

Nietzsche and the Divine

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CLINAMEN PRESS

2000

*Nature and the human 'redivinised':
Mahāyāna Buddhist themes in
Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

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At least we are today far from the laughable immodesty of decreeing from our own little corner that perspectives are *permissible* only from this corner. The world has rather become 'infinite' for us once more, insofar as we cannot dismiss the possibility that it *contains within it infinite interpretations*. Once more the great shudder grips us – but who then would want straight away to divinize *this* monster of an unknown world again in the old way? (GS 374)

Nietzsche's infamous proclamation in 1882 of the death of God would seem to be reinforced by the publication the following year of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in which the protagonist reaffirms at the start the deity's demise, and soon universalizes the obituary by announcing the death of '*all Gods*'.¹ The trenchant and eventually harsh criticisms of Christianity delivered up to the end of his writing career with *The Anti-Christ* have tended to confirm Nietzsche's reputation as a godless immoralist. But if we reflect on that magnificently timed stroke of fate which brought the realization, two weeks before he was first struck by the thought of eternal recurrence, that he had a genuine precursor in Spinoza, we may well see that his understanding of the world is closer than generally assumed to the *deus sive natura* of that 'God-intoxicated man'.²

In a previous essay advocating our taking Nietzsche seriously as an ecological thinker and philosopher of nature, I referred to the passage that serves as the epigraph to the present chapter and suggested that he wouldn't want 'straight away to divinize *this* monster of an unknown world again in the old way', but that 'he gives every indication that this monster of an unknown world *presents itself* as divine, in the new way of a Dionysian pantheism, to those who are able to emerge from their own little corner with sufficient reverence for what lies beyond their human

horizons.³ I should like here to amplify that suggestion with reference to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

It was over fifty years ago that the Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani drew attention to the importance in Nietzsche's thought of what he called 'a new religion with a Dionysian new god', remarking its similarity to 'the standpoint of Meister Eckhart, who speaks of "living without why, within the Godless desert of divinity"'.⁴ Aware of the limitations of Nietzsche's understanding of Buddhism, Nishitani makes the further comment: 'Ironically, it was not in his nihilistic view of Buddhism but in such ideas as *amor fati* and the Dionysian as the overcoming of nihilism that Nietzsche came closest to Buddhism, and especially to Mahāyāna'.⁵ While there has been some discussion of Nietzsche as a religious thinker, not much has been said about the nature of this new, Dionysian religion – or about its remarkable similarities to Mahāyāna (a later form of Buddhism with which Nietzsche was not acquainted).⁶

A comprehensive comparison would enhance our understanding of both sides, but would best be carried out with respect to a particular school or thinker in the multifarious Mahāyāna tradition.⁷ Having found that reading *Zarathustra* from a Mahāyāna perspective highlights some hitherto ignored aspects of the text, I here adopt this kind of perspective in order simply to limn the outlines of Nietzsche's 'new Dionysian pantheism' (as Nishitani calls it), which turns out to involve some remarkable revaluations of the divinity of nature and the human.

Nietzsche will have read in Hermann Oldenberg's book *Buddha* that 'the noblest task of [the Buddha's] life was the preaching of the teaching of liberation and the attracting of all kinds of people to follow him in the monk's habit'.⁸ Nietzsche's Zarathustra also has a teaching of liberation to impart, and after gathering a number of disciples he delivers numerous speeches whose style and content parallel Oldenberg's accounts of the Buddha's sermons and relations with his audience. (The parallels with Jesus and his sermons are, of course, more numerous and extended.) Both the Buddha and Zarathustra realize that if their teachings of liberation are to be imparted successfully, their speeches must be carefully adjusted to the level of their audiences. Since Zarathustra begins by haranguing the people in the marketplace, continues with a series of speeches to disciples, and ends up addressing himself (as well as his animals, his soul, and a female figure called Life), and since his understanding of himself and the world progressively deepens, we can best gauge his (and by extension Nietzsche's) attitude to the divine by following the development of his discourse as the story unfolds.⁹

'Dead are all Gods!'

At the beginning of the book, Zarathustra seems well on the way to becoming what the Mahāyāna Buddhists call a *bodhisattva*, a being who attains enlightenment but refuses to enter nirvana until all beings have become enlightened. The *bodhi* in the term means 'enlightenment' while the *sattva* means 'being' – but also has the connotation of 'warrior'.¹⁰ The bodhisattva's two main qualities are consummate wisdom and boundless compassion, wisdom being associated with ascent out of the world of ignorance, and compassion with descent back into the world for the salvation of all beings.¹¹ On *Zarathustra's* first page we hear the protagonist, after ten years of accumulating wisdom in his mountain-top cave, address the sun as follows:

Behold! I am overfull of my wisdom, like the bee that has gathered too much honey, and I need hands outstretched to receive it.... Bless the cup that wants to overflow, that the waters may flow from it golden and carry everywhere the reflection of your delight! Behold! This cup wants to become empty again, and Zarathustra wants to become human again. (Z 'Prologue' 1)

It is the same with the bodhisattva: the attainment of wisdom, which involves the realization of the emptiness of the self through its interrelatedness with all things, naturally leads to an abundant generosity and a re-engagement with the world. Zarathustra could well be describing a bodhisattva when he says:

I love him whose soul squanders itself, who wants no thanks and does not give back: for he always bestows and does not want to preserve himself. ... I love him whose soul is overfull, so that he forgets himself and all things are in him: thus all things become his going under. (Z 'Prologue' 4)

Next to a sketch for this passage in one of Nietzsche's notebooks from the period is another note saying: 'We are to be a mirror of Being: we are God on a small scale'.¹²

On the way down from his mountain-top to the world of his fellow human beings, Zarathustra encounters an old holy man who immediately recognizes him as *ein Erwachter*, 'an awakened one' (Z 'Prologue' 2) – an appellation customarily applied to Buddhas and bodhisattvas.¹³ Applied to Zarathustra it suggests not only an awakening to the true nature of his self but also to the realization that such an awakening must be enacted through re-engaging the human world. The old man counters Zarathustra's profession of love for humanity by professing his own

love for God, just as the Arhant (the early Hinayāna Buddhist counterpart to the bodhisattva) strives to attain nirvana primarily for himself. Zarathustra restrains himself from depriving the holy man of the object of his love by telling him: *'God is dead'* (Z 'Prologue' 2).

We learn something about the implications of this death from Zarathustra's first speech to the people in the market-place, with its opening proclamation of the *Übermensch* and its admonition that 'The human being is something that is to be overcome' (Z 'Prologue' 3). Theism is not simply to be replaced by humanism, nor is Zarathustra, in admonishing the crowd to *'stay faithful to the earth and not believe those who speak of over-earthly hopes'* (Z 'Prologue' 3), merely advocating a renunciation of transcendent perspectives in favor of a focus on the human. To urge that the human must be overcome is on one level to call for a transcendence of the anthropocentric perspective to a view that sees the inanimate world – 'the earth' – as itself divine.

Once sacrilege against God was the greatest sacrilege, but God died, and with Him these sacrilegious ones too. Sacrilege against the earth is now the most terrible thing, and to revere the entrails of the unfathomable more than the sense of the earth! (Z 'Prologue' 3).

Hopes directed to what is beyond the earth are to be renounced, and with the demise of a transcendent divinity the earth and nature become the proper locus of the sacred. A late Buddhist sutra claims that the Buddha's enlightenment brought about the enlightenment of the whole world: 'I and the great earth are simultaneously enlightened. Mountains, rivers, grass, and trees have all realized their intrinsic Buddha-nature'.¹⁴ This exemplifies an idea that was elaborated in later Indian Buddhism under the name *tathāgata-garbha*, which signifies that all beings intrinsically possess 'buddha-nature' and have the capacity to be enlightened. This idea became central to the forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism that developed in China, Tibet, and Japan.

By the time of Zarathustra's seventh speech, however, his apparent atheism is moderated to an agnosticism: in response to those who maintain that life is a heavy burden, he says: 'I would only believe in a God who could dance' (Z 'On Reading and Writing'). The ground for this potential belief is revealed in the ecstatic ending to the speech: 'Now I am light, now I am flying, now I see myself beneath myself, now a God dances through me' (Z 'On Reading and Writing'). This is an epiphany – the first of several in the book – of Dionysus, God of wine and the dance. As the climax of Zarathustra's most lyrical flight so far, it may be

taken as an involuntary revelation of his belief in divine forces to an audience from whom he is currently withholding his deeper feelings as he tries to disabuse them of their belief in God.

By the end of the first part of the book Zarathustra has gathered an audience of disciples, but he realizes they are immature in being more inclined to follow him rather than his teaching. He therefore resolves to leave them and return to his solitude, but not before delivering a speech that ends by reiterating his emphasis on staying loyal to the earth, at the high pitch of a sentence entirely in italics: *"Dead are all gods: now we want the Übermensch to live"* – may this be at the great noontide our ultimate will! (Z 'On the Bestowing Virtue' 3). On one level this admonition is a reflection of the idea (derived from Feuerbach) that Gods are the result of a projection of unconscious human qualities. Nietzsche had outlined the consequences of the withdrawal of such projections in a passage written shortly before *Zarathustra*:

There is a lake that one day refused to let itself flow off and threw up a dam where it had formerly flowed off: since then this lake has been rising ever higher. Perhaps this very refusal will also grant us the strength with which the refusal itself can be borne; perhaps the human being will from then on rise ever higher, when it no longer flows out into a God. (GS 285)

The refusal to allow one's energies to drain off through projections of divinity is a necessary step – but not the last – on the way to understanding one's place in the cosmos. Even after human beings have risen higher thanks to this refusal, they still may find themselves inferior to other forces in the cosmos.

Taken in context, Zarathustra's apparent declaration of a radical atheism may be understood as what the Buddhists call *upāya*, 'skill in means', a strategy aimed at directing an audience unprepared for the full revelation of the truth some way along the appropriate path. When the Buddha sends his disciples out into the world he says to them, 'I am released from all bonds, both divine and human. You, too, are released from all bonds, you disciples, both divine and human'; but he then tells them to go out and spread the teachings 'to the joy of gods and humans'.¹⁵ In order to throw the practitioner back on his or her own resources, Mahāyāna Buddhism keeps its respect for the Buddhas and Patriarchs in perspective through the use of injunctions such as, 'If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!'¹⁶ Correspondingly, Zarathustra would rather that his disciples at first rid themselves of all belief in forces transcending the human, than move too soon to a more salutary poly-

theism – from which they might then relapse into some other form of ‘monotonothetism’.¹⁷

As a last lesson Zarathustra encourages his disciples to cultivate in themselves what he proclaims as the highest, *bestowing* virtue – ‘You shall compel all things toward you and into you, so that they may flow back out of your wells as gifts of your love’ – and retreats to his mountain-top cave (Z ‘On the Bestowing Virtue’ 1).

‘Divine shall all beings be for me.’

The first chapter of the book’s second part, ‘The Child with the Mirror’, opens with Zarathustra’s awakening from a dream in which a child approaches him with a mirror and invites him to look at his reflection – an allusion to the myth of Dionysus-Zagreus in which the Titans abduct the infant Dionysus as he stares at his reflection in a mirror.¹⁸ He interprets the dream as a sign that he must go back down to human beings and to being human again, after a further period of accumulating wisdom in his mountain-top solitude. Again, as with the bodhisattva, it is love that prompts him to go back down and pour out his self into the world:

My impatient love overflows in torrents, downwards, toward rising and setting. Out of silent mountains and thunderstorms of pain my soul rushes into the valleys.... Mouth have I become through and through, and the roaring of a stream out of high cliffs: downward would I hurl my speech into the valleys. ... There is a lake in me, solitary and self-sufficient; but the river of my love carries it away – down to the ocean! (Z ‘The Child with the Mirror’)

The Dionysian imagery of his speech, which rushes through him as a force of nature, then veers from features of landscape to the trappings of war, as Zarathustra braces himself for the struggle against hostile forces with images of riding wild steeds and hurling spears at his enemies.

His first speech to his disciples after coming down from the mountain, ‘In the Isles of the Blessed’, explains why the Gods must die before the *Übermensch* can come to life. The death of God as the collapse of the plausibility of any permanent absolutes brings the individual face to face with the radical impermanence of all existence, and especially the impermanence of the human self. To suffer a Dionysian dissolution of one’s own person is suffering indeed, but subsequent participation in

the broader processes of destruction and regeneration brings a realization of the possibilities of new creation.

Creating – that is the great redemption from suffering, and life’s becoming lighter. But that the creator may be, that itself requires suffering and much transformation. Yes, much bitter dying must there be in your lives, you creators! Thus are you advocates and justifiers of all that is transitory. (Z ‘In the Isles of the Blessed’)

The impermanence of all existence, the suffering associated with that, and the fabrication of a self-construct in response – all are central teachings of Buddhism. Nishitani quotes an unpublished note of Nietzsche’s that echoes Zen ideas: ‘Becoming as inventing, willing, negating the self, as self-overcoming: no subject, but a doing, positive, creative.’¹⁹ And indeed Nietzsche himself associates this kind of Dionysian process with impermanence: ‘Dionysos: sensuality and cruelty. Impermanence could be interpreted as enjoyment of the procreative and destructive energies, as constant creation’ (KSA 12 2 106). For Zarathustra, as long as human beings feel themselves subordinated to transcendent forces in the form of divinities they will lack confidence in their own will to create. But if they are able to face up to the impermanence of ‘becoming’ and fully engage the cycles of death and rebirth and destruction and creation that characterize the world of a deity like Dionysus, such self-overcoming will allow the forces of the creative will to work and play – perhaps even dance – through them. Captivated by a vision of what the human being could become, Zarathustra claims to have no need for divine epiphanies: ‘The beauty of the *Übermensch* came to me as a shadow. Ah, my brothers! What are the Gods to me now!’ (Z ‘In the Isles of the Blessed’).

But in his speech ‘On the Famous Wise Men’, where Zarathustra shows how much previous philosophers have been lackeys in the service of religious leaders or political rulers, it becomes clear that atheism is merely a provisional stage in the transformations of the human spirit. In questioning his predecessors’ pretensions toward the truth, he alludes to the ‘three transformations’ (camel to lion to child) described in his very first speech.

Truthful – thus did I call the one who goes into godless deserts and has broken his reverential heart. In yellow sand and burned by the sun, he squints thirstily at islands rich in springs, where living things repose beneath dark trees. But his thirst does not persuade him to become like these comfortable ones: for where there are oases, there are always images of idols. Ravenous, violent, solitary, godless: thus would the lion-will have itself be.

Free from the happiness of vassals, redeemed from gods and worship, fearless and fearsome, great and solitary: thus is the will of the truthful one. (Z 'On the Famous Wise Men')

At the stage of the camel one has to 'break one's reverential heart' in order to be able to endure the godless desert with the strength of the lion and not be seduced by mirages harboring idols. But we recall that the lion's 'holy No' is incapable of genuine creativity: the best it can manage is 'the creation of freedom for new creation' (Z 'On the Three Transformations'). For 'the play of creation' the 'holy Yes-saying' of the child is required; after the Gods who impede human creativity have been denied, they return in the form of the child. For it turns out that among the living things reposing under dark trees will be a little God.

In the next chapters Zarathustra's speeches modulate into songs, as he approaches the central topic – and figure – of Life. Before breaking into 'The Dance Song' he addresses, in the presence of his disciples, a group of young maidens dancing in a meadow:

God's advocate am I before the devil: but he is the spirit of gravity. How could I, you light-footed ones, be an enemy of divine dances? Or of girls' feet with well-turned ankles? Indeed I am a forest and a night of dark trees: but whoever does not fear my darkness will also find rose-bowers under my cypresses. And the little God will one find as well, who is to girls the dearest one: beside the spring he lies, still, with his eyes closed. (Z 'The Dance Song')

The God whose advocate Zarathustra is before the devil is Dionysus, since it was thanks to this divinity's dancing through him that he was going to be able to overcome the spirit of gravity (Z 'On Reading and Writing'). In the context of the dance song the child Dionysus appears as *Erôs* (or Cupido, as he is referred to here), though Nietzsche closely associates these two Gods of the life-force.

In 'The Tomb Song' the divine recurs in the form of 'divine moments' made for 'tender eternities' from Zarathustra's youth. (The conjunction of 'moments' [*Augenblicke*] and 'eternities' [*Ewigkeiten*] anticipates the thought of eternal recurrence, in which the moment plays a key role.) Zarathustra now mourns the loss of those divine moments, while accusing his 'enemies' of strangling 'the songbirds of his hopes', because of the even greater loss they cost him.²⁰

For you cut short what was eternal for me, as a tone breaks off in coldest night! Scarcely as a glinting of divine eyes did it come to me – as a moment! Thus did my purity once speak to me in a fair hour: 'Divine shall all beings

be to me.'²¹ ... 'All days shall be holy to me' – thus did the wisdom of my youth once speak: verily, the speech of a joyous wisdom! (Z 'The Tomb Song')

Prevented by resentment toward his enemies from regaining his former attitude of 'holy Yes-saying' to the world, Zarathustra now places his hope in the redemptive power of his creative will, trusting that the deaths and tombs by which he is surrounded will turn out to be harbingers of resurrections and new life.

In his next speech, 'On Self-Overcoming', Zarathustra announces the outcome of his inquiries into the living: life is best understood as 'will to power'. Just as Plato (in the *Symposium*) had Diotima intimate life's deepest mysteries to Socrates, so Nietzsche has Life herself tell Zarathustra that she is continual 'self-overcoming' and 'will to power' (Z 'On Self-Overcoming'). When Nietzsche later elaborates this insight as a challenge to understand the whole world (not just the animate part of it) as 'will to power, and nothing besides', he signifies that while this would mean that the transcendent God of morality is refuted, a pantheistic cosmos full of immanent Gods is not.²² But to experience the world this way, as a play of will to power engaged in perpetual self-overcoming, one has to understand from experience the thought of eternal recurrence.

Circulus vitiosus deus?

The second chapter of part three, 'On the Vision and the Riddle', presents the first full intimation of this thought – the 'basic conception' of *Zarathustra* and 'the highest formula of affirmation that can possibly be attained' (EH 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra' 1). The thought of eternal recurrence had first been presented at the end of *The Gay Science*, where we are asked what our response would be if a demon (or *daimôn*?) were to say to us: 'This life, as you now live and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more' (GS 341). Would you curse the demon? Or have you ever experienced a tremendous moment where you would answer him: 'You are a God and never have I heard anything more divine!'" (GS 341). Corresponding to the nihilistic and affirmative responses to the prospect of eternal recurrence, then, are the demonic and the divine aspects to the thought.

In 'On the Vision and the Riddle' Zarathustra is voyaging across the sea when he has a vision in which he is climbing a mountain-path in defi-

ance of the spirit of gravity, his 'devil and arch-enemy', who in the form of a dwarf sits on his shoulders (Z 'On the Vision and the Riddle' 1). The dwarf asserts his superiority over Zarathustra by reminding him that, no matter how high he may climb, however high he throws himself up, he will always come down again and will ultimately suffer the fate of all mortal beings and go under altogether. The spirit of gravity, modeled after Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust* ('the spirit that always negates'), represents the force whereby 'all things fall' and always wants 'the earth and life' to be *heavy*.²³ But Zarathustra then experiences a sudden access of courage, a courage powerful enough to strike even *death* dead that ultimate manifestation of impermanence insofar as it says: 'Was *that* life? Well then! One more time!' (Z 'On the Vision and the Riddle' 1).²⁴

When the thought of eternal recurrence is reiterated in similar words in *Beyond Good and Evil*, there is another allusion to the divinity of the cosmos. Here Nietzsche claims that in his confrontation with nihilism he has at least overcome the Eurocentric perspective, if not the anthropocentric perspective too, insofar as he has looked 'with an Asiatic and supra-Asiatic eye into the most world-denying of all possible ways of thinking ... beyond good and evil' (BGE 56) – and has thereby had his eyes opened to 'the opposite ideal ... of the most exuberant, vital, and world-affirming human being' (BGE 56). Such a human being, who could joyously affirm the world '*just as it has been and is*' (BGE 56), would understand the enigmatic end of the aphorism, *circulus vitiosus deus* (BGE 56), in this way: what had looked like a vicious circle (the thought of recurrence in its nihilistic aspect) turns out to be divine – *deus ex natura*, one might say.

To return to Zarathustra: to the extent that he can summon the courage to say (and live) Yes! to the question – in his every action, at every moment – 'Do you want this once again and innumerable times more?', he will overcome the spirit of gravity with levity and laughter. To say and live Yes! to this question requires courage because it requires an affirmation of the whole of existence, insofar as every action of each self is inextricably linked with all other actions and selves. As Zarathustra asks the dwarf: 'And are not all things knotted together so tightly that this moment draws after it *all* things that are to come?' (Z 'On the Vision and the Riddle' 2). The question also receives an affirmative answer in the central Buddhist teaching of 'dependent arising' (*pratītyasamutpāda*), which similarly emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things and the consequent 'emptiness' of any 'self-nature' to them. This

idea receives its ultimate Dionysian expression at the culmination of *Zarathustra's* fourth part, when Zarathustra sings:

Did you ever say Yes to a single pleasure? Oh, my friends, then you said Yes to *all* pain. All things are interlinked, intertwined, enamoured – (Z 'The Night-Wanderer Song' 10)

This passage exemplifies what Nishitani has called 'Dionysian pantheism' with reference to Nietzsche's explication of the term 'Dionysian' as involving 'rapturous affirmation of the total character of life [and] the great pantheistic sharing of joy and suffering' (WP IV 1050). As Nishitani states:

Nietzsche's use of the term 'pantheistic' is not unimportant, for what is overcome by eternal recurrence is only 'the God of morality', and belief in recurrence opens one to a pantheistic affirmative attitude toward everything. He asks himself, and then answers, the question of whether it is possible to think of a God not in moral terms but 'beyond good and evil'.²⁵

Nietzsche even sees this possibility as one that was latent in German philosophy (Hegel) but went undeveloped: 'to think through a *pantheism* in which evil, error, and pain are *not* felt as arguments against divinity' (KSA 12 2 106).

In the second phase of his vision Zarathustra sees himself as a shepherd writhing on the ground because a huge black snake has crawled into his mouth and bitten fast to his throat.²⁶ The shepherd eventually bites the snake's head off, spits it out and leaps to his feet, 'No longer a shepherd, no longer human – one transformed, enlightened, who *laughed!*' (Z 'On the Vision and the Riddle 2) A laughter that is 'no human being's laugh' (Z 'On the Vision and the Riddle 2): *übermenschlich* then, with accents, at least, of the divine.

The effects of this experience on Zarathustra's understanding of himself and the world come to light in the chapter 'Before Sunrise'. Still on board ship on the open sea, he rises before dawn and delivers a speech to the open sky in response to the divine feelings the prospect engenders in him: 'O heaven above me, you pure one! profound one! You abyss of light! Beholding you I shudder with divine desires' (Z 'Before Sunrise'). His reaction echoes the response of the Epicurean thinker (as described by Lucretius) to the revelation in which 'Nature is revealed as rid of haughty overlords, as the free autonomous agent of everything, without the participation of the gods'.²⁷ Such a revelation affords a peculiar pleasure: 'At these things some godlike delight seizes me and a shuddering

of awe, to think that nature is thus made so clear and manifest, laid open and unveiled in every part.²⁸

To Zarathustra's eyes the heavens before dawn, in which the stars have been extinguished and the sun has not yet risen, are an expanse of pure openness that illuminates everything evenly, without bias or slant – by contrast with the sun's illumination which always comes from a particular direction, casting shade and shadows. 'Before Sunrise' is of crucial importance since it seems to go beyond Nietzsche's customary perspectivism and allow for an experience of the world that is not merely 'from our own little corner' but from a horizon that transcends anthropocentric views. There are remarkable parallels here with Nishitani's explication of 'the standpoint of *śūnyatā* [emptiness]' in Mahāyāna Buddhism, from which things are experienced not as representations of a subject but rather in their own 'suchness' or 'as-they-are-ness' (*tathātā*).²⁹

Somewhat enlightened by the vision he has just seen, and addressing the most open audience imaginable, Zarathustra can afford to be totally open himself and claim without reservation that he now has something in common with the pre-dawn heavens: 'the enormous, unbounded saying of Yes and Amen'. As a participant in this unbounded affirmation he is moved to bless all things in the 'innocence of their becoming' (to borrow a phrase Nietzsche uses elsewhere):

But this is my blessing: to stand over each particular thing as its own heaven, as its round roof, its azure bell and eternal security: and blessed is he who blesses thus! For all things are baptized in the well of eternity and are beyond good and evil; for good and evil are themselves mere intervening shadows and damp depressions and drifting clouds. Verily, it is a blessing and no blasphemy when I teach: 'Over all things stands the heaven Chance, the heaven Innocence, the heaven Contingency, the heaven Exuberance.'

'Lord Contingency'³⁰ – that is the oldest nobility in the world, which I restored to all things when I redeemed them from their bondage under purpose. (Z 'Before Sunrise')

When a particular thing is what it is only thanks to the role assigned it under some overarching divine Providence, or the position occupied in some scientific projection of the world, it is not free to be itself. Just as the Daoist sage (a precursor of the Zen master) is able to broaden his perspective to the point where he is able to 'illumine all things in the light of heaven,' and by acting in a way harmonious with heaven and

earth can 'help the ten-thousand things be themselves',³¹ so Zarathustra's blessing lets each particular thing generate its own horizons and be (or, rather, *become*: arise and perish) just as it is. And ultimately he understands that all things would far rather, more than anything, 'dance on the feet of chance' just as the bodhisattva works for the en'lighten'-ment of all things.

One should note that these stances are by no means biocentric in being restricted to a celebration of all life: they concern rather a celebration of *all things*. In a preface written in 1886 to a book in which he first emphasized the importance of 'small things' and the 'inconspicuous truths' of life, Nietzsche writes of himself as one who re-engages the world after a period of alienation from it:

It is almost as if his eyes are only now opened to *what is near*. He is amazed, and sits still: where *was* he then? This near and nearest things: how they seem to him transformed! what bloom and enchantment they have acquired in the interim! He looks back with gratitude... (HH 'Preface' 5)

It is from this kind of perspective that one might experience all things as having been 'baptized in the well of eternity'.

Returning to *Zarathustra*, we learn that Zarathustra's purity, which we heard announce the divinity of all beings to him, is a reflection of the vaster purity of the heavens:

O heaven above me, you pure one! on high! That is what your purity means to me, that there is no eternal reason-spider and spider's web: that for me you are a dance-floor for divine accidents, that for me you are a gods' table for divine dice and dice-throwers! (Z 'Before Sunrise').

The heavens are a dance-floor not because the Gods are above but because Zarathustra's boundless affirmation has overturned all traditional hierarchies of the 'heavens above, earth below' variety. Earth's materiality is to be seen through, deliteralized, so that it can be rebaptized 'the light one' (Z 'On the Spirit of Gravity 2), and Zarathustra can begin his apostrophe to the open sky with the appellation, 'you abyss of light' (Z 'Before Sunrise').

We learn more about Zarathustra's theism when he tells the hilarious tale of how the ancient gods died:

Theirs was no mere 'twilight' death – that is a lie!³² Rather did they *laugh* themselves to death! That happened when the most godless word issued from a god himself – the word: 'There is only one God! Thou shalt have no other god before me!'³³ – an old wrath-beard of a god, a jealous one, forgot

himself thus: And thereupon all the gods laughed and rocked on their chairs and shouted: 'Is that not precisely godlike [*göttlich*, divine], that there are gods but no god?' He that hath ears, let him hear. – (Z 'On Apostates' 2).

These are Zarathustra's last words in the last speech that he makes before returning to his mountain-top solitude for the last time, and the quotation from *Matthew* suggests that there is more to come, deeper implications to what has been said than the audience has grasped. If the old gods laughed themselves to death, and the divine consists in there being Gods but no God, then presumably the old gods may be laughed back to life again – by transformed shepherds who understand the world as 'will to power'.

How the world appears on such an understanding is conveyed by Zarathustra's speech 'On Old and New Tablets', where he tells of how his flying into a far future granted him an experience of the world as a force-field of divine play:

Where all becoming seemed to me a Gods'-dance and Gods'- willfulness, and the world released and exuberant and fleeing back to itself: – as an eternal fleeing-and reseeking-themselves of many Gods, as the blissful self-contradicting, self-rehearing, self-rebelonging of many Gods. (Z 'On Old and New Law Tablets' 2)

Such was the power of this experience that he retroactively transforms his previous interrogative into an affirmative by claiming to have said earlier 'That precisely is godlike, that there are gods, but no god' (Z 'On Old and New Law Tablets' 11).

The book as Nietzsche originally conceived it culminates in three lyrical chapters celebrating the mystic marriage of Zarathustra with Life, on the model of the nuptials of Dionysus and Ariadne.³⁴ At the end, in the 'Yes- and Amen-Song', Zarathustra reaffirms the way the ring of recurrence sets a seal on the world as a playing field for divinities:

If ever I laughed with the laughter of creative lightning, grumblingly but obediently followed by the rumbling of the long thunder of the deed: If ever I played with Gods'-dice at the Gods'-table of the earth, so that the earth quaked and broke and snorted forth rivers of fire: – for a Gods'-table is the earth, trembling with creative new words and Gods'-throws – Oh how could I not be lusting after eternity and the nuptial ring of rings – the ring of recurrence? (Z 'The Seven Seals' 3)

The world as divine play, then, the ultimate game of chance, with the enlightened human being as a full participant.

'What can we best give in return?'

Nietzsche was attracted at an early age to the religiosity of the ancient Greeks through his reading of Homer and the Hellenophilic writings of Goethe and Schiller. His admiration only increased with time, and after several decades later he writes: 'What astounds us in the religion of the ancient Greeks is the unrestrained abundance of gratitude that it exudes: it is a very noble kind of human being that stands *thus* before nature and life!' (BGE 49). Zarathustra is naturally an exemplar in this respect:

Thus does the nature of noble souls wish it: they want to have nothing for free, and least of all life. Whoever is of the rabble wants to live for free: we others, however, to whom life has given itself – we are always wondering *what* we can best give *in return!* (Z 'On the Old and New Law Tablets' 5)

This kind of gratitude is again reminiscent of Epicurus, for whom meditation cultivates a keen appreciation of the 'once-only' character of existence in a radically contingent universe. When the world is experienced as arising anew at every moment, yet with no necessary connection between this moment and the next, one comes to celebrate each moment as a unique miracle. As Epicurus writes: 'One cultivates profound gratitude to nature for granting us the gift of life'.³⁵ Zarathustra cultivates such gratitude by striving to live each moment (which for him, too, is unique and 'once only') *as if* it and the rest of the past were going to recur eternally. A similar gratitude informs Mahāyāna Buddhist practice, which is also based on an understanding of the unique and radically contingent character of each and every moment.

And yet for Nietzsche there seems to be something that persists throughout the constant flux, which he characterizes in a late note as the Dionysian: 'rapturous affirmation of the total character of life, as what is the same in all change, similarly powerful, similarly blissful' (KSA 13 14 14). Nishitani's gloss of this 'total character' is apt, coming as it does from the Mahāyāna perspective:

For Nietzsche, what remains the same throughout the process, never departing from ever-changing arising and perishing, is the will that affirms eternal recurrence. This is the perspective of the new 'pantheism' – qualitatively different from previous and subsequent pantheistic ideas – and Dionysus is the god who embodies it.³⁶

A Dionysian pantheism by no means excludes – indeed by its nature it includes – other forms of the divine, and indeed one of Nietzsche's last

words on the topic keeps such possibilities open. In a note written several months before his mental collapse, under the title 'History of the Concept of God', he bemoans the impoverishment consequent upon a move away from God as a being (like nature) that one can thank and yet that can be harmful as well as helpful, to 'a God of *the Good*' alone. He contrasts a God (like Dionysus) who 'knows the dangerous *ardeurs* of destruction' with 'the pitiful God of European monotonous-theism', who he trusts is finally giving way to something new:

– And how many new Gods are still possible!..To myself, in whom the religious, that is to say *God-forming* instinct wants every now and then to become active again: how differently, how variously the Divine has revealed itself to me every time!..So much that is strange has already passed before me, in those timeless moments that fall into one's life as if from the moon, where one no longer has any idea how old one is already and how young one will yet become ...I should not doubt that there are many kinds of Gods. (KSA 13 17 4).

And insofar as humans are natural beings, one should not doubt that there are many kinds of participation in the divine play open to them too.

I trust that this essay reinforces the conclusion of an earlier one, which argued that Nietzsche's ideas about nature deserve to be taken seriously in current debates about 'the environment', especially in the light of their consonance with ideas from such a different tradition as that of Mahāyāna Buddhism.³⁷ Both views go beyond a naive romanticism that would see nature as simply beneficent, regarding its perpetual creativity and destructiveness rather as deserving our awe and respect. Indeed Nietzsche associates 'the naturalizing of the human' precisely with the cultivation of awareness of the tremendous *contingency* of our existence: 'We can protect ourselves only a little in the great matters: a comet could smash the sun at any moment...To the naturalizing of the human belongs readiness for the absolutely sudden and thwarting' (KSA 9 11 228). The Mahāyāna Buddhists too understand that, to the extent that we can give up our death-anxiety-engendered desire to subjugate the natural world, and cultivate instead a readiness for the absolutely sudden and thwarting (of which the ultimate paradigm is my death), there will open up a way of being that verges on the divine through its fullness of sorrows and joys.

Bibliography of cited works of Nietzsche

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Notes

- 1 See GS 108, 125; Z 'Prologue' 2, 1 'On the Bestowing Virtue' 3. I refer to passages from *Zarathustra* using my own translation (forthcoming from Stanford University Press, 2001).
- 2 Nietzsche, letter to Franz Overbeck, 30 July 1881 in *Briefe* (Munich: Walter de Gruyter, 1986) 6 111.
- 3 Graham Parkes, 'Staying Loyal to the Earth: Nietzsche as an Ecological Thinker' in John Lippitt (ed.), *Nietzsche's Futures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999) pp.167–188. See p. 182.
- 4 Keiji Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990, trans. Graham Parkes with Setsuko Aihara) p. 48.
- 5 Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* p. 180.
- 6 Laurence Lampert in his forthcoming book, *Nietzsche's Task: An Interpretation of 'Beyond Good and Evil'* (New Haven: Yale University Press), emphasizes Nietzsche's conviction that a new philosophy such as his needs to be complemented by a new religion, such as his religion of Dionysus. On Nietzsche and Buddhism, see the essays by the Japanese contributors to Graham Parkes (ed.), *Nietzsche and Asian Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) as well as my review article, 'Nietzsche and Early Buddhism', and 'Reply to Robert Morrison', *Philosophy East and West* 50:2 (2000) pp. 254–267 and pp. 279–284.
- 7 See, for example G. Parkes, 'Nietzsche and Zen Master Hakuin on the Roles of Emotion and Passion', in Joel Marks and Roger T. Ames (eds.) *Emotions in Asian Thought: A Dialogue in Comparative Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) pp. 213–233.
- 8 Hermann Oldenberg, *Buddha. Sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde* (Berlin: Wilhelm Hertz Verlag, 1881) p. 121. See also Nietzsche's notes on this book in the context of *Zarathustra*, in KSA 11 26 220–221.
- 9 For the sake of (relative) brevity, I confine myself to the first three parts of *Zarathustra* which constitute the book as Nietzsche originally conceived it.
- 10 Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* (London: Kegan Paul, 1932) p. 9. It has also been suggested that *sattva* may mean 'strength, energy, vigour, power, courage' (*ibid* p. 7).
- 11 Gadjin Nagao, *Mādhyamika and Yogācāra: A Study of Māhāyāna Philosophies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991, trans. Leslie Kawamura) pp. 32–33.
- 12 Nietzsche, KSA 105 1 240. See also the claim: 'I am too full: thus I forget

- myself, and all things are in me, and beyond all things there is nothing more: where have I gone?' (KSA 5 1 238)
- 13 The Buddha is often referred to as *ein Erwachter* in Oldenberg's *Buddha*.
 - 14 Cited in Kōgaku Arifuku, *Deutsche Philosophie und Zen-Buddhismus* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1999) p. 115.
 - 15 Oldenberg, *Buddha* p. 133.
 - 16 See, for instance, the first of the collection of Zen stories entitled *Mumonkan* (The Gateless Gate).
 - 17 The advantages of polytheism are eloquently explicated in GS 143.
 - 18 See the account by Nonnos: 'The Titans cunningly smeared their round faces with disguising chalk, and while [Zagreus] contemplated his changeling countenance reflected in a mirror, they destroyed him with an infernal knife' in *Diomyiaca* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1940) vol. 7 p. 169. Also *Diodorus of Sicily* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1932) vol 5 75 4.
 - 19 Nietzsche, KSA 12 7 54, WP III 617, cited by Nishitani in *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* pp. 47–48.
 - 20 The context and the biographical background suggest that these 'enemies' were the Wagners and also Lou Salomé and Paul Rée.
 - 21 This saying, as well as 'All days shall be holy to me,' is adapted from a passage from Emerson's *Essays* of which Nietzsche was especially fond, and which he used for the epigraph to *The Gay Science* (1882). The original reads: 'To the poet, to the philosopher, to the saint, all things are friendly and sacred, all events profitable, all days holy, all men divine' (*Essays*, 'History'). In a letter to Overbeck written on the Christmas after the fateful summer when his relationship with Lou Salomé foundered so painfully, Nietzsche writes: 'I have here the most beautiful opportunity to demonstrate that "all experiences are useful, all days holy, and all human beings are divine" to me !!!!' (25 December 1882), *Briefe* 6 312.
 - 22 See BGE 36, 37. As Laurence Lampert says of the import of these two aphorisms for the idea of the world as will to power: 'That wasteful, indifferent, throbbing abundance, the world as it is, must be seen as the not refuted, vindicated divine'. See L. Lampert, 'Nietzsche's Best Jokes' in Lippitt (ed.), *Nietzsche's Futures* p. 79. Nietzsche wrote to Jacob Burckhardt that *Beyond Good and Evil* 'says the same things as my *Zarathustra*, but differently, very differently' (22 September 1886), *Briefe* 7 254.
 - 23 See Z 2 'On the Tarantulas', 3 'On the Spirit of Gravity' 2.
 - 24 For a comparison of Zen Buddhist and 'existentialist' (including Nietzsche's) understandings of death with respect to a momentary conception of time, see G. Parkes, 'Death and Detachment: Montaigne, Zen, Heidegger, and the Rest', in Jeff Malpas and Robert C. Solomon (eds.) *Death and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998) pp. 164–180.
 - 25 Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* p. 65.

- 26 See Z 3 'On the Vision and the Riddle' 2, 3 'The Convalescent' 2.
- 27 Lucretius, *The Way Things Are: The 'De rerum natura' of Titus Lucretius* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1968, trans. Rolfe Humphries) 2 1100.
- 28 *Ibid* 3 16–17, 28–30.
- 29 Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, trans. Jan Van Bragt) chapter four. See also my elaboration of some of the parallels in G. Parkes, 'Nietzsche and Nishitani on the Self through Time', *The Eastern Buddhist* vol. 17:2 (1984) pp. 55–74.
- 30 *Von Obngefahr*. The phrase means 'by chance,' but Nietzsche is playing on the use of the prefix *von* to indicate a noble family (as in the name Alexander von Humboldt).
- 31 *Zhuangzi*, chapter 2, Laozi, *Daodejing*, chapter 64.
- 32 An allusion to the last part of Wagner's *Ring* cycle, *Twilight of the Gods*.
- 33 Compare *Exodus* 20 3–5, where the Lord introduces the ten commandments by saying: 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me. ... for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.'
- 34 See Laurence Lampert's commentary on these chapters in *Nietzsche's Teaching* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) pp. 223–44.
- 35 Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings* 19, 69, 75. For the parallels between Epicurus and Zen see G. Parkes, 'Practicing Philosophy as a Matter of Life and Death', *Zen Buddhism Today* 15 (1998) pp. 58–67.
- 36 Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* p. 65.
- 37 See G. Parkes, 'Staying Loyal to the Earth'.