

# Nietzsche's Futures

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# 9

## Staying Loyal to the Earth: Nietzsche as an Ecological Thinker<sup>1</sup>

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I swear to you, my brothers, *stay loyal to the earth* and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes! ... The most dreadful thing is now to sin against the earth.

(Z Prologue 3)

It is customary in current discussions of the environmental crisis to ascribe responsibility for the pernicious effects of our technological domination of the earth to a tradition of thinking about the human relation to nature that is characterised as Platonic and/or Judaeo-Christian. Nor is it unreasonable to suppose that a world-view in which the physical universe is denigrated as unreal by comparison with an intelligible realm of unchanging ideas, or in which the natural world has been created for the benefit of humans as the only beings made in the image of God, is unlikely to be conducive to a reverential attitude towards natural phenomena. There is, however, a current of thinking that has been opposed to this mainstream all along. Beginning with the pre-Socratic thinkers, it resurfaces in the Stoics and Epicureans and with certain figures in the Christian mystical tradition and the Italian Renaissance, attains full flow with Goethe and the *Naturphilosophen* in Germany, and eventually issues in philosophers like Emerson and Thoreau in North America. What is not generally appreciated is that Nietzsche is a major figure in this minor current of thinking, and that his philosophy of nature qualifies him as one of the most powerful ecological thinkers of the modern period. This prominent position derives from his intimate personal relationship to the natural world, in

accordance with his principle that philosophical thoughts grow directly out of the life experience.

## I

Nietzsche's ideas about nature underwent considerable change as his thought developed – from an early Romanticist view, through a sober, more rational understanding informed by modern science, to a profound and comprehensive vision of humanity and the natural cosmos as dynamic and interpenetrating configurations of what he called 'will to power'. His final view, based on a reverence for the ultimately enigmatic nature of things, advocates a loyalty to the earth and a reverence for and affirmation of the 'innocence' of natural phenomena in all their transience. Because his conceptions of the human relation to nature undergo considerable alteration, it is advisable to consider them in chronological sequence – though the first two phases can be given no more than a brief summary here.

Nietzsche's early mentions of nature evince a feeling of mystical union with the natural world, a tendency encouraged by his readings in Byron and Shelley as well as the early Goethe and Hölderlin. Subsequent immersion in Emerson's *Essays* and the writings of Schopenhauer strengthened the animistic and hylozoistic features of his early speculations about the natural world.<sup>2</sup> In a public lecture from 1872 he asserts the indispensability for culture of a close, personal relationship with nature, and bemoans the tendency of education to teach 'how one subjugates nature toward one's own ends' through 'clever calculation'. And in teaching courses on the pre-Socratic thinkers, Nietzsche develops a view that is in stark contrast to the anthropocentrism characteristic of the modern attitude towards the natural world: he cites with approval the view of Heraclitus that 'the human being does not by any means occupy a privileged position in nature'.<sup>3</sup>

The salient feature of Nietzsche's coolly scientific phase of thinking about nature is his emphasis on the ways human conceptions of nature from epoch to epoch are conditioned by various kinds of *fantasy projections*, ranging from subjective caprice to impositions of humanly created regularities.<sup>4</sup> Yet this more ironic attitude by no means dispels his deep feeling of personal kinship with the natural world, as evidenced by his reaction to discovering the alpine

landscapes of the Upper Engadin for the first time. Soon after arriving in St Moritz he writes to Overbeck: 'But now I am in possession of the Engadin and am in my own element – quite astounding! I am *related* to *this* very nature.'<sup>5</sup> The feeling is most forcefully expressed in the aphorism 'Nature as *Doppelgänger*', where the ultimate joy is found in being able to say of one's physical environment: 'This [nature] is intimate and familiar to me, related by blood, and even more than that' (WS 338).<sup>6</sup> If this sounds extreme – his feeling such close kinship with a landscape he had never even seen before – recall that, having retired from his teaching position, Nietzsche could spend six to eight hours a day, when not indisposed by illness, hiking through pine woods and around alpine lakes. Consider too the distinctly mystical tone to the experiences invoked in the aphorisms 'Et in Arcadia ego' and 'At noon' (WS 295, 308), and that he would spend almost every subsequent summer of his career in nearby Sils-Maria, where he found the landscape even more *blutverwandt* [related by blood].

Not long after this first, transformative summer in the Engadin, Nietzsche seems to vacillate on the question of withdrawing the projections that condition our experience of the natural world (and of the world in general). At times it seems that the best we can ever do is to become *aware* that we are constantly 'dreaming' – or being dreamed by – 'the primal age and past of all sentient being' (GS 54), it being impossible to withdraw the archaic 'phantasm and the entire human *contribution*' from any particular experience of a cloud or a mountain (GS 54), or to avoid '*veiling* nature and mechanics' from ourselves (GS 59). But then later in *The Joyful Science* is a passage that suggests that a withdrawal of at least some kinds of projection may be possible after all, thanks to the discipline of science:

The total character of the world is to all eternity chaos, not in the sense of lacking necessity but lacking order, articulation, form, beauty, wisdom and whatever else our human aestheticizings call it ... When shall we have completely de-divinized nature! When shall we be able to start to *naturalize* ourselves with pure, new-found, newly redeemed nature!

(GS 109)

This 'chaos' seems to refer to what is left when the projections that customarily divinise abysmal indeterminacy by giving it order and form are withdrawn. The question then arises of how a human

being can experience this 'total character of the world', since Nietzsche usually denies that there can be such a thing as perspectiveless seeing. The same issue is addressed by an unpublished note from the period, which characterises his 'task' as 'the dehumanizing of nature and then the naturalizing of the human, after it has attained the pure concept of "nature"'.<sup>7</sup>

The way to such an experience is surely not through dying to the world (as the true philosopher is said to do in Plato's *Phaedo*) in order to enter some eternal realm beyond: Nietzsche does speak of a 'death with waking eyes' – but eyes open to the 'net of light' in which all things are spun as if buried in it (WS 308).<sup>8</sup> And yet this 'world of light' opened up by the collapse of the everyday human perspective is one in which it is 'natural' (!) to project Greek heroes and see the great god Pan slumbering (WS 295). The tension between a view that understands fantasy projection as an ineluctable (if occasionally see-throughable) aspect of the human condition and one that allows for a seeing of the world of nature as it is in itself, apart from human projections on to it, persists to the time of *Zarathustra*.

## II

Even though this favourite of Nietzsche's among his books contains only a single mention of the term *Natur* (Z II 'On Poets') and not one of its cognates, it is not that he has given up thinking about nature, but rather that this thinking plays itself out here in concrete images rather than abstract ideas. And when Zarathustra's life and work (and his life *as worked*) are presented as a potentially inspiring paradigm, they are seen to develop and unfold in the context of the natural world.

Zarathustra is presented as the teacher of a new possibility for human beings, the *Übermensch*, or overman. In his prologue he says to the people in the market-place:

*Behold! I teach you the overman!* The human being is something that must be overcome ....

The overman is the sense of the earth. Let your will say: the overman *shall be* the sense of the earth.

I swear to you, my brothers, *stay loyal to the earth* and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes! ...

Once the sin against God was the greatest sin, but God died and these sinners died with him. The most dreadful thing is now to sin against the earth.

(Z Prologue 3)

For humanity to come into its own it must overcome the chronic tendency to project the source of human value in some realm beyond or above this world. Whereas 'God' here stands for all the highest values that have grounded human existence in its post-Platonic history, 'the earth' stands for all *this-worldly* value. Now that transcendent grounds and sources are no longer viable ('God died') and we are thrown back, as it were, into the world of nature and history, 'the earth' also signifies what Spinoza called *natura naturans*. (Since Nietzsche had been re-reading the *Ethics* with enthusiasm around this time, the resonances between Zarathustra's 'earth' and the idea of *deus sive natura* are significant.)

It is remarkable, too, though not often remarked, that the *Übermensch* is introduced in Zarathustra's prologue primarily through metaphors drawn from nature:

The overman is the sense of the *earth* ...

Behold, I teach you the overman: he is this *ocean* ...

Behold, I teach you the overman: he is this *lightning* ...

I love him who works and invents to build a house for the overman and prepare for him *earth* and *animal* and *plant*: for thus he wills his own going under.

(Z Prologue 3, 4; emphases added)

As Zarathustra elaborates his teaching of the *Übermensch* and himself develops as a teacher, the natural environment of mountain and sea, lake and forest, is the indispensable context for this self-unfolding.<sup>9</sup> At the same time his psycho-spiritual development is presented almost exclusively in images of natural phenomena: there is preparing of soil and sowing of seed, transplanting of trees and pruning of vines, tending of gardens and harvesting of crops, breeding and herding and training of animals – and Zarathustra himself is likened, in Homeric-heroic fashion, to thunderstorms, mountain cataracts, ripening fruit, and forests of dark trees.<sup>10</sup> The role of nature in the cultivating of human nature is thus central and all-pervasive – so much so that our psychological development is impoverished to the extent that our

relations with the natural world are curtailed or our acquaintance with it diminished.

A major consequence of Zarathustra's denial of transcendent sources of value is that natural phenomena are understood as being valuable in themselves and not just through being created by God. This inherent validity is celebrated in Zarathustra's reiterated blessings in the essay 'Before Sunrise':

But this is my blessing: to stand over every thing as its own heaven, as its round roof, its azure bell and eternal security: and blissful is the one who blesses thus!

For all things are baptized in the well of eternity and are beyond good and evil ...

'Over all things stands the heaven Accident, the heaven Innocence, the heaven Chance, the heaven Exuberance' ...

I redeemed [all things] from their bondage under purpose.

(Z III 'Before Sunrise')

In redeeming all things from their bondage under purpose, Zarathustra frees them from any universal teleology, whether stemming from divine providence or the projection of a scientific view of progress, in order to let them be – or, rather, come and go – in what Nietzsche calls 'the innocence of becoming'.<sup>11</sup> Zarathustra owes his capacity for such redemptive blessing to his intimate kinship with the distinctly un-Platonic-Christian heavens he addresses before the sun rises in the sky, the abyss of light that wise-smilingly affirms whatever arises and perishes within its vast openness. This capacity derives in turn from Zarathustra's realisation of the world as perfect, just as it is, through his dropping off into the well of eternity 'at noon' (Z IV 'Noon').

### III

One of the major revelations in *Zarathustra* is the idea that all life is will to power. Much of Nietzsche's next book, *Beyond Good and Evil*, is devoted to explicating this difficult idea and elaborating its implications for the future of humanity. It is introduced in the first section of the book, 'On the Prejudices of the Philosophers', in an aphorism addressed to the Stoics which opens with the question – or exclamation: 'You want to *live* "in accordance with nature"?'

Think of a being like nature, extravagant beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without intentions or consideration, without mercy or justice, fertile and barren and uncertain all at once, think of indifference itself as power – how *could* you live in accordance with this indifference? Life – is that not precisely a wanting-to-be-other than this nature?

(BGE 9)

Human life is sustainable only in so far as it to some extent works *against* nature, even while being a part of it. Culture in particular is an *opus contra naturam*. But Nietzsche then accuses the Stoics of projecting their own morality on to nature while claiming to be reading it off from it:

And some abysmal arrogance finally gives you the insane hope that *because* you know how to tyrannize yourselves – Stoicism is self-tyranny – nature, too, allows herself to be tyrannized: is the Stoic not then a *piece* of nature?

(*ibid.*)

That last question invites an affirmative answer – in which case, even though nature might not allow herself to be tyrannised by the Stoics, she might nevertheless practise *self-tyranny*. (More on this shortly.) After an ellipsis, signifying a move from the particular to the general, Nietzsche concludes:

But this is an old, eternal story: what happened with the Stoics still happens today, as soon as any philosophy begins to believe in itself. It always creates the world in its own image, it cannot do otherwise; philosophy is this tyrannical drive itself, the most spiritual will to power, to 'creation of the world,' to the *causa prima*.

(*ibid.*)

Rather than beginning from where *Zarathustra* left off, with the idea that all life is will to power, Nietzsche here takes a special kind of life, the philosophical, and styles it as the most refined form of the will to create the world in one's own image: 'the most spiritual will to power'. Three aphorisms earlier he had recounted his realisation that 'every great philosophy up to now' has been 'the self-confession of its creator and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir' (BGE 6).

Is the great philosophy that Nietzsche has to offer us similarly such? It surely must be – and just like the philosophy of the Stoics, his too will project human concerns on to nature and create the world in its own image. But since it will be aware of what it is doing, and will celebrate the ‘innocence of becoming’ simply by ‘standing over every thing as its own heaven’, there is reason to suppose the resultant picture will be fuller and clearer.

We heard Nietzsche’s earlier suggestion that the order modern science finds in the natural world is just as much a human projection as the chaos of arbitrary wilfulness the so-called ‘primitive’ sees there. He now suggests that in projecting ‘lawfulness’ on to nature physics is pandering to the ‘democratic instincts of the modern soul’ with its claim that ‘equality before the law’ must hold for the natural world as a whole (BGE 22). An alternative is voiced by someone who

could interpret the very same nature, and with respect to the same phenomena, as the *ruthlessly tyrannical and relentless enforcement of claims of power* – an interpreter who would present the exceptionlessness and unconditionality in all ‘will to power’ in such a way that almost every word, and even the word ‘tyranny,’ would ultimately appear unsuitable, or as a weakening and diluting metaphor – as too human.

(*ibid.*, emphasis added)

This is why it is wishful thinking on the part of the Stoics to believe that nature allows itself to be tyrannised. When thunderstorms, floods, drought or earthquakes assert their claims of power, there are no exceptions made or conditions to be negotiated, no compromises on behalf of the human realm.

In an unpublished note Nietzsche associates ‘the naturalizing of the human’ precisely with an awareness of the tremendous *contingency* of life: ‘We can protect ourselves only a little in the great matters: a comet could smash the sun at any moment [for example] ... To the naturalizing of the human belongs readiness for the absolutely sudden and thwarting.’<sup>12</sup> Such readiness involves renouncing the fictions of the immortality of the soul and the substantiality of the ego by seeing through the illusion of duration, so as to realise our implication in the utter momentariness of natural processes, our suspension in the Heraclitean flux of arising and perishing. Since the products of scientific technology afford us relatively more protection and means of forewarning with respect to

those powers of nature that can be sudden and thwarting, we feel less tyrannised than our forebears; but it is a Faustian delusion to believe that we are no longer subject to non-human powers – to the natural forces on which human life depends.

After offering us an alternative interpretation (in terms of will to power) to that of Newtonian physics, Nietzsche takes an ironical step back: ‘Given that this, too, is only interpretation – and you will be eager enough to offer this objection? – Well, all the better’ (BGE 22). This twist draws our attention to the status of the aphorism and of the book and Nietzsche’s philosophy as a whole: it is not a presentation of the truth about the world, but rather a *Versuch*, an experimental proposition that we are invited to try out in our own experience. Nietzsche will nevertheless supply some grounds for accepting this proposition of his in favour of alternative interpretations.

#### IV

The second section of *Beyond Good and Evil*, where the topic of will to power is most deeply engaged, bears the title ‘The Free Mind’ – by contrast with minds still shackled by the philosophical prejudices discussed in the opening section. Nietzsche prepares the ground by recalling the traditional distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric in philosophy. ‘Our highest insights’, he writes (with Plato, among others, in mind), ‘must – and should – sound foolish, sometimes even criminal, when without permission they reach the ears of those who are not predisposed and predestined for them’ (BGE 30). What he has to say about will to power will sound ludicrous to minds informed by unexamined presuppositions about nature and the soul. Nor will it make sense from the anthropocentric perspective, when inquiry into the nature of the world is conducted in ‘too human’ a manner (BGE 35).<sup>13</sup> Note the *experimental* tone established by the conditional with which the key aphorism opens: ‘Supposing that nothing is “given” as real other than our world of desires and passions, that we are unable to get down or up to any “reality” other than just the reality of our drives’ (BGE 36). Supposing we accept – to put briefly what Nietzsche has taken many pages of previously published text to elaborate – his idea of the soul as a ‘social structure of the drives’, and that these drives working through the medium of fantasy interpret nerve stimuli and thereby constitute, as will to power, the world of our

experience: the question is bound to arise concerning just *what it is* the drives interpret. In other words, except when we are dreaming and input from outside is minimal, the drives do not have completely free rein in constituting the world of our experience. There is some resistance there, something appearing to 'push back' and set limits on how the world can be construed.

But granted the supposition that we cannot get to any reality other than the reality of our drives, Nietzsche asks:

Is it not permitted to make the experiment and ask the question whether this given does not *suffice* for understanding on the basis of things like it the so-called mechanistic (or 'material') world too? ... as a kind of drive-life, in which all organic functions are still synthetically bound up with each other ... as a *preform* of life? 'Will' can of course work only on 'will' – and not on 'matter' (not on 'nerves,' for example). In short, one must venture the hypothesis that everywhere that 'effects' are recognized will is working on will.

(ibid.)

What pushes back, then, as our drives interpretively project a world, is *will* in the form of *other drives* – not only the drives of our fellow human beings, but also those that animate animals, plants, and other natural phenomena. Since Nietzsche warned us that his ideas would sound foolish to ears not ready to hear them, we should be wary of dismissing this hypothesis as primitive animism, Stoicism without the God, or warmed-over Schopenhauer. Indeed the idea of will to power is in a sense a culmination of profound monistic tendencies in the tradition from Leibniz and Spinoza through the German Romantic thinkers – and especially as epitomised by the much neglected J. G. Herder.<sup>14</sup>

Backed by an understanding of more – and more sophisticated – physics and biology than these predecessors had access to, Nietzsche extends features of their conceptions of the human body and soul to the rest of the world:

Supposing, finally, that we succeeded in explaining our entire drive-life as the development and ramification of one basic form of will – namely, of will to power ... one would then have the right to determine *all* effective force univocally as: *will to power*. The world seen from within, the world determined and defined

in its 'intelligible character' – would be precisely 'will to power' and nothing besides.

(ibid.)

Not just my or our drive-life, nor even all life, but '*all* effective force' – the whole universe – is to be understood as will to power:

'What? Doesn't this mean, in vulgar parlance: God is refuted but the devil isn't?' On the contrary! On the contrary, my friends! And to the devil with whomever forces you to use vulgar parlance!

(BGE 37)<sup>15</sup>

That playful little dialogue, one of the pithiest aphorisms in the book, comes right after the major presentation of the idea of will to power and shows its profoundest implication. Nietzsche's response to the distressed objectors suggests that the devil would be refuted by the idea of the world as will to power, but not God. In less vulgar parlance: not the God of Spinoza – *sive natura naturans* – would be refuted, but the devilishly transcendent God of orthodox Christian monotheism.

## V

The theme of tyranny returns later in the book, in significant connection with the topic of nature and in the context of a '*natural* history of morals':

Every morality is, as opposed to 'letting go,' a piece of tyranny against 'nature,' and against 'reason' as well ... The essential and priceless thing about every morality is that it is a long compulsion ... The wonderful thing is that all there has ever been on earth in the way of freedom, refinement, boldness, dance, and masterly sureness ... developed only thanks to the 'tyranny of such arbitrary laws' [as those of poetry]; and it is indeed quite probable that precisely *this* is 'nature' and 'natural' – and *not* this 'letting go'!

(BGE 188)

How wonderful to hear that 'old immoralist' Nietzsche singing the praises of morality and propounding ethical naturalism with a

vengeance – even if only because morality shares an important feature in common with artistic creation: namely, prolonged tyrannical compulsion.<sup>16</sup> In a move that must infuriate the Stoics excoriated earlier, he now suggests that the tyrannising of ‘nature’ (in the form of natural drives and instincts) that characterises moralities and creative disciplines itself turns out to be precisely ‘natural’. And to compound the infuriation, he writes again of “Nature” *as it is*, in all its extravagant and *indifferent* magnificence’, saying that it ‘appalls us, but is noble’ (ibid., first emphasis added). The ‘as it is’ is clearly meant to suggest the possibility of encountering a dehumanised nature on its own terms, and not just as it appears to human beings within a projected horizon of utilitarian or scientific or aesthetic concerns. And while it may be appalling in its indifference, it is also noble – and thus worthy of human emulation. This is the sense in which nature can serve as a standard for the renaturalisation of humanity, which has too long suffered under regimes of anti-natural moralities. But moralities need not be anti-natural, and Nietzsche wants to say more than that nature can serve as a model:

It is the ‘nature’ [in a morality] that teaches hatred of ‘letting go’ and excessive freedom and the need for restricted horizons ... ‘You are to obey, no matter whom, and for a long time: *or else* you will perish and lose the last shreds of respect for yourself’ – this seems to me the moral imperative of nature [which is directed toward] peoples, races, epochs, classes, and above all toward the whole human animal, toward humanity itself.

(ibid.)

Nietzsche had suggested in his untimely meditation on history that human nature is in part given by nature and in part a process of creating a second nature, or culture, through disciplined working of what is given.<sup>17</sup> Now it turns out that the (moral!) imperative to work oneself into something, as well as the energies required for the task, comes from nature itself.

The (self-)tyranny dictated by nature itself involves a certain cruelty, and it is the aversion to cruelty on the part of many moralists that has led them to misunderstand the nature of nature. (Just as the failure of many readers of Nietzsche to see that the cruelty he celebrates is cruelty directed primarily towards *oneself* leads to their dismissing him prematurely.) ‘One misunderstands the beast of prey and the man of prey (Cesare Borgia, for example) fundamentally,

one misunderstands “nature,” as long as one still seeks some “sickness” at the bottom of these healthiest of all tropical monsters and growths, or some “hell” that is inborn in them’ (BGE 197). It is *fear* of the more terrible aspects of the natural world, which can indeed be ‘red in tooth and claw’ and hostile – when not indifferent – to human interests, that has contributed to the general denigration of the natural world in favour of human culture.

In the course of a later discussion of a basic tendency of the human spirit towards dissimulation, Nietzsche writes of the need to recognise ‘the terrible ground-text *homo natura*’ beneath the layers of self-serving valuations that have been applied to it over the ages:

To translate the human back into nature ... to make it that the human being henceforth stand ... before that *other* nature, with fearless Oedipus-eyes and stopped-up Odysseus-ears, deaf to the enticements of all the metaphysical bird-catchers who have been whistling to him for too long: ‘You are more! You are higher! You are of another origin!’ – that would be a strange and wonderful task.

(BGE 230)

The twofold task, strange and wonderful, would be to strip away the fantastic metaphysical interpretations of human origins that have obscured human nature, and to confront human beings with nature itself, similarly stripped of human projections. One may infer that this ‘terrible ground-text *homo natura*’ mirrors that *other* nature – nature dehumanised and dedivinated – in being ‘extravagant beyond measure’ and ‘indifferent beyond measure’. Yet even within nature *per se* that extravagance collides with and works against itself in the phenomenon of life – and in the reflective space that in human beings opens up between straight and retroflective (or inhibiting) drives, this working against itself can become debilitating as ‘bad conscience’ (neurosis for Freud) and/or creative as higher culture.

## VI

When Nietzsche proposed that we understand all existence – ourselves, humans, as well as animals, plants, and the realm of the

so-called inanimate – as will to power, he followed this proposition with an allusion to the divinity of the world thus understood (BGE 36–7). There is a further allusion to the divinity of the cosmos in aphorism 56, one of the most affirmative expressions of the most affirmative of thoughts, eternal recurrence. Here Nietzsche suggests that in his confrontation with nihilism he has at least overcome the Eurocentric perspective, if not the anthropocentric perspective too, in so far 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’ – and has thereby had his eyes opened to ‘the opposite ideal ... of the most exuberant, vital, and world-affirming human being’. Such a human being, who could joyously affirm the world ‘just as it has been and is’, would see what had looked like a vicious circle (the thought of recurrence in its nihilistic aspect) turn out to be divine – *deus ex natura*, one might say.<sup>18</sup>

A number of unpublished notes from around the time of *Beyond Good and Evil* show Nietzsche entertaining thoughts of the divinity of the cosmos in terms of a Dionysian pantheism. He wonders about the plausibility of ‘a pantheism in which evil, error, and suffering are not experienced as arguments against divinity’ – and ends the note by writing: ‘Dionysos: sensuality and cruelty. Impermanence could be interpreted as enjoyment of the procreative and destructive energies, as constant creation.’<sup>19</sup> And in a later discussion of the nihilistic aspect of eternal recurrence he questions whether the collapse of the moral interpretation of the universe as having some kind of meaning or purpose ‘also renders impossible a pantheistic affirmation of all things’:

Is it meaningful to think of a god ‘beyond good and evil’? Would a pantheism in *this* sense be possible? Could we remove the idea of purpose from the process and *nevertheless* affirm the process? This would be possible if something within the process were *attained* in every moment of it – and always the same.<sup>20</sup>

That ‘something’ would be what Nietzsche later calls, in another note associating pantheism with the Dionysian, ‘the total character’ of life or existence. Here the Dionysian is said to be, among other things, ‘the great pantheistic sharing of joy and suffering [*Mitfreudigkeit und Mitleidigkeit*] which affirms and hallows even the most terrible and questionable features of life’.<sup>21</sup>

When Nietzsche added a fifth book to *The Joyful Science* for the new edition of 1887, he returned to the theme of the great nobility of nature as will to power and its possible divinity.<sup>22</sup> Again this insight appears to have emerged from an overcoming of the anthropocentric perspective:

As a researcher into nature, one should come out of one’s human corner: and what *reigns* in nature is not deprivation but rather abundance, extravagance, even to the point of senselessness ... in accordance with the will to power, which is precisely the will of life.

(GS 349)

Getting out of one’s corner, one is granted a broader perspective which reveals the Dionysian *Überfluss* of the natural world – an abundance too extravagantly alive to be comprehensible in terms of dead matter alone. Nietzsche thus admonishes the ‘materialistic researchers of nature’:

One should want above all not to divest existence of its *richly ambiguous* [*vieldeutigen*] character: *good* taste demands that, gentlemen, the taste of reverence for everything that goes beyond your horizon! ... An essentially mechanical world would be an essentially *meaningless* world!

(GS 373)

For all his admiration for the discipline of science and the insights it affords into the natural world, Nietzsche makes it clear that materialism and mechanism are hopelessly shortsighted and without ‘reverence’ for those aspects of nature that lie beyond their restricted horizons. The next aphorism shows just how constricting the materialistic perspective can be.

The relevant premise is ‘whether all existence [is not] essentially *interpreting* existence’ – which is equivalent to the hypothesis advanced in *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE 36) concerning all existence as will to power:

But I think that today we are at least 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 again, insofar as we cannot dismiss

the possibility that it *contains within it infinite interpretations*. The great terror grips us again – but who then would want straight away to divinise *this* monster of an unknown world again in the old way?

(GS 374)

Nietzsche surely wouldn't – yet 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. It is on these grounds that Nietzsche deplores the arrogance of the modern stance towards the natural world: 'Our whole attitude towards nature today is hubris, our rapping of nature by means of machines and the inconsiderately employed inventions of technology and engineering' (GM III 9).

But *are* there ways for mortal beings such as we are, being only a small part of nature, to understand the whole – without going beyond the world in a move of metaphysical transcendence? Ways of transcending the human perspective while remaining faithful to the earth?

## VII

The joyful science that would assist us here embraces many methods, in so far as it enjoys what Nietzsche calls 'the greatest advantage of polytheism' (GS 143). And while many of the experimental methods Nietzsche recommends involve inter- and intra-personal relations (D 432), many demand relations with non-human beings. One simple way of emerging from one's corner is to change scale and 'become small' – and 'just as close to the flowers, grasses, and butterflies as a child is'. For 'whoever wants to participate in all that is good must also know how to be small at times' (WS 51). And indeed Nietzsche's works are full of suggestions concerning how to realise our participation in the vegetal soul.<sup>23</sup>

Another way is to return to the inorganic – to re-enter the flow, or else to 'turn to stone' as the title of this gem of an aphorism has it: 'How one is to turn to stone. – Slowly, slowly to become hard like a precious stone – and finally to lie there still and to the joy of eternity' (D 541). While some of this hardness has to do with making one's mark for the sake of posterity,<sup>24</sup> a number of unpublished

notes from this period evidence a fascination with the benefits of participation in the 'dead' world of the inorganic. For a start, one can see better: 'To procure the advantages of one who is dead ... to think oneself away out of humanity, to unlearn desires of all kinds: and to employ the entire abundance of one's powers in *looking*.'<sup>25</sup> And yet this unlearning of desires makes existence anything but dull: 'It is a *festival* to go from this world across into the "dead world." ... Let us *not* think of the return to the inanimate as a regression! ... *Death* has to be reinterpreted!'<sup>26</sup> The image of the festival reappears in the same notebook, this time in connection with love of nature: 'To be released from life and become dead nature again can be experienced as a *festival* – of the one who wants to die. To love nature! Again to revere what is dead!'<sup>27</sup> On reflection, what makes us from the start intimate relations of this dead world is our physical constitution as living organisms: 'How distant and superior is our attitude toward what is dead, the anorganic, and all the while we are three-quarters water and have anorganic minerals in us that perhaps do more for our well- and ill-being than the whole of living society!'<sup>28</sup> And finally, a note adjacent to the one cited earlier in which Nietzsche characterises his task as 'to dehumanize nature and then naturalize humans', contains this pertinent observation: 'The inorganic conditions us through and through: water, air, earth, the shape of the ground, electricity, etc. We are plants under such conditions.'<sup>29</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum of ways to emerge from one's corner is: getting into the *flux* of existence, life's flow, not merely by going along with it but by flowing or *streaming* with it: no passive or reactive *laissez-aller*, but an active participation that furthers and amplifies life's flow – just as Zarathustra's soul 'rushes into the valleys' and he becomes 'fully the roaring of a stream out of high cliffs' (Z II 'The Child with the Mirror'). If one emulates Nietzsche's regimen of six to eight hours hiking per day, it is not hard to appreciate how he came to experience life as natural flux. At the limit, this flow issues in the great human being, or genius: 'He flows out [*strömt aus*], he overflows [*strömt über*], he consumes himself and does not spare himself – fatally, disastrously, involuntarily, as a river that bursts its banks does so involuntarily' (TI 'Expeditions' 44). With this passage from *Twilight of the Idols* we reach the locus of Nietzsche's last great pronouncement on nature, where he returns to the theme of 'translating the human back into nature'.

An aphorism entitled 'Progress in my sense' begins as follows: 'I too speak of a "return to nature," although it is not actually a going back but rather a *coming up* – up into the high, free, even terrible nature and naturalness' (TI 'Expeditions' 48). To reach 'the terrible ground-text *homo natura*' requires gaining higher ground, an ascent to a loftier level of human nature. Nietzsche cites Napoleon as an exemplar of such a 'return to nature', and then turns to an attack on Rousseau and egalitarianism. The French Revolution was regressive because it tried to abolish the order of rank, the difference in levels between lofty and base, that is to be found in nature.

We learn more about the nature of this 'return back up' from the next aphorism, entitled 'Goethe' – a figure who, for Nietzsche, epitomises human greatness as the ultimate synthesis of spontaneous nature and refined culture. He characterises Goethe as 'a tremendous attempt to overcome the eighteenth century through a return to nature, through a coming up to the naturalness of the Renaissance' (TI 'Expeditions' 49) – the Renaissance being an age that achieved the highest culture in the context of a life animated by the most powerful natural drives:

What [Goethe] wanted was *totality* ... he disciplined himself into wholeness, he *created* himself ... Goethe conceived of a strong, highly cultured human being, adept in a range of physical skills, self-controlled and with reverence for himself, who can dare to grant himself the full range and richness of naturalness, and who is strong enough for this freedom.

(*ibid.*)

It is a matter of *daring* to grant oneself 'the full range and richness of naturalness' since such naturalness is possible only after one has undergone protracted discipline in the form of tyranny by the 'task' that has emerged from one's nature – a regimen prescribed by nature itself, and one that can be fatal for unfortunate practitioners. That same naturalness is 'terrible' also because the power of the natural drives is channelled by configurations of other drives rather than by some controlling centre of the psyche like the conscious ego.

Nietzsche's concern with self-discipline as a means of achieving the best that human nature is capable of is by no means an end in itself, however. Though indispensable, it is only a means: the end is a natural spontaneity that is attained through the relaxation of self-discipline (protracted also over generations preceding the individual's

lifetime), in which the configurations of drives, or will to power, that constitute the individual work and play in productive interaction with the configurations of will to power that constitute the natural and cultural environment in which that individual lives.

Nietzsche's philosophy of the soul implies that no psychical or cultural development can take place in the absence of imagery drawn from natural phenomena: thus the more we accelerate the extinction of species in the natural world, the more impoverished our psychical life will gradually become. But the larger stakes are higher: the future of the human is in doubt, in part because the future of the earth is imperilled. Nietzsche's philosophy of nature, his understanding of the natural world and human existence as interdependent processes and dynamic configurations of will to power, can contribute to grounding a realistic, global ecology that in its loyalty to the earth may be capable of saving it. In view of the degradation of nature in the modern period, Nietzsche's Dionysian–pantheistic affirmation of 'what has been and is' is not to be taken as a fatalistic acquiescence in the ongoing devastation. In the later works he writes frequently of the enormous responsibility (*Verantwortlichkeit*) that accrues to those who would understand the world, a responsibility to the nobility of nature as well as the nobility of millennia of past culture – and a responsibility to see to it that 'what *will be*' will be even nobler than 'what has been and is'.

Given the ways in which Nietzsche's understanding of the world – and of the world of nature especially – furthers a strain of thinking that runs from Heraclitus through Boehme and Spinoza and Goethe and Emerson, and in view of its profound resonances with philosophies of nature from other traditions (Daoism and Zen in particular), one might be tempted to think that understanding true. But truth is not the crucial issue here: the urgency of our current predicament does not allow the luxury of speculating about truth. The major forces responsible for the devastation of the earth doubtless glimpse the truth of the situation already – but they are cynical enough to let the destruction continue in the belief that they can insulate themselves (and immediate progeny) from the dire consequences. It all comes down to a question of will to power, conflicts between competing interpretations and world-views: 'In the great and small struggle it all comes down to preponderance, growth, expansion, power' (GS 349). The more people can come to an appreciation of Nietzsche's view of the natural world as divine, the better

the chances for the earth's future flourishing. And if that's what we want, it's up to us to do what it takes.

A colleague of mine was disappointed with this conclusion, concerned that it implied that the *Übermensch* would spend his or her time going around planting trees. I can think of many more ignoble occupations for the *Übermensch* – especially since Zarathustra exhorts his disciples to 'prepare earth and animal and plant for him'. But just as 'there are no scientific methods that alone lead to knowledge' (D 432), there are no practical methods that alone can solve our ecological problems. Even though most of the violence Nietzsche advocates is to be practised on oneself, there is no *a priori* reason why the *Übermensch* could not, under certain circumstances, act like a member of Edward Abbey's Monkey-Wrench Gang, engaging in the spiking of trees and other acts of 'ecoterrorism'. Nietzsche considers 'the most important question for philosophy' to be 'to what extent things have an unalterable character and form: so that, once this question is answered, one can set about *improving those aspects of the world recognised as alterable* with the most ruthless courage' (RWB 3). As if in response to Marx's injunction to philosophers to change the world, he goes on to add that 'This is what the genuine philosophers teach, even in deed, insofar as they work on improving the very alterable views of human beings.' And since one of the most important weapons in the coming 'nature wars' will be the ability to affect 'the very alterable views of human beings' with respect to the natural world; and given that philosophy as 'the most spiritual will to power' has the power to transform people's experience and worldviews, we may hope to see its practitioners wielding mightier implements than pens on a variety of fronts.

## Notes

1. The present essay is in large part inspired by Laurence Lampert's provocative remarks on Nietzsche's 'joyous science' as ecological philosophy in *Nietzsche and Modern Times: A Study of Bacon, Descartes, and Nietzsche* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 278, 404, 418. All translations are the author's own, from KSA. For sigla used in my citations, see the Reference Key to Nietzsche's Texts on p. xii.
2. For a discussion of Nietzsche's early attitude toward nature, see the first chapter of my *Composing the Soul* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1994), and for a more detailed comparison with

Emerson the essay 'Floods of Life around Granite of Fate: Emerson and Nietzsche as Thinkers of Nature, in *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, vol. 43 (1997), pp. 207–40.

3. 'Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks', 7 (KSA 1:831). Compare also the distinctly 'entomocentric' opening of the contemporaneous essay 'On Truth and Lie in the Extramoral Sense' (KSA 1:875; also included in Daniel Brezeale (ed. and trans.), *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1979)).
4. See, for example, HH 8, 111; D 17, 23, 31, 142, 423, 424, 426, 427. I discuss the much neglected topic of fantasy projection in Nietzsche in several sections of *Composing the Soul* (in Chapters 3 and 8 especially).
5. Letter of 23 June 1879. Witness the numerous bursts of appreciation for the landscape and the air around St Moritz, and expressions of feelings of kinship with them, in several other letters from that summer, as well as in the unpublished notes (KSA 8:41[8]–45[6]).
6. See also WS 14, 17, 51, 57, 115, 138, 176, 205, 295, 308, 332.
7. KSA 9:11[211]; 1881. The theme reappears in 9:11[238].
8. Nietzsche returns to the theme of the perfection of the world at the noon hour in the essay in *Zarathustra Part IV* entitled 'Noon'.
9. A note from 1884 reads: 'N.B. The highest human being to be conceived as a copy [*Abbild*] of nature' (KSA 11:25[140]).
10. For more detailed discussion of this kind of imagery, see *Composing the Soul*, Chapters 4, 5 and 6.
11. This affirmative attitude has deep parallels with the Indian Buddhist response to *tathâtâ*, or the 'suchness' of the world, or with what the Chinese Daoists celebrate as *ziran*, or 'self-so-ing', or Japanese Zen practitioners as *jinen/shizen*, or spontaneous unfolding in accordance with one's particular nature. See, for instance, my essay 'Human/Nature in Nietzsche and Taoism', in J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (eds), *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 79–98.
12. KSA 9:11[228]; 1881.
13. See Laurence Lampert's discussion of Leo Strauss's reading of these (and subsequent) aphorisms in *BGE*, in *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1996), Chapter 2.
14. See the discussions of Herder in *Composing the Soul*, Chapters 3 and 7.
15. I am indebted to Laurence Lampert for pointing out the importance of this profound little joke. [Editor's note: see Lampert's essay in this volume, especially pp. 78–80.]
16. Nietzsche touches here on a feature that appears to be common to the creative endeavour across a wide range of cultures. One thinks in particular of the arts of Japan, in which natural impulses are trained under severe constraint over long periods of time so that their eventual discharge attains a higher level of spontaneity – from which something almost supernatural issues.
17. 'The best we can do is to combat our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge of it, and even to have a new, disciplined culture fight our archaic and innate acquisition, and to implant in ourselves a

- new habitude, a new instinct, a second nature, so that the first nature withers away ... always a dangerous attempt, because it is so difficult to find the borderline in negating the past, and because second natures are mostly weaker than first ones' (UD 3).
18. Recall the alternative to the nihilistic response to the thought in 'The Heaviest Weight' – to say to the *daimôn*: 'You are a god, and never did I hear anything more divine!' (GS 341). Also the transfiguration of the shepherd in Zarathustra's vision into someone 'no longer a human being – one transfigured, enlightened, who *laughed!*' (Z III 'On the Vision and the Riddle').
  19. KSA 12:2[106]; 1885–6. It is no wonder that this notion caught the attention of the Japanese philosopher Nishitani Keiji, since it is so close to the notion of impermanence in Mahayana Buddhism. Nishitani is one of the few commentators to have seen the importance of what he calls Nietzsche's 'Dionysian pantheism': see the references in *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, trans. Graham Parkes with Setsuko Aihara (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), especially pp. 64–6.
  20. KSA 12:5[71] 7 = WP 55; 1887.
  21. KSA 13:14[14] = WP 1050; 1888.
  22. This theme is treated, and the following aphorisms from *The Joyful Science* discussed, in Part III of Laurence Lampert's *Nietzsche and Modern Times*.
  23. For more on this topic, see *Composing the Soul*, Chapter 5: 'Husbanding the Soul: Vegetal Propagation'.
  24. As Zarathustra says to his 'brothers': 'For creators are hard. And what bliss it must be, to impress your hand upon millennia as on wax – / Bliss to write upon the will of millennia as on bronze – harder than bronze, nobler than bronze' (Z III 'On Old and New Tablets', 29).
  25. KSA 9:11[35].
  26. KSA 9: 11[70].
  27. KSA 9:11[125].
  28. KSA 9:11[207].
  29. KSA 9:11[210].

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