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**A Telling Silence:  
Nietzsche on the Downfall of the Dialectic**

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*A thesis submitted in candidature for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy*

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## Abstract

*A Telling Silence: Nietzsche on the Downfall of the Dialectic* presents a rereading of Nietzsche's work in the German original with a view to the conspicuous silence in which Nietzsche shrouds his relationship to the dialectic. The study shows how this silence is betrayed in the intricacies of Nietzsche's writing, and in turn betrays the nature of his relationship to the dialectic as integral to his thinking and inherent in his historical position as a philosopher. Nietzsche's distinct use of the terms *Wiederkehr* and *Wiederkunft* indicates that he thinks his fundamental thought specifically as *Wiederkunft* and, correspondingly, determines being as bringing-forth, as giving-birth, as *Niederkunft*. Since *Niederkunft*, in metaphysical terms, describes the tragic act *per se*, this definition of being coincides with the definition of being as tragedy, which had preoccupied Nietzsche since his youth. An inquiry into the fact that Nietzsche hardly speaks of work at all shows, accordingly, that he renounces the notion of the human that has characterized Western philosophy since Plato. As the first thinker of the West, he defines the human not in work, but in labour and in this sense not as man, but as woman - signalling, thus, a solution to the dead end of the master-slave-dialectic. Finally, the study questions the tradition of reading Nietzsche's thinking as explosion, which prevails in Nietzsche scholarship to date, and presents Nietzsche's thinking as the antidote to the explosive age of dialectics. As it ascribes to Nietzsche's thinking the implosion of the dialectical age as well as the emergence of a new era of human life on earth, it depicts his thinking in essence as the *Niederkunft* of the Western system of thought, and subsequently examines its implications today.

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## Conclusions on Method: A Preface

An aphorism, properly stamped and moulded, has not been 'deciphered' just because it has been read out; on the contrary, this is just the beginning of its proper *interpretation*, and for this, an art of interpretation is needed.<sup>1</sup>

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*

The aphoristic writing of Friedrich Nietzsche requires by his own reckoning an art of interpretation - and *not* a methodology - in order to reveal its full magnitude. An *art* of interpretation suggests above all that the interpretation entails an element of creation: it suggests that something is *made* of the original text. In this sense, an art of interpretation is the very opposite of a method, which, wittingly or not, always forestalls the results it is willing to accept as such. A method, in other words, closes down an interpretation even before it has begun, whereas Nietzsche's understanding of art in general would suggest that an art of interpretation opens up an interpretation such that it, in turn, gives rise to ever new interpretations. If Nietzsche recommends that his thinking should be approached thus, he implies that there is never a complete, a definitive or even a finished interpretation of his thinking: there is always more to be made of his thought. An interpretation of Nietzsche can only ever be *one* among many; in this sense, I do not intend my reading of Nietzsche to lay claim to *the* truth. And conversely, it is precisely because for Nietzsche himself, 'it is clear

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, translated by Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 9.

that interpretation is always unfinished'<sup>2</sup> and there is always more to be made of his thinking that I ventured to write on Nietzsche at all, even in an age that has already seen a wealth of Nietzsche scholarship.

I approached the study of Nietzsche's work with no more methodical an intention than to listen to him as best I could. In contradistinction to much of the contemporary scholarship on Nietzsche, I therefore always proceeded from reading his work in the German original, and consequently, I have at times used material which is not yet readily available in translation; in these instances, the translations given in the text are my own. As my argument rests on the intricacies of Nietzsche's writing, which point to and indeed beyond the conspicuous silence that surrounds his relationship with the dialectic, the secondary literature on Nietzsche's work has not in itself been a focal point of my research. I chose the secondary texts that I have consulted according to what I discovered in Nietzsche's own writing, without prescribing a format and a method for their use at the outset.

Like so many a reader of Nietzsche, I have been seduced by his style and hence I grounded my analysis of his thinking in the subtleties of his language; contrary to many of the seminal commentaries on his work, however, I have confined myself solely to the metaphysical aspect of his thought. I do not examine Nietzsche as a lyricist, a dramatist or a polemicist, siding rather with Martin Heidegger's view that Nietzsche is not a 'poet-philosopher' or a 'philosopher of life',<sup>3</sup> but always and everywhere a thinker of metaphysics in the strictest sense. Correspondingly, I follow Heidegger's argument that Nietzsche's

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Freud, Marx', translated by Alan D. Schrift, in: Gayle L. Ormiston / Alan D. Schrift (eds), *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 59-67 (p. 64).

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes I and II*, translated by David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), I: *The Will to Power as Art*, p. 5.

thought, whilst it marks no doubt a turning point in the history of the West, is ultimately still deeply engrained in the tradition of Western philosophy.<sup>4</sup> It is in this context that my approach led me to address Nietzsche's relationship to Hegel, which, it seems, has always fascinated as well as perturbed those who engage with both of these thinkers. In contemporary scholarship, Elliot L. Jurist detects a growing 'uneasiness with the conception of Hegel and Nietzsche as philosophical opposites',<sup>5</sup> which I certainly share, if only to the extent that I do not take their positions to be mutually exclusive. I am not, however, looking to reconcile their thinking; I am not looking for the 'compromise' between Hegel and Nietzsche, which Gilles Deleuze already suspected to be impossible,<sup>6</sup> and I am not even trying 'to place Hegel and Nietzsche in conversation with one another',<sup>7</sup> as Jurist and Will Dudley,<sup>8</sup> among the most prominent contemporary scholars, profess to do. And yet, if I am uncomfortable with aiming for a reconciliation or a 'consensus'<sup>9</sup> between Nietzsche and Hegel and even with engaging them in conversation, I am equally uncomfortable with reading their relationship as a 'hand-to-hand combat',<sup>10</sup> as Jacques Derrida has suggested, or reducing Nietzsche's thought to an 'attack' on Hegel's system.<sup>11</sup> It is, indeed, on the very same grounds that these positions arouse my suspicion, for a relationship of combat and attack of the other, no less than one of reconciliation and dialogue, remains in essence a dialectical one. By contrast, I suggest a reading of the relationship between Hegel and

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Heidegger, 'Nietzsche as the Thinker of the Consummation of Metaphysics', in: *Nietzsche: Volumes III and IV*, edited by David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), III: *The Will to Power as Knowledge and as Metaphysics*, translated by Joan Stambaugh, David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi, pp. 3-9.

<sup>5</sup> Elliot L. Jurist, *Beyond Hegel and Nietzsche: Philosophy, Culture, and Agency* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson (London: Athlone, 1983), p. 195.

<sup>7</sup> Jurist, *Beyond Hegel and Nietzsche*, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Will Dudley, *Hegel, Nietzsche, and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. i.

<sup>9</sup> Jurist, *Beyond Hegel and Nietzsche*, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otiobiography, Transference, Translation*, edited by Christie McDonald, translated by Peggy Kamuf from the French edition by Claude Levesque and Christie McDonald (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Dudley, *Hegel, Nietzsche, and Philosophy*, p. 237.

Nietzsche which makes the two thinkers part of the same tradition, and yet opposites in their respective take on it, which grants a complimentary quality of their thoughts<sup>12</sup> without the possibility of reconciliation and which, in short, depicts their relationship as forever confrontational in the most immediate sense. In contradistinction to those who, following Karl Löwith, view Hegel and Nietzsche as the two opposing ends which delineate the nineteenth century in the history of German thought,<sup>13</sup> I detect in their respective thinking not just parallels of a more or less contingent nature, but a point of convergence, as both thinkers approach, albeit from different angles, the last thought that is possible in Western metaphysics. In this sense, I presume much closer a relationship between Hegel's and Nietzsche's thought than most commentators do, certainly those who, with Löwith, perceive a clear break between Hegel's completion and Nietzsche's new beginnings,<sup>14</sup> or indeed those who, with Heidegger, view Nietzsche as the last metaphysician and thus cast Hegel in the role of his precursor. And yet, at the very point of their convergence, I detect an irreconcilable element in the thoughts of Hegel and Nietzsche: an element of confrontation, which, I contend, is in essence anti-dialectical. This take on Nietzsche's position *vis-à-vis* Hegel is crucial to my interpretation of his thought on the whole; in principle, my reading expands, indeed, on Max Horkheimer's and Theodor Adorno's view that Nietzsche was one of the few after Hegel who recognized the dialectic of enlightenment.<sup>15</sup>

In examining the convergence of Hegel's and Nietzsche's thinking at the end of the philosophical system of the West, I focus in particular on its implications on our definition of

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<sup>12</sup> I would not, however, want to follow Will Dudley in his call for 'Hegelians and Nietzscheans to engage in a harmonious collaboration'. Dudley, *Hegel, Nietzsche, and Philosophy*, p. 238.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche: Der revolutionäre Bruch im Denken des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Fischer, 1969), p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche: Der revolutionäre Bruch im Denken des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Max Horkheimer / Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 36.



the human, and it is in this context that I discuss the dialectic of master and slave and the role it assigns to work in the constitution of the human. Today, it may seem that work is no longer a philosophical question but has become a topic for economics or sociology, as Löwith suggests, but I contest his view that Karl Marx was the last thinker who actually grounded the social and economic issues of work in philosophy,<sup>16</sup> suggesting rather that Nietzsche's thinking engages, indeed, no less than Marx's or Hegel's with the role of work in our conception of the human. In this context, I discuss the absence of woman in the master-slave dialectic and explore her existence - in contradistinction to man's - in terms of the human consciousness it evokes. Inasmuch as it engages, thus, with Nietzsche's thinking of woman, my reading of his thought delves into what has always been one of the most controversial aspects of his thinking. As opposed to most of the early Nietzsche scholars, who 'followed one of Nietzsche's most famous commentators, Walter Kaufmann, in dismissing his comments on women as unfortunate products of his time and irrelevant to his philosophy',<sup>17</sup> I side with the majority of more recent interpretations which, particularly from a feminist perspective, emphasize that his remarks cannot be ignored. In fact, I detect in Nietzsche's thinking of woman the central theme of his thought, and precisely in this respect, I also diverge from much of what has become the canonical scholarship on Nietzsche and the feminine. It seems, indeed, that much of the controversy that still surrounds Nietzsche's thinking of woman is rooted in the very fact that work is today no longer examined in a philosophical way at all, or at best only, as in Löwith's own analysis, in terms of its societal and cultural implications in the history of the bourgeois-Christian world<sup>18</sup> but not in its theoretical origins in the dialectic of master and slave. Accordingly, Nietzsche's thinking of

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<sup>16</sup> Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche: Der revolutionäre Bruch im Denken des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, p. 307.

<sup>17</sup> Kelly Oliver and Marilyn Pearsall, 'Introduction: Why Feminists Read Nietzsche', in: Oliver / Pearsall (eds), *Feminist Interpretations of Friedrich Nietzsche* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), pp. 1-17 (p. 1).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche: Der revolutionäre Bruch im Denken des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, pp. 287-314.

woman has largely been treated as a more or less problematic appendage to his thought, to be investigated in societal, political or psychoanalytic terms; it has not, however, been explored as his central metaphysical thought. Such an interpretation, I suggest, has the potential to qualify many a criticism that has been levelled against Nietzsche in relation to his remarks on women. If Nietzsche thinks 'woman' purely in metaphysical terms, his views are not a question of his personal experience, which certainly reflects on Malwida von Meysenbug's criticism, who, as one of the earliest commentators on his views on women 'renounced his generalizing judgments' on the grounds that 'he hardly knew any women'.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Keith Ansell-Pearson's point that to 'overlook, or to disregard ... Nietzsche's sexist remarks is ... politically dangerous'<sup>20</sup> is no doubt a valid one regardless of whether or not Nietzsche's comments were actually intended in a political way; and nonetheless, the view that Nietzsche thinks woman precisely *not* in political terms, as I suggest, sheds no doubt a different light on any criticism of his remarks on political grounds. It is certainly not my intention to defend Nietzsche against his critics or be in any way apologetic about his views but, by the same token, the thinker that emerges in my reading is neither a hopeless misogynist nor, indeed, a dysfunctional neurotic, whose questionable views on women can be traced to his family situation.<sup>21</sup> If I do not expand on Nietzsche's thinking of woman in social, political and psychoanalytic terms, it is not, however, because I dismiss the validity of such arguments. The relationship between man and woman is of course always a social and political question, but I would contend that in the philosophical tradition of the West, it is

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<sup>19</sup> Bianca Theisen, 'Rhythms of Oblivion' in: Peter J. Burgard, *Nietzsche and the Feminine* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), pp. 82-103 (p. 82).

<sup>20</sup> Keith Ansell-Pearson, 'Nietzsche, Woman and Political Theory' in: Paul Patton (ed.), *Nietzsche, Feminism and Political Theory* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Kelly Oliver, for instance, traces 'Nietzsche's troubled relation to "the feminine"' to his family circumstances of 'The Abject Mother' and 'The Dead Father' and concludes that he ultimately 'fetishizes the abjection itself. He fetishizes the womb of being where there are no borders between truth and falsity, good and evil, creation and destruction, mother and son, masculine and feminine'. Oliver, 'Nietzsche's Abjection' in: Burgard, *Nietzsche and the Feminine*, pp. 53-67 (pp. 53, 57, 63, 65).

always also – and indeed primarily – a metaphysical one. In discussing Nietzsche’s thinking of woman as a category of human consciousness, I intend, thus, not so much to depart from previous scholarship on Nietzsche’s thinking on woman, as in fact to engage with its underlying issues. To a certain extent, my reading follows, thus, in the footsteps of those who, after Alison Ainley, examined how ‘[b]y taking up the metaphoric potentials of pregnancy and femininity ... Nietzsche is able to effect a strategic parody of sexual difference’,<sup>22</sup> and those who, after Eric Blondel, read woman in Nietzsche’s writing as ‘the privileged metaphor of life’.<sup>23</sup> I do not, however, interpret Nietzsche’s remarks on woman only in metaphorical terms; hence, I could not agree with Alexander Nehamas’ view that Nietzsche ‘looks at the world as if it were a sort of artwork; in particular, ... a literary text’,<sup>24</sup> or with any other metaphorical interpretation which detects in Nietzsche’s thinking ‘not a theory of the world but a view of the ideal life’.<sup>25</sup> If Nietzsche’s views on woman constitute the centre of his philosophical system, as I suggest, his thought defines being as a whole as gynaecomorphism and, indeed, in such a way that this definition of being is grounded not in an ideal but in *this* world – and in this world only.

In the course of my research, I have also encountered secondary texts that could not add to my reading of Nietzsche, nor contradict it in any way but *prima facie* – most notably, Luce Irigaray’s *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* and Maurice Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster*. Irigaray’s female address of the male philosopher in *Marine Lover of Friedrich*

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<sup>22</sup> Alison Ainley, ‘“Ideal Selfishness”: Nietzsche’s Metaphor of Maternity’ in: David Farrell Krell / David Wood (eds), *Exceedingly Nietzsche: Aspects of Contemporary Nietzsche-Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 116-130 (p. 126).

<sup>23</sup> Eric Blondel, ‘Nietzsche: Life as Metaphor’ in: David B. Allison, *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 150-175 (p. 156).

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, p. 7.

*Nietzsche* laments, and thus also reinforces, the female position as that of the other;<sup>26</sup> hence, the possibility that Nietzsche thinks being as gynaecomorphism, as I suggest, undermines her reading in its very premises. In the case of Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster*, the discrepancy stems from his approach to the task of interpretation. Criticizing that Nietzsche, 'without reflecting', sometimes 'borrows his language from the Christian commonplaces of the time',<sup>27</sup> Blanchot suggests that there is, at times, an accidental quality about Nietzsche's writing. As he forecloses, thus, the possibility that *every* word in Nietzsche's texts carries meaning, Blanchot excludes the implicit meanings that I discern in Nietzsche's words from the very outset of his interpretation.

My prioritisation of Nietzsche's own writing over the secondary literature is mirrored in the structure of my argument. Each chapter opens with a reading of Nietzsche's writing in the original and proceeds to explore its broader meanings on the grounds thus laid out. And just as each chapter describes a trajectory from Nietzsche's own words to their wider implications, the study as a whole describes a trajectory from the very intricate analysis of Nietzsche's language in the opening chapter to an overview of the implications of his thought for our age in the closing one.

Examining Nietzsche's communication of his thought of eternal return in Chapter One, I suggest that his distinct use of the terms *Wiederkehr* and *Wiederkunft* proves that he thinks his fundamental thought precisely and specifically as *Wiederkunft* and, correspondingly, determines being as bringing-forth, as giving-birth, as *Niederkunft*. I expand upon this reading of Nietzsche's fundamental thought in regard to his position in the history of

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, translated by Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>27</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, translated by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 123.

philosophy in general and his standing *vis-à-vis* Hegel and Hegel's re-incarnation as Zarathustra in particular.

In a close reading of *The Birth of Tragedy* in Chapter Two, I argue that what is often regarded as an insignificant work of Nietzsche's youth shows, in fact, that Nietzsche thought his fundamental thought as *Niederkunft* long before he thought it as the eternal return of the same and as will to power. I explore the metaphysics of *Niederkunft* as the tragic act *per se* in relation to Nietzsche's notion of art as the truly metaphysical activity of man. In the tragic fate of the dialecticians Socrates, Faust and Bartleby, I show the intricate relationship between the tragic and the dialectic and their critical juncture in Nietzsche's thinking.

In Chapter Three, I look at the implications of Nietzsche's thinking for the definition of the human. Noting that Nietzsche does not speak of work in a philosophical sense, I examine his silence against the Western tradition, which, from Plato's *Republic* and the Bible onwards seeks in work the defining quality of man. I examine this definition in comparison with the essence of woman in Western thought and, discussing the distinction between work and labour, suggest a definition of woman as the human consciousness that arises in labour, as opposed to work. Reading Nietzsche as the first thinker of the West to define the human not in work but in labour and, thus, not as man but as woman, I explain how his thinking paves a way around the dead end of the master-slave-dialectic and implies a future for mankind on earth.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I examine the history of Nietzsche scholarship and question the tradition, prevalent to date, of reading Nietzsche's thinking as explosion. Examining the self-consciousness of Nietzsche's thinking as a symptom of his historical position, I suggest

that his thinking describes not so much an explosion as the implosion – the giving-in and the *Niederkunft* – of the Western system of thought. In looking at the singular role that Heidegger's reading has played in Nietzsche scholarship, I elucidate the grounds for my own allegiance to the commentator who has to date most definitively described Nietzsche's thinking as implosion. I conclude by examining the role of Nietzsche's thinking for the contemporary age and its implications for reading Nietzsche today.

In this sense, the question of a method, the question of how it is possible and what it means to read Nietzsche today, has in fact been the object and the outcome of my research much more than a consideration which preceded it. At the end of my study, I realize how much it is still a beginning – and I hope that it will be a beginning in the way that reading Nietzsche should, by his own admission, always be a beginning: a preface.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, translated by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

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## From *Wiederkunft* to *Niederkunft*: Towards a Rereading of the Eternal Return

I again plant myself in the soil out of which I draw all that I will and *can* - I, the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysos - I, the teacher of the eternal recurrence...<sup>1</sup>

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

The thought of eternal return emerged as Nietzsche's fundamental thought only relatively late. It was not until several decades after Nietzsche's lifetime that Martin Heidegger's hugely influential lecture series on Nietzsche revealed its position at the very core of Nietzsche's thinking. Reading the whole of Nietzsche's thinking as a thinking of the eternal return, Heidegger recognized this thought as a strangely opaque epitome of Nietzsche's work and pointed to its singular and controversial position within the whole of Nietzsche's philosophy. 'No wonder', he grants, that previous 'commentators have felt it to be an obstacle and have tried all sorts of maneuvers to get round it, only grudgingly making their peace with it'.<sup>2</sup> Today, it is not necessarily any easier to get to grips with Nietzsche's thought or to make one's peace with it; and as it has been established as the epitome of Nietzsche's thinking, it would be practically impossible to 'manoeuvre around' it. If the thought of eternal return is Nietzsche's fundamental thought, any serious reading of Nietzsche engages and ought to engage with it in one way or another. As Nietzsche himself, however, never

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, 'Twilight of the Idols' in: *Twilight of the Idols / The Anti-Christ*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), pp. 29- 122 (p. 121).

<sup>2</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 5.

discussed and hardly ever even mentioned the thought of eternal return explicitly, a reading of it will often rest on what is merely implicit in his famously metaphorical writing. In this sense, a reading of the eternal return promises to be most instructive in Nietzsche's German original. This is not to say that Nietzsche's work has not sparked some of its most important repercussions in translation or that it is any more untranslatable than other texts. But even if, as Nietzsche himself professed, it is 'neither the best nor the worst of a work which is untranslatable',<sup>3</sup> it is nonetheless precisely this, the untranslatable, which shows a thought in all its manifestations and implications, in its richness, abundance and entirety.

### ***Wiederkunft and Wiederkehr: The Two Modes of the Return***

In German, Nietzsche refers to his thought of eternal recurrence as *die ewige Wiederkunft* – and in the work he intended for publication, he *always* refers to it thus. His specific usage of the term *Wiederkunft* in contradistinction to the synonyms or near-synonyms that the German language offers cannot be replicated in a translation, far less his juxtaposition of the terms *Wiederkunft* and *Wiederkehr*. In English, the consistent use of the words 'return' and 'recurrence' can only indicate the fact of a distinction, but not its nature. Whilst it can, thus, serve to direct the reader to the German original, it will not in its own right provide much of an insight into Nietzsche's thinking of the eternal return. Even in the German, however, Nietzsche's usage of the terms is hardly conspicuous at first and has therefore rarely been commented on. A remarkable exception is an article by Peter Murray, who ventures:

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<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, translated by Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 119.



Nietzsche uses two words to refer to his teaching of the eternal return, namely, *Wiederkehr* and *Wiederkunft*. I would like to examine their differing origins and to suggest that it is unlikely that Nietzsche found the two to be interchangeable.<sup>4</sup>

Nietzsche does, indeed, use both terms throughout his work and he does not use them interchangeably, but this is precisely because he does *not*, as Murray suggests, use both terms to refer to his thought of eternal return. In fact, Nietzsche employs the term *Wiederkehr* to denote a recurrence in any sense other than that of his thought of eternal return – which, by contrast, he consistently refers to as *Wiederkunft*. In *Ecce Homo*, for instance, Nietzsche says *Wiederkehr* and not *Wiederkunft* when he speaks of ‘a real return of German seriousness and German passion in spiritual things’,<sup>5</sup> or when he speaks of the ‘return of milder, more philanthropic thoughts’,<sup>6</sup> thoughts which he believes were indicative of the proximity of a herd of cows, that is, of the simple ruminating herd animals so often the symbolic target of his scorn. Elsewhere, of course, the distinction may not be quite so obvious. In the *Twilight of the Idols*, as Nietzsche writes

What did the Hellene guarantee to himself with these mysteries? *Eternal* life, the eternal recurrence of life; the future promised and consecrated in the past ...<sup>7</sup>

he does indeed use the phrase ‘*die ewige Wiederkehr*’,<sup>8</sup> seemingly contrary to his otherwise consistent usage. In this particular instance, however, he refers not so much to his own key thought as to the ideas of recurrence as they prevailed in ancient Greek thinking. And in this

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Murray, ‘Nietzsche’s New *Wiederkunft*’, *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 17 (1999), 70-72 (p. 70).

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 56, and ‘*Ecce Homo*’ in: Giorgio Colli / Mazzino Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin: de Gruyter), VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften (August 1888 – Anfang Januar 1889): Der Antichrist, Ecce Homo, Dionysos-Dithyramben, Nietzsche contra Wagner* (1969), pp. 253-372 (p. 316).

<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 75, and ‘*Ecce Homo*’ in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 253-372 (p. 340).

<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, ‘*Twilight of the Idols*’ in: *Twilight of the Idols / The Anti-Christ*, pp. 29-122 (p. 120).

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche, ‘*Twilight of the Idols*’ in: *Twilight of the Idols / The Anti-Christ*, pp. 29-122 (p. 120), and ‘*Götzen-Dämmerung*’ in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 49-157 (p. 153).

sense, the passage does not constitute an exception to his usage of the terms; on the contrary: it is a particularly striking illustration of his juxtaposition of the terms in that it shows that he does not render the phrase of the eternal recurrence as *Wiederkunft* where it does not in essence relate to his own fundamental thought. In his choice of the terms, Nietzsche indicates thus that despite his usual emphasis on their kinship he does, in fact, perceive a substantial difference between Greek ideas of recurrence and his own thinking of the eternal return. It is this difference which establishes his thinking as a development and as a completion of metaphysics, as opposed to a simple regression to the thought of the ancients. As Heidegger explains,

Nietzsche's philosophy is the end of metaphysics, inasmuch as it reverts to the very commencement of Greek thought, taking up such thought in a way that is peculiar to Nietzsche's philosophy alone. [...] Nietzsche by no means recovers the philosophy of the commencement in its pristine form. Rather, here it is purely a matter of the reemergence of the essential fundamental positions of the commencement in a transformed configuration.<sup>9</sup>

Here as elsewhere, Heidegger is much more emphatic than Nietzsche himself about the fact that Nietzsche thinks the eternal recurrence precisely *not* in the way of the Greeks or as a return to Greek philosophy but as 'a matter of overcoming the doctrine of the eternal flux of things and its essentially destructive character'.<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche himself is seldom as explicit about his relationship *vis-à-vis* early Greek philosophy as he is in an unpublished note of the early 1880s, which reads, 'I teach you redemption from the eternal flux'<sup>11</sup> – redemption, that is, from this most famous Greek notion of eternal return in the philosophy of Heraclitus. Much more frequently, his writing reveals only implicitly that he acknowledges a difference between Greek philosophy and his own in thinking the eternal return. And yet, subtle

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<sup>9</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, pp. 199-200.

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 146.

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke, VII/1: Nachgelassene Fragmente Juli 1882-Winter 1883/84* (1977), p. 209; translation as quoted in: Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 146.

though it may be, his specific usage of the terms *Wiederkunft* and *Wiederkehr* shows that he perceives these two notions to pertain to categorically different modes of return.

In this light, it seems no doubt peculiar that he suggests in *Ecce Homo* that the

doctrine of 'eternal recurrence', that is to say of the unconditional and endlessly repeated circular course of all things – this doctrine of Zarathustra *could* possibly already have been taught by Heraclitus.<sup>12</sup>

On the face of it, Nietzsche professes here a real kinship between Heraclitus' thinking and his own, and to be sure, he always felt that it was the Greeks and Heraclitus in particular whose thinking came closest to his own – closest, that is, but not necessarily close. In fact, in the way it is phrased, his statement already conveys a good deal of doubt, and rather than testifying to the correspondence of their thinking, threatens to betray the distance between them. Nietzsche, inasmuch as he refers here to *Wiederkunft*,<sup>13</sup> seems to argue that Heraclitus, too, could have been thinking the thought of eternal recurrence beyond a simple *Wiederkehr* and in line with his own thought of eternal return. But does it not seem that Nietzsche's *phrasing* of the argument says precisely the opposite; does it not seem that it suggests that Heraclitus could at best have thought Nietzsche's thought of eternal return, *die ewige Wiederkunft*, in inverted commas? Similarly, Nietzsche appears to use the term *Wiederkunft* in reference to a Greek way of thinking as he explains in *Ecce Homo* that he had already prophesied 'the return of the Greek spirit'<sup>14</sup> in his first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy*. But again, the phrasing of his statement could also indicate precisely the opposite. After all, Nietzsche's choice of the term *Wiederkunft* might imply that he is in fact referring to his own

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<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 51.

<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, 'Ecce Homo' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 253-372 (p. 311).

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 52, and 'Ecce Homo' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 253-372 (p. 312).

thinking here. Read thus, his statement would indicate that, in retrospect at least, Nietzsche saw *The Birth of Tragedy* not so much as an exploration of a Greek way of thinking as an anticipation of his own fundamental thought. And in this sense, Nietzsche's statement not only places *The Birth of Tragedy* much closer to the core of his thinking than is usually presumed; it also reveals much more of his intricate relationship with Greek philosophy and grants us, thus, much more of an insight into his thinking, than if it merely testified to a slip-up in his usage of the terms.

The one instance where Nietzsche employs the term *Wiederkunft* such that it clearly does *not* refer to the thought of eternal recurrence is in *The Anti-Christ*, as he traces the origins of Christianity and speaks about the point at which

there is introduced into the type of the redeemer ...: the doctrine of a Judgement and a Second Coming<sup>15</sup> [*die Lehre vom Gericht und von der Wiederkunft*].<sup>16</sup>

In this case, the break with Nietzsche's specific use of the terms is evident even in the translation, which renders *Wiederkunft* in this context not as return or as recurrence but as 'Second Coming'. The term denotes here indeed not just a return but a resurrection and, more specifically, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In what can only be described as a vehement criticism of Christianity Nietzsche refers, thus, to Christ, no less, by the very term he elsewhere uses to point to his own fundamental thought and to the overcoming of Christianity in his thinking. The contradiction, however, is merely apparent; for Nietzsche read in the figure of Christ also the very opposite of Christians and of Christianity. In *The Anti-Christ* and indeed in the passage above, he expands on precisely this discrepancy between Christ himself and the image presented of him in Christianity, arguing that

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<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, 'The Anti-Christ' in: *Twilight of the Idols / The Anti-Christ*, pp. 123-199 (p. 166).

<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, 'Der Antichrist' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 162- 252 (p. 213).

Jesus had done away with the concept of 'guilt' itself – he had denied any chasm between God and man, he *lived* this unity of God and man as *his* 'glad tidings' ... And *not* as a special prerogative!<sup>17</sup>

In this light, the term *Wiederkunft* sits no doubt much more easily in a reference to Christ. If Nietzsche points out that the doctrine of Christ's Second Coming is something that was later introduced into the Christian ideal of the 'redeemer', he is nonetheless aware that it is only there that Christ reveals himself to be god as well as man. Only in his Second Coming, imposed on him by his following though it may be, does Christ actually live the unity of man and god; and only thus does he begin to resemble Nietzsche's Overman, who also lives as man *and* god. In this sense, the term *Wiederkunft* points here once again towards Nietzsche's own fundamental thought; it reveals that Nietzsche saw in the figure of Christ someone who might well have anticipated the Overman.

It seems, thus, that even where it is not immediately obvious or entirely straightforward, Nietzsche does not use *Wiederkunft* and *Wiederkehr* synonymously but is in fact very consistent in his specific usage of these terms. He is certainly and very obviously consistent in that he renders his thought of eternal recurrence as *Wiederkunft* wherever he refers to it explicitly – in a first note of August 1881, as well as in the plans for the work he did not finish, in *Zarathustra's Seven Seals*,<sup>18</sup> as well as in declaring himself, in the *Twilight of the Idols*, the 'teacher of the eternal recurrence'.<sup>19</sup> It is Nietzsche's first communication of this thought, however, which paints the most vivid image of it. What if, Nietzsche ventures in *The Gay Science*, a demon were to suggest that

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<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, 'The Anti-Christ' in: *Twilight of the Idols / The Anti-Christ*, pp. 123-199 (p. 166).

<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche, 'Also Sprach Zarathustra' in Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/1: *Also Sprach Zarathustra (1883-1885)* (1968), pp. 283-287.

<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, 'Twilight of the Idols' in: *Twilight of the Idols / The Anti-Christ*, pp. 29- 122 (p. 121), and 'Götzen-Dämmerung' in Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 49-157 (p. 154)

[t]his life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you [*wiederkommen*<sup>20</sup>], all in the same succession and sequence.<sup>21</sup>

Nietzsche does not even name the eternal recurrence as such here – and yet, speaking for the first time of this very thought, he renders the verb ‘to return’ not as *wiederkehren* or any other near-synonym, but as *wiederkommen* – in the verb form, that is, of *Wiederkunft*. In his first account of his fundamental thought, Nietzsche announces it not as *Rückkehr* or as *Rückkunft* or as *Wiederkehr*; in this first account, the teacher of the eternal recurrence already reveals himself as the teacher, precisely and specifically, of *Wiederkunft*.



It is no coincidence that Nietzsche chose the term *Wiederkunft* over the feasible alternatives to describe his thought of eternal recurrence. Today, it may sound like the more formal term in comparison to *Wiederkehr*, but this is a relatively recent distinction which would probably not have been relevant in a nineteenth-century work. There are, however, other slight divergences in meaning between the two words, although they can nearly always be used synonymously; and it is these differences which shed light on Nietzsche’s choice of the terms. Amongst the meanings and former meanings of *Wiederkehr*, the Grimms’ German dictionary cites return or recurrence in the general sense, a return in the particular sense of a return to god or a return to virtue, and historically in some instances also a compensation or

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<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, ‘Die fröhliche Wissenschaft’ in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, v/2: *Idyllen aus Messina / Die fröhliche Wissenschaft / Nachgelassene Fragmente: Frühjahr 1881 bis Sommer 1882* (1973), pp. 11-335 (p. 250).

<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 273.

compensatory damages.<sup>22</sup> The verb *wiederkehren*, correspondingly, means to return or to recur, historically also in the more specific senses of to return or to repay a favour, to return to the straight and narrow, to return to faith, or to return something to its previous state; *wiederkehren* could, moreover, in some instances mean to repeat itself, to compensate, to recompense, to rectify, to regret, to repent or to do penance.<sup>23</sup> As for *Wiederkunft*, the Grimms' dictionary mentions that, aside from its meaning of return or recurrence in a general sense, the term could refer more specifically to the return of someone from a journey, from foreign parts or from banishment, and it could imply joy and happiness at the return of someone who has been away for a long time or has returned from great danger. Historically, *Wiederkunft* could in some instances also be used to mean future, *Zukunft*.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the verb *wiederkommen* which nowadays means simply to return or to recur, includes amongst its historic meanings to encounter, to recover, to heal and to regain strength, to come to from a state of unconsciousness, to rise from the dead and to return to life.<sup>25</sup> On the whole, it seems that of the two terms *Wiederkehr* implies the greater focus on the past; its connotations, in that they draw largely on the re-gret, the re-turn, the re-action, emphasize the negative, the sense of passing and highlight, thus, the transience inherent in repetition. *Wiederkunft*, on the other hand, seems to point more to the future; its connotations, insofar as they draw not so much on the passing but on the arrival, on the coming again, on the active and the positive, highlight, thus, the being anew that is also inherent in repetition and in the eternal return of the same. It is on these connotations that Nietzsche's use of the terms draws. He refers to his fundamental thought as *Wiederkunft* because he thinks it, precisely, as *Wiederkunft*. And thinking the recurrence as *Wiederkunft* and not as *Wiederkehr* is what makes it the *redemption*

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<sup>22</sup> Jakob Grimm / Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Leipzig: Hirzel), XIV. Band, I. Abteilung, II. Teil: *Wenig-Wiking* (1960), pp. 1068-1072.

<sup>23</sup> Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, XIV. Band, I. Abteilung, II. Teil: *Wenig-Wiking*, pp. 1072-1079.

<sup>24</sup> Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, XIV. Band, I. Abteilung, II. Teil: *Wenig-Wiking*, pp. 1093-1095.

<sup>25</sup> Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, XIV. Band, I. Abteilung, II. Teil: *Wenig-Wiking*, pp. 1086-1091.

from the eternal flux, the 'liberation', in Heidegger's words, 'from the irreducible, ceaseless "forever the same"'.<sup>26</sup> In everyday use, to be sure, the difference between *Wiederkunft* and *Wiederkehr* appears so small that it is usually considered to be negligible. But small though it may be, this difference is categorical for Nietzsche's purposes. *Wiederkehr* and *Wiederkunft* denote two different modes of the return, and the difference changes everything. It reflects the difference between the thought of eternal flux and the thought of eternal return: between the Greek notion of recurrence and Nietzsche's own thinking of it. At a first glance, no doubt, even Nietzsche's formulation of the thought of return 'introduces an immense, paralyzing indifference into all beings and into human behavior'.<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche, however, thinks the eternal return precisely *not* so that it results in indifference, as Greek notions of recurrence did, but so that it 'grants supreme lucidity and decisiveness to beings at every moment'.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, Greek notions of recurrence allowed the philosophy and the entire 'history of antiquity ... to get bogged down in fatalism'.<sup>29</sup> But thinking the same thought slightly differently, as Nietzsche does, has radically different implications. It is this small but all-important difference between the modes of return that he marks in his choice of the terms *Wiederkehr* and *Wiederkunft*.

Mostly, the difference between the two modes of return is merely implicit in Nietzsche's writing. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, however, he provides a more explicit description in the powerful image 'Of the Vision and the Riddle'. Zarathustra and the dwarf both know the solution to this riddle to be a circle - and yet, the way they think the circle, the eternal return, is radically different:

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<sup>26</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 147.

<sup>27</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 147.

<sup>28</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 147.

<sup>29</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 132.



The gap opens between two things that in one way are alike, so that they appear to be the same. On the one side stands the following: 'Everything is nought, indifferent, so that nothing is worthwhile - *it is all alike*'. And on the other side: 'Everything recurs, it depends on each moment, everything matters - *it is all alike*'.

The smallest gap, the rainbow bridge of the phrase *it is all alike*, conceals two things that are quite distinct: 'everything is indifferent' and 'nothing is indifferent'.<sup>30</sup>

This is, indeed, the 'smallest gap' which separates Nietzsche's thinking from Greek notions of eternal recurrence. In his specific use of the term *Wiederkunft* for his own thought of return, Nietzsche acknowledges this distinction - and thus, in turn, opens up the gap that separates *Wiederkunft* from *Wiederkehr* and illustrates that the terms, in some ways so similar, can also be radically distinct. It is in this sense that Nietzsche's thinking pervades into his language, and vice versa, in a way that a translation could hardly replicate. A good translation, however, is never simply a replication, *Wiedergabe*; it is itself a kind of *Wiederkunft*: a coming again, a re-emergence, a rebirth of meaning - and in this sense true to Nietzsche's metaphorical style.<sup>31</sup> Words, to Nietzsche, are 'themselves ... nothing other than interpretations',<sup>32</sup> and the way in which he uses the word *Wiederkunft* certainly makes the term metaphorical. The word *Wiederkunft*, in that it denotes the intricacies of a particular mode of the return, in and of itself already describes how Nietzsche thinks his fundamental

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<sup>30</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 182.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', translated by Harry Zohn, in: Marcus Bullock / Michael Jennings (eds), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, I: 1913-1926* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 253-263; Benjamin, 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers' in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV/1 (Werkausgabe 10): *Kleine Prosa / Baudelaire-Übertragungen*, edited by Tillman Rexroth (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), pp. 9-21; and Jacques Derrida, 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', translated by David Wood and Andrew Benjamin, in: Peggy Kamuf, *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 269-276.

<sup>32</sup> Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Freud, Marx', in: Ormiston / Schrift (eds), *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: From Nietzsche to Nancy*, pp. 59-67 (p. 65).

thought. And inasmuch as it is reminiscent of *Niederkunft*,<sup>33</sup> it already hints at another formulation of this thought in Nietzsche's writing.

### ***Wiederkunft* and *Niederkunft* as Manifestations of Nietzsche's Central Thought**

If Nietzsche's term for his principal thought, *die ewige Wiederkunft*, resounds with *Niederkunft*, it points first of all to the fact that thoughts of pregnancy, of creation and of bringing forth prevail everywhere in his work. Nietzsche, no doubt, felt himself to be 'a thinker big with thought'.<sup>34</sup> In an unpublished note of the early 1880s, he muses:

What keeps me alive? Pregnancy: and every time a work was born, my life hung by a thin little thread.<sup>35</sup>

It is not only in relation to the circumstances of his thinking, however, that Nietzsche uses the language of pregnancy and of giving birth; he also describes the object and the essence of his thoughts in these terms. He is, as Derrida observes, 'the thinker of pregnancy which, for him, is no less praiseworthy in a man than it is in a woman'.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the fact that he describes in the thought of *Niederkunft* not only the modality of his thinking but the essence of being as a whole reveals that he thinks being as *Niederkunft*, even if he does not discuss or

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<sup>33</sup> *Niederkunft*: delivery, childbirth, lying-in, confinement; in: Karl Wildhagen / Will Héraucourt, *English-German, German-English Dictionary in Two Volumes* (Wiesbaden: Brandstetter; London: Allen & Unwin, 1964), II: *German-English*, p. 833.

<sup>34</sup> Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles / Éperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche*, translated by Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 65.

<sup>35</sup> 'Was erhält mich am Leben? Die Schwangerschaft: und jedes Mal wenn das Werk geboren war, hing das Leben an einem dünnen Fädchen'. Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VII/1: *Nachgelassene Fragmente: Juli 1882-Winter 1883/84*, p. 121.

<sup>36</sup> Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles / Éperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche*, p. 65 (my italics).

even mention this thought explicitly.<sup>37</sup> It is only the implicit prevalence of the thought of *Niederkunft* in Nietzsche's work which reveals its central importance for his thinking. In the *Twilight of the Idols*, for example, Nietzsche writes:

the 'pains of childbirth' sanctify pain in general – all becoming and growing, all that guarantees the future, *postulates* pain ... For the eternal joy in creating to exist, for the will to life eternally to affirm itself, the 'torment of childbirth' *must* also exist eternally ...<sup>38</sup>

In this instance, the connection between Nietzsche's thoughts of *Wiederkunft* and *Niederkunft* emerges much more explicitly than elsewhere in his work. For if Nietzsche argues that life, in order to affirm itself, implies the 'torment of childbirth', he effectively states that the eternal recurrence of the same, *die ewige Wiederkunft*, implies as its *modus operandi* the existence of childbirth – *die Niederkunft*. In this sense, the two thoughts are essentially connected, to the extent that they describe the same phenomenon. Just as the thought of *Niederkunft* implies affirmation despite the pain and the danger of childbirth, the thought of *Wiederkunft*, as Nietzsche thinks it, stipulates affirmation despite the terror it evokes – for, as Deleuze points out, only that which is affirmed returns.<sup>39</sup>

Elsewhere, the connection between Nietzsche's thoughts of *Wiederkunft* and *Niederkunft* may not be quite so obvious, but it is always palpable in his writing. Ultimately, if being and hence everything that *is* is thought in terms of the eternal recurrence of the same, as

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<sup>37</sup> A rare exception is a letter to Franz Overbeck, where Nietzsche refers to his thinking explicitly as *Niederkunft* as he writes: 'Die unausgesetzte schmerzliche Entbehrung an allem Nothdürftigen, Tröstlichen, Stärkenden, lange zusammengepreßt durch meinen üblichen Gedulds-Stoicismus, bricht von Zeit zu Zeit heraus, und zwar wie mir scheint, immer am stärksten nach einer neuen "Schwangerschaft" und "Niederkunft"'. Nietzsche to Franz Overbeck (13/14 November 1884) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin: de Gruyter), III/1: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1880-Dezember 1884* (1981), p. 555.

<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche, 'Twilight of the Idols' in: *Twilight of the Idols / The Anti-Christ*, pp. 29-122 (p. 120).

<sup>39</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 189.

Nietzsche proposes, it follows that 'there will be nothing new in it'<sup>40</sup> ever – and everything that is yet to occur must already be implicit in the present. The future can only be brought forth by what already is; equally, what exists at present can in essence only bring forth and give birth to itself. Born of the past, so to speak, the present is pregnant with the future. This is not to say that for Nietzsche the future is determined as such. The world, thought with Nietzsche as 'perpetual Becoming' and 'as a totality of force [which] is nonetheless inherently finite, ... produces "infinite" effects'.<sup>41</sup> There is, in other words, a limited number of states that the world can attain, but this does not mean that the future is strictly determined or in any way predictable. The future occurs, rather, as the chance emergence of one of the world's potential constellations over all its other possible states. In this sense, it comprises chance and necessity in such a way that they are no longer opposites. Each constellation of the world emerges by chance, and yet, since their number is ultimately finite, emerges necessarily and will necessarily recur in all eternity. The 'total character of the world', Nietzsche concludes, 'is in all eternity chaos – in the sense not of a lack of necessity but of a lack of order'.<sup>42</sup> Thus it is that Nietzsche's thinking of the eternal return pertains in essence to the structure of *Niederkunft*. The modality of the future as Nietzsche thinks it is the modality of giving birth, of *Niederkunft*: the bringing forth of that which is both necessity and chance. Indeed, the structure of time more generally corresponds in Nietzsche's thinking to the structure of *Niederkunft*. To think the eternal return thus that it does not become the crushing 'forever the same' which leads to indifference and fatality, it has to be thought as incessant *Niederkunft* of the world, as the world's eternal bringing forth and creating itself anew. Every moment is different from the preceding one on account of what has been brought forth and is now actual, and what will be brought forth from this moment and is in

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<sup>40</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 273.

<sup>41</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 89.

<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 168.

this sense implicit in it. As each moment is born from the preceding one and in turn gives birth to the next, it seems almost as if Nietzsche's thinking of the 'Ring of Recurrence'<sup>43</sup> entails something of a *linear* progression of time. And indeed – is not a circle in a sense a line? For even if, in other words, the 'path of eternity is crooked',<sup>44</sup> as Zarathustra's animals observe, it is still a path.

Nonetheless, Nietzsche's thought of eternal return eventually emerges as a radical break with the notion of linear progression as it prevails in the dialectical age. Initially, no doubt, the discrepancies seem to be small. The circle described in the eternal return entails a linear aspect which, though it simply accounts for its inherent necessity, appears to be reminiscent of the dialectical notion of linear progression. In fact, however, the progression of the dialectic cannot, despite appearances, be reduced to a linear movement anyway. The dialectic may lay claim to a linear progression, but in the sense that it comprises the back-and-forth between the opposites and the upwards movement of *Aufhebung*, it would be more accurate to describe it as having a helix structure – a structure, that is, which implies a circular movement. Hegel himself compared the dialectic to a circle, illustrating thus that it is 'not only an advancing process but a retrograde one at the same time'.<sup>45</sup> When Adorno, however, later concludes that '[t]o this extent, the picture of the circle describes it correctly',<sup>46</sup> he also implies that it is *only* this far that the analogy holds true. The image of the circle describes only *one* aspect of the dialectic; it describes the dialectic from *one* point of view – and there is indeed a point from which a helix structure looks like a circle. Ultimately,

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<sup>43</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), pp. 244-247.

<sup>44</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 234.

<sup>45</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 157.

<sup>46</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 157.

however, the dialectic is always more than a circle and more than the return to the 'father'.<sup>47</sup> There is always – and inherent in the operation of *Aufhebung* – a sense of the dialectic going beyond itself, of going on and going up. In this sense, it emerges that in the thought of eternal return, which resists the upward urge of *Aufhebung*, Nietzsche thinks in fact the anti-dialectical. The circle of the eternal return is essentially an anti-dialectical figure, although it is certainly not *undialectical*. The undialectical in Nietzsche's thinking is, rather, that which is not affirmed and which therefore does *not* return. As Deleuze pointed out, the thought of eternal return implies that '[o]nly that which affirms or is affirmed returns';<sup>48</sup> what is not affirmed, on the other hand, disappears into nothingness – never to be recuperated, never to be appropriated and in all eternity meaningless. The undialectical, in other words, is that which is not brought into the world again through affirmation. And in the light of what is at stake, it is evident that this act of affirmation cannot be taken lightly; it is always painstaking, all-important and all-deciding. In this respect, too, the thought of eternal return corresponds to the creative affirmation of *Niederkunft*. As a bringing-to-life, *Niederkunft* constitutes first and foremost a simple affirmation of life; ultimately, however, it is also an affirmation of life over and beyond one existence, and in this sense even at the expense of life, for it stipulates the death of one for the other to live. All giving birth and all 'reproduction demands the death of the parents who produced their young only to give fuller rein to the forces of annihilation'.<sup>49</sup> In this sense, the act of *Niederkunft* implies the affirmation not so much of one individual life as of life itself. It is, essentially, the affirmation that brings life to life. In a letter

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Derrida, *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone, 1993), pp. 75-94, and *Glas*, translated by John P. Leavey jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), pp. 75a-79a.

<sup>48</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 189.

<sup>49</sup> Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, translated by Mary Dalwood (London: Marion Boyars, 1987), p. 61.

of December 1882, Nietzsche suggests as much as he writes: 'It appears to me that only the state of *pregnancy* ties us, time and again, to life'.<sup>50</sup>

As the process of life bringing forth life in *Niederkunft* and thus perpetuating life itself, the circle of the eternal return touches upon the question of god. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche even asks himself whether his thought of return 'would ... not be – *circulus vitiosus deus*'?<sup>51</sup> This consideration is certainly remarkable, if only because he speaks of god here, although he had already proclaimed his death in *The Gay Science* of 1882. Little wonder, then, that Heidegger, too, opens his analysis of the passage in astonishment and with a series of questions:

We cannot believe our eyes and ears: '*circulus vitiosus deus*'? *Circulus* means the circle and the ring, hence eternal recurrence, indeed as *vitiosus*; *vitium* means defect, malady, something destructive; *circulus vitiosus* is the ring that also necessarily brings recurrently this *vitium*. Is it *deus*? Is it the god himself, the one whom Nietzsche at the end of his way still *calls* – is it Dionysos? And in the sphere of this god – the world?<sup>52</sup>

The malady, the *vitium*, that the *circulus vitiosus* brings back – could this, Heidegger asks, be *deus*, god? Does the circle of the eternal return reproduce everything as it was and is – and with everything, god? 'At all events, here we have a *question*,' Heidegger concludes: 'So, then, God is not dead? Yes and no!'<sup>53</sup> The *moral* god, no doubt, met his death in Nietzsche's thought. Nietzsche's dictum of the death of god, however, refers not only to the moral god, for if the character of the world and of being as a whole is thought as eternal return of the same, god as the creator is redundant, devoid of power and meaning – dead. And in this

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<sup>50</sup> 'Es scheint mir, daß allein der Zustand der Schwangerschaft uns immer wieder an's Leben anbindet'. Nietzsche to Hans von Bülow (early December 1882) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/1: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1880-Dezember 1884*, p. 290.

<sup>51</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 82.

<sup>52</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 65.

<sup>53</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, pp. 65-66.

sense, the eternal return of the same is the end – and in fact also the *goal* – of the dialectic. In the incessant striving for the other, the dialectical man never aimed for anything but god, who, in Derrida's words, is the 'wholly other'.<sup>54</sup> But as soon as man has attained god, he has also killed him, for a god who is on a par with man has expired *as god*. After this death of the altogether other, the dialectic does not have a direction or an aim any longer and collapses within itself. With the death of god, the dialectical helix falls back upon itself and forms the circle of the eternal return. As well as god himself, the location or the dimension of god is now missing from the world. For Karl Jaspers, indeed, the thought of the eternal recurrence cannot be thought in the presence of a god. 'If there were gods', Jaspers argues, 'there would be nothing to create'.<sup>55</sup> And yet, it is precisely in Nietzsche's thought of eternal return that man himself finally becomes a creator and thus, if only in this sense, a god. As the eternal return is revealed as the ultimate goal of the dialectical man, it emerges on the other hand that it also reproduces, in a sense, the man who believes that he could be god and who finally believes himself to be god. There is, in other words, in Nietzsche's thinking of the return always the potential for a return of the dialectical man. Correspondingly, there is in Nietzsche's thinking always the potential for a god. In fact, Heidegger suggests that the existence of a god is not so much an obstacle as indeed the prerequisite for man to become a creator. For, Heidegger asks,

[w]hat would remain for human beings to create ... if gods were always available and merely at hand? [...] Is it not the case that the god must first of all be created? Do we not require supreme force to be able to create something out beyond ourselves? And prior to that, must not man himself, the last man, the contemptible man, be re-created to that end?<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, translated by David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 78 and *passim*.

<sup>55</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of his Philosophical Activity*, translated by Charles F. Wallraff and Frederick J. Schmitz (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 432.

<sup>56</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 67.



If Heidegger suggests, thus, that man *requires* a god in order to create something beyond himself, this does not necessarily contradict Jaspers' observations that the existence of a god is detrimental to human creation. The discrepancy, rather, points to the fact that Nietzsche's thinking marks the transformation of man's relationship to his god. It is certainly true that man cannot be a creator, properly speaking, as long as god alone reigns over the only 'true', that is, the transcendent world. And it is, on the other hand, no less true that man, having after all first created this god and then killed him, could create another god. This, indeed, is what is at stake in Nietzsche's thinking. In his controversial prophesy of the 'birth of the *Overmen*',<sup>57</sup> he anticipates a human society which defines its relationship to god in very different terms to the way we see ourselves *vis-à-vis* the sacrificial Christian god. The birth of the *Overmen* – and it is not a coincidence that Nietzsche speaks of 'birth' here – denotes simply the beginning of a new relationship between man and god: a relationship of mutual enjoyment and of love, reminiscent, as Deleuze explains, of Ariadne and Dionysos.<sup>58</sup> It is in this sense that man, as Heidegger suggested, requires god in order to truly overcome himself and create himself anew in the *Overman*, who is born of man *and* god and, to be precise, of the *dialectical* man and *his* god.

Once the dialectic has killed the god that was its goal, it collapses within itself; it comes down onto itself and with itself: this is the *Niederkunft* of the dialectic in both senses of the term. It describes the dialectic bringing forth the *Overman* and creating the possibility of a new human existence on earth. In the more literal but rarer usage of the term, *Niederkunft* also denotes a simple coming-down from above; in this sense, it describes the same process in terms of the dialectic moving *backwards*. The two meanings of *Niederkunft* not only

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<sup>57</sup> 'Die Geburt der *Übermenschen*'. Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VII/1: *Nachgelassene Fragmente: Juli 1882-Winter 1883/84*, p. 117.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, pp. 186-198.

describe two aspects of Nietzsche's thinking; in their discrepancy they also highlight the inherent problem of the dialectic, which could produce something truly other and truly beyond itself only if it were to go backwards and against itself to the extent that it expires. Creation is against the very nature of the dialectic. Everything in the dialectic is synthetic but strictly speaking nothing is created or even produced, because the dialectic can never bring forth; it only ever *preserves*. It is only in its end, in its death, that it is truly creative; and it expires precisely because it ultimately only works against itself. In the *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno notes that

[w]hat tolerates nothing that is not like itself thwarts the reconciliation for which it mistakes itself. The violence of equality-mongering reproduces the contradiction it eliminates.<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, Adorno highlights here not only the inherent contradiction of the dialectical principle, he also illustrates how the anti-dialectical principle emerges, as he explains elsewhere, at the very core of the dialectic.<sup>60</sup> In the sense that the dialectic *reproduces* the contradiction it eliminates, it reveals in this act of producing alone the anti-dialectical principle operating at its heart. For once the dialectic not only preserves but produces, the principle at its core is no longer dialectical; it is no longer one of *Aufhebung* but one of *Niederkunft*. This, precisely, is the inherent problem of the dialectic: ultimately, its only goal is its own annihilation. Since its inception in ancient Greece, however, dialectical thinking has been very careful in its denial of its apocalyptic nature. In thinking the thought of eternal return, Nietzsche is the first thinker of the West to recognize the imminent crisis in thought. The thought of eternal return, as Nietzsche was well aware, describes the ultimate catastrophe of the dialectic. In April 1887, he writes to Franz Overbeck:

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<sup>59</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 142-143.

<sup>60</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 158.

This winter I have perused enough of the European literature to be able to say *now* that my philosophical position is by *far* the most independent, much as I feel myself to be the heir to several millennia. Contemporary Europe has no idea of the terrible decisions around which my whole nature revolves and of the *wheel* of problems to which I am tied – and that in me a *catastrophe* is preparing, the name of which I know but will not pronounce.<sup>61</sup>

Describing himself as the ‘heir’ to the tradition of Western thinking, Nietzsche acknowledges his place *within* it, despite the fact that his thought also constitutes a marked break with this tradition. And as he announces a catastrophe the name of which he will not utter, it is almost as if the term ‘catastrophe’ speaks for itself. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the term ‘from Latin *catastrophā*, from Greek *katastrophē* ‘overturning, sudden turn’, from *kata-* ‘down’ + *strophē* ‘turning’ (from *strephein* ‘to turn’)’.<sup>62</sup> And what is Nietzsche’s thought, if not a sudden overturning of the dialectic, an implosion of the dialectic, a shift from *Aufhebung* to *Niederkunft* – and in this sense precisely a sudden *down*-turning?



With Nietzsche’s thought, thinking in the West changes fundamentally. The thought of eternal return determines being as a whole as becoming – as creation, as bringing forth. In this sense, *Niederkunft* comes to describe the configuration of the world as a whole. According to Nietzsche, the world is ‘a *permanent becoming*’,<sup>63</sup> and yet, ‘what becomes is

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<sup>61</sup> ‘Diesen Winter habe ich mich reichlich in der europäischen Literatur umgesehen, um jetzt sagen zu können, daß meine philosophische Stellung bei weitem die unabhängigste ist, so sehr ich mich auch als Erbe von mehreren Jahrtausenden fühle: das gegenwärtige Europa hat noch keine Ahnung davon, um welche furchtbaren Entscheidungen mein ganzes Wesen sich dreht, und an welches Rad von Problemen ich gebunden bin – und daß mit mir eine Katastrophe sich vorbereitet, deren Namen ich weiß, aber nicht aussprechen werde’. Nietzsche to Franz Overbeck (14 April 1887) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/5: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889* (1984), p. 57.

<sup>62</sup> Judy Pearsall (ed.), *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 287.

<sup>63</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, II: *The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 109.

inasmuch as in creation it *becomes being* and *is becoming*'.<sup>64</sup> The world is thus in a perpetual state of becoming being and being becoming and in this sense in a perpetual state of pregnancy and of giving birth: in a state of *Niederkunft*. And conversely, it is this state of *Niederkunft* which, for Nietzsche, determines the constitution of the world. It is what characterizes the world *as such*, that is, as *the world*, as Zarathustra suggests when he recounts:

When the moon rose yesterday I thought it was about to give birth to a sun, it lay on the horizon so broad and pregnant.  
But it was a liar with its pregnancy; and I will sooner believe in the man in the moon than in the woman.<sup>65</sup>

Zarathustra does not believe in the woman in the moon; he does not believe that the moon is capable of giving birth. If the world is determined by its state of *Niederkunft*, he indicates, thus, that the moon does not pertain to this world. The moon is here an image of the transcendental, of the place which, according to Western metaphysics, would grant the real, the truthful, the 'immaculate'<sup>66</sup> perception of the world. But this place, Zarathustra observes, has no real bearing upon the world and its claim to this end is a lie. In this sense, his tale shows how Nietzsche thinks the end of the transcendent world. If Nietzsche, as Karl Jaspers explains, thinks 'the world as pure immanence',<sup>67</sup> this is not to say that he stipulates that there can be nothing other than this world. Nietzsche, Jasper argues,

does not reject the possibility of countless worlds in addition to this one in which and as which we are. But these worlds would in no way concern us, while the assertion that the other world is the only true one affects our entire *Existenz*.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 200.

<sup>65</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 144.

<sup>66</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 144-145.

<sup>67</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of his Philosophical Activity*, p. 319.

<sup>68</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of his Philosophical Activity*, p. 319.

It is not that Nietzsche's thinking altogether abolishes the transcendent world but it abolishes it *as such*, as over and above the world. The transcendent loses its *essence*, that is to say, its transcendental place; it either becomes meaningless or it comes into the world. In this sense, too, that is, in that it effects the transcendent to become part of the world, Nietzsche's thinking determines the world as *Niederkunft* in the more literal sense of the word. And this constitutes an essential change of the world as a whole; for with the transcendental world, what has hitherto been the 'immanent' world has also been changed fundamentally, as Nietzsche acknowledges when he writes:

We have abolished the real world: what world is left? the apparent world perhaps? ... But no! *with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!*<sup>69</sup>

With the transcendent world, the immanent world has equally been abolished *as such*, that is, in its essence as the merely-temporal and the merely-worldly, as the 'apparent' which has no stake in the truth. Now the 'immanent', the stuff of *this* world, has the potential to acquire meaning above the merely particular. Nietzsche, as Jaspers points out,

... transcends life to a more-than-life, from the standpoint of which life can be judged, affirmed, and denied, but he does this in such a way that this innermost essence of man - his more-than-life - is itself still thought of as life, as pure immanence, and not as *Existenz* confronting transcendence.<sup>70</sup>

What has changed with Nietzsche's thinking is the relationship between life and the more-than-life. In the world after Nietzsche, even that which transcends life in one way or another remains part of life. The world does no longer offer the unaffected and 'immaculate' perspective of the moon, but it does offer elevated perspectives such as that of the eagle, who

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<sup>69</sup> Nietzsche, 'Twilight of the Idols', in: *Twilight of the Idols / The Anti-Christ*, pp. 29- 122 (p. 51).

<sup>70</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of his Philosophical Activity*, p. 324.

is one of Zarathustra's animals.<sup>71</sup> These are, however, always tied to the world much more than the 'transcendental world' of old and they only ever afford temporary glimpses. In Nietzsche's thinking, the more-than-life is always characterized by its imminent coming-down into the thick of life again. Thus it is that the thought of eternal return determines the world as eternal *Niederkunft* not only in the sense of an eternal giving birth and bringing forth but in the sense also of a constant coming-into-the-world of that which, however long or briefly, transcended it. The theme of *Niederkunft* is, thus, not simply a thought that preoccupied Nietzsche incidentally; it seems, rather, that it touches upon the essence of his thinking. In an unpublished note of the mid-1880s, Nietzsche describes '[t]he world as a work of art that gives birth to itself - ',<sup>72</sup> that is, not in terms of the eternal return of the same but in terms of *Niederkunft*. In this instance, it certainly seems that the thought of *Niederkunft* constitutes no less a definition of the world than the thought of eternal return and indeed defines the world in very much the same way. It seems, in other words, that the thought of *Niederkunft* is another configuration of Nietzsche's fundamental thought of eternal return, *die ewige Wiederkunft*.



If the thought of *Niederkunft* is to be understood as another expression or manifestation of Nietzsche's fundamental thought, it raises, first of all, a series of questions. For how are these manifestations different and how are they related? Why are there even different manifestations of this one thought? And why is it that Nietzsche himself never actually speaks of his fundamental thought as *Niederkunft*? In the Nietzsche lectures, Heidegger, for

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<sup>71</sup> Cf. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 52-53, and Heidegger, 'Zarathustra's Animals' in: *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, pp. 45-48.

<sup>72</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 419.

one, discerns two manifestations of what he calls Nietzsche's 'fundamental' thought: the will to power and the eternal recurrence of the same. He argues that these are essentially two expressions of one thought; the difference is that

[t]he determination 'will to power' replies to the question of being *with respect to the latter's constitution*; the determination 'eternal recurrence of the same' replies to the question of being *with respect to its way to be*.<sup>73</sup>

Both of these phrases express thus the same thought, but they each describe it in a particular manner or mode. The fact that there are, indeed, two manifestations of Nietzsche's fundamental thought, Heidegger argues, lies in the nature of the question of being itself, which can be interpreted and answered in two different senses: it can either refer to the constitution of being or to what Heidegger calls its 'way to be'. In this respect, it seems that the thought of *Niederkunft* expresses Nietzsche's fundamental thought in the same way as the eternal return, that is to say, it describes the world with a view to '*the way in which being as a whole is*'.<sup>74</sup> It says that the world, according to Nietzsche, is eternally propagating, creating and giving birth to itself. It is, thus, not a matter of how the question of being is addressed that distinguishes *Wiederkunft* and *Niederkunft* as configurations of Nietzsche's central thought; it is, rather, a matter of perspective. The expressions of *Wiederkunft* and *Niederkunft* both designate the character of being, but they differ in the respective position from which they describe the way being is. Being manifests itself as the eternal return of the same when the question of being is posed from the position of the philosopher, that is, from *outside* of the world it is to describe. From within the world, the eternal return would not appear *as such*. The determination of being as eternal return implies a perspective of eternity and of transcendence: it describes being from a point of view over and above the world. In fact, it implies the perspective of the recently-deceased god, whose place has been taken by the

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<sup>73</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 199.

<sup>74</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 109.

dialectical man who has since Socrates aspired upwards, to ever greater heights away from the world. This is the position that Nietzsche inherits in the history of Western thought; in this respect, his thinking remains *within* the Western tradition and in fact constitutes its culmination, as Heidegger argues.<sup>75</sup> And it is precisely because Nietzsche is a philosopher in the traditional sense that the nature of being appears to him as eternal return of the same. His traditional position notwithstanding, however, Nietzsche is the first thinker of the West to look for the essence of the world in the world itself; he is the first of the philosophers to look *down*. In this sense, he certainly breaks with the Western tradition, albeit from a position bequeathed to him by this very tradition. Once again, Zarathustra's words best explain the situation, as he declares:

You look up when you desire to be exalted. And I look down, because I am exalted.<sup>76</sup>

In this respect, and notwithstanding their other differences, Zarathustra speaks also for Nietzsche, whose perspective on the world is equally that of one who looks down because, having completed the quest of the dialectic, he knows himself to be exalted. Indeed, the mere fact that Nietzsche looks *down* into the world for its essence reveals that he is speaking from a perspective over and above the world. And from this point of view, the nature of being appears as eternal return of the same. To one who is actually immersed in the world, on the other hand, and who is in this sense not exalted but looks at being from within, the nature of being, that is to say, the way being *is*, would appear not as eternal return but as *Niederkunft*. In the world, the nature of being shows itself as creation and as incessant giving-birth and, after Nietzsche, as the coming-down, the descent, the *Niederkunft* of the transcendent. A position within the grand circle of the eternal return does not afford a view of this circle

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<sup>75</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 205 and passim.

<sup>76</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 68.



itself. In the world that is determined by the eternal return, everything that *is* is in essence as *Niederkunft* in one sense or the other. It is in this sense that the thought of eternal return determines being *as a whole* as *Niederkunft*.



As the thought of being as *Niederkunft* is so clearly related to Nietzsche's thought of eternal return, the question as to why Nietzsche himself never phrases his fundamental thought as *Niederkunft* is all the more pressing. The very first time he thought this thought, in the summer of 1881, he thought it as eternal return of the same, and he clearly described it as eternal return on several occasions later on in this writing, although it is remarkable how seldom he actually mentions it explicitly. Indeed, Nietzsche 'spoke of his fundamental thought either in very brief straightforward references or only circuitously, in cryptic passwords and parables'.<sup>77</sup> In this later writing, he also refers to the other configuration of his principal thought, the will to power, and he does so rather more frequently than he mentions the eternal return. Nowhere in his writing, however, does he speak of *Niederkunft* in a way that would reveal it as a manifestation of his fundamental thought. He speaks of pregnancy, of creation and of giving birth, he speaks of women and of woman, and these images and allusions betray the fact that the thought of pregnancy preoccupies his thinking. And yet, although he evidently engages with the thought of *Niederkunft* all throughout his work, he never refers the term to being as a whole; he never describes the nature of the world explicitly as *Niederkunft*. Nor, indeed, would Heidegger's reading suggest that Nietzsche's thought could also manifest itself as *Niederkunft*, although it was Heidegger who recognized in the eternal return and in the will to power two manifestations of what he calls

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<sup>77</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, pp. 14-15.

Nietzsche's fundamental thought. Heidegger argues that the 'thought of eternal recurrence of the same is the inner – but not the retrospective – completion of the thought of will to power',<sup>78</sup> and explains that

[p]recisely for this reason Nietzsche thought eternal recurrence of the same at an earlier time than he did will to power. For when he thinks it for the first time, each thinker thinks his sole thought in its completion, though not yet in its full unfolding.<sup>79</sup>

That these two manifestations of Nietzsche's thought come to him at different times is, thus, to be explained by the fact that they each refer to a different mode of the question of being. The thought of *Niederkunft*, however, refers to the question of being in the same way as the thought of eternal return; as has been suggested above, they differ in terms of the perspective they stipulate respectively. Hence, if Nietzsche does not think of his principal thought as *Niederkunft*, this simply confirms that his point of view is not the one from which being appears as *Niederkunft*. Nietzsche, in other words, does not describe the world as *Niederkunft* because he does not see it as *Niederkunft*. He is – and he always remains – in a position from which he sees the nature of the world as eternal return. In this sense, he is merely *anticipating* a world in which the nature of being reveals itself as *Niederkunft*. And thus it is that he feels himself to be pregnant: for what is pregnancy, if not forthcoming, imminent *Niederkunft*? Now, Heidegger does not explicitly describe Nietzsche's thinking as *Niederkunft*, either, but he indicates that the thought of eternal return results in creation becoming the defining characteristic of being. He suggests that

[t]he thought of eternal return thinks being in such a way that being as a whole summons us without cease. It asks us whether we merely want to drift with the tide of things or whether we would be creators. Prior to that, it asks us whether

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<sup>78</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, III: The Will to Power as Knowledge and as Metaphysics*, p. 10.

<sup>79</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, III: The Will to Power as Knowledge and as Metaphysics*, p. 10.

we desire the means and the conditions by which we might again *become* creators.<sup>80</sup>

The thought of eternal return calls us into question because it entails the prospect of a radically different definition of man. By thinking being as eternal return or, what amounts to the same, by thinking being as creation and *Niederkunft*, man defines himself anew. It is in the nature of being, Heidegger explains, that it is in this sense determined by the question of being itself. The way the question of being is developed determines the innermost essence of being.<sup>81</sup> Once we begin to think being as *Niederkunft* and thus incorporate the thought of *Niederkunft*, we determine the world such that it *is* in essence *Niederkunft*. And since man pertains to being as a whole, he too will now be defined anew; he too will now be defined as creator. The thought of *Niederkunft* reveals, thus, more readily than the thought of eternal return the extent to which Nietzsche's thinking draws man into question, with a view to woman as well as with a view to the *end* of man, to the overcoming of man. Ultimately, however, it is only in drawing himself into question that man can finally become himself. Only in coming down from the position above the world where he had searched for the truth, and for his own truth, has man become capable of defining himself. In this act of *Niederkunft*, he determines the world and himself *as Niederkunft*; he determines himself as creator and as the creator of himself. In this respect, it seems, Zarathustra is not only an advocate, a *Fürsprecher*,<sup>82</sup> someone who merely predicts and prophesies. He does not simply

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<sup>80</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 174.

<sup>81</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*; cf. especially '25. The Essence of a Fundamental Metaphysical Position; The Possibility of Such Positions in the History of Western Philosophy', pp. 184-197.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Heidegger, 'Who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?' in: *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Return of the Same*, pp. 209-233. Heidegger discerns in the term *Fürsprecher* a sense not only of 'speaking on behalf of' but also of 'speaking forth' and 'speaking before'.

announce the thought of eternal return; he thinks it in such a way as to incorporate and to live it in all its implications – for ‘Zarathustra begins by going under’.<sup>83</sup>

### **Zarathustra’s Down-going: Decline, Demise and Destiny in the Dialectic**

Zarathustra’s is no doubt a strange beginning, a strange prologue, which announces before all else his own demise, his down-going, his *Untergang*.<sup>84</sup> ‘I must go down – as men, to whom I want to descend, call it’,<sup>85</sup> he declares: ‘*Ich muss ... untergehen*’.<sup>86</sup> The emphasis on the word *untergehen* refers not only to the fact of the down-going but also to its mode, in the sense that Zarathustra’s down-going, thought in its entirety, comprises the different meanings of this term. *Untergehen*, the translator R. J. Hollingdale points out, ‘has three meanings: to descend or go down; to set (as of the sun); and to be destroyed or to go under’; he grants that there ‘is much play upon this triple meaning throughout the book’ and that the ‘noun *Untergang* is treated in a similar way’.<sup>87</sup> The fact that Nietzsche describes Zarathustra’s down-going as *Untergang* – and not as *Niedergang* or as *Niederkunft* – indicates that he thinks it in the interplay of these different connotations of the word. He certainly does not think it as *Niederkunft*; and he could not have, for Zarathustra’s down-going would appear as *Niederkunft* only from within the world, which is not the position from which Nietzsche speaks as a Western philosopher. The word *Niedergang*, on the other hand, is almost synonymous with *Untergang*, and it seems that from Zarathustra’s point of view, at least, his down-going could also be described as *Niedergang*. As Nietzsche only refers to it as

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<sup>83</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, II: *The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 67.

<sup>84</sup> Nietzsche, ‘Also Sprach Zarathustra’ in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/1: *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, p. 22.

<sup>85</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 39.

<sup>86</sup> Nietzsche, ‘Also Sprach Zarathustra’ in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/1: *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, p. 6.

<sup>87</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 339.

*Untergang*, however, it seems that his perspective is not the same as Zarathustra's; in fact, it seems that Nietzsche's choice of the word *Untergang* implies that Zarathustra disappears out of his sight and leaves Nietzsche, and man in general, behind. If Nietzsche thinks of Zarathustra's journey not as a *coming-down* but as a *going-down*, this not a contradiction of the fact that his thinking is the thinking of *Niederkunft*; it merely reveals the nature of his own perspective as that of one left behind. By definition, Zarathustra's down-going into the world begins at a point over and above the world: at the point, that is, which the thinker has claimed in the long history of dialectics. This is the very perspective that Nietzsche, too, inherited from the philosophical tradition of the West and it is from this point of view that he observes Zarathustra's down-going; hence, he describes it not as *Niedergang* but as *Untergang*. For notwithstanding the fact that the two terms are often very close in meaning and sometimes overlap, the Grimms' dictionary also records a significant difference between them. The term *Niedergang* denotes a down-going from the very point the summit has been passed; whereas *Untergang* means the descent, the disappearance proper. In this sense, *Niedergang* would describe the path of the sun from midday on, whilst *Untergang* refers only to the setting of the sun in the evening.<sup>88</sup> Accordingly, if Nietzsche describes Zarathustra's down-going as *Untergang*, he suggests that Zarathustra is about to be truly immersed in the world and that he is about to complete what man, who is at best engaged in a process of decline, *Niedergang*, has barely started. And indeed, *Niedergang* is the term that Nietzsche uses with disconcerting frequency to describe mankind. 'What!', he exclaims in *Ecce Homo*,

could mankind itself be in *décadence*? has it always been? – What is certain is that it has been *taught* only *décadence* values as supreme values. The morality of unselfing is the morality of decline [*Niedergangs-Moral*] *par excellence*, the fact 'I am perishing' translated into the imperative 'you all *shall* perish' [*zu Grunde gehn*] – and *not only* into the imperative! ...<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, XI. Band, III. Abteilung: *Un-Uzvogel* (1936), pp. 1558-1559.

<sup>89</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 102, and 'Ecce Homo' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 253-372 (p. 370).

At the same time as pointing out that man as he is today is essentially *décadence* and *Niedergang*, however, Nietzsche insists that this *Niedergang* of man should not be halted but must in fact be completed. For when the decline of man is about to be completed, when *Niedergang* becomes *Untergang*, it acquires a positive and constructive meaning again. Similarly, when Nietzsche speaks of man's *Zugrundegehen*, he already points past the decline of man and to the positive that is inherent in it. No doubt *zugrundegehen* in this context means first of all to go to the ground, to perish; at the same time, however, it entails a sense of going to the bottom of things. In fact, the expression resounds with *auf den Grund gehen*, which means to get to the bottom of the matter and to seek its essence. It is in this very sense that Nietzsche regards man, who is but decline, *Niedergang*, as a great promise. He sees in man's *Niedergang* already the possibility of his *Untergang*; that is to say, he discerns in the decline of man also the prospect of man immersing himself in the world in his search for its essence rather than seeking the truth of the world in its transcendent negation. In this sense, there is nothing sinister in Nietzsche's celebration of man's decline, for he anticipates simply a new definition of man. At times, it seems indeed that he already thinks of man in terms of *Untergang*; thus, as he writes:

What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal; what can be loved in man is that he is a *going-across* [*Übergang*] and a *down-going* [*Untergang*].<sup>90</sup>

In fact, however, Nietzsche is very specific in that he says here that there is something *in* man that he can celebrate, which implies that man is precisely *not* something that can be celebrated in its entirety. In this sense, the passage confirms rather than contradicts the fact that Nietzsche thinks of man as *Niedergang* and not yet as *Untergang*; for as long as man is not

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<sup>90</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 44, and 'Also Sprach Zarathustra' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/1: *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, pp. 10-11.

in essence *Untergang* but only the implicit promise of it, he cannot be loved unreservedly. Only once his decline, his down-going, is complete, will man be something that can be affirmed again. In celebrating the decline of man, Nietzsche is effectively promoting the process by which man becomes essentially positive again; and it is in this sense that Nietzsche's thinking reveals itself to be fundamentally anti-dialectical. As opposed to the dialectic, Nietzsche seeks the positive not in the negation of the negation,<sup>91</sup> but in the *affirmation* of the negation. In this sense, Nietzsche's thinking of the decline of man such that it can be celebrated as his improvement is essentially anti-dialectical. On the other hand, however, this very decline of man is also the profoundly dialectical death of the dialectical man. In that the dialectic only ever aims for the other, it only ever aims for its own annihilation and for the rise of the anti-dialectical. And what could be the final goal of the dialectical man, if not his death, his *Untergang*? What, if not his *down-going*, could be the *end* of him who always aspired *upwards*? In one sense, the *Untergang* of the dialectical man is, thus, merely his inevitable death. In another, however, it is the first incorporation of the anti-dialectical principle and the first manifestation of Nietzsche's thinking, for in the death of the dialectical man, man is reborn such as Nietzsche thinks him. And it is not a coincidence that Nietzsche's thinking first manifests itself in this manner. The anti-dialectical principle first emerges, as Adorno explains, at the very core of the dialectic,<sup>92</sup> which is, ultimately, constituted by the negation that is man. Thus it is that Nietzsche's thinking begins with man and with the question of what man might be.



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<sup>91</sup> Cf. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 158.

<sup>92</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 158.

It seems that Nietzsche's usage of the term *Untergang* in its different connotations is, indeed, suggestive of the way in which he sees in man's decline also the emergence of a new definition of man. For apart from 'to go under' and 'to perish', the Grimms' dictionary records for the verb *untergehen* the meanings of 'to get under a weight or a burden in order to lift and carry it', and 'to examine and to investigate'.<sup>93</sup> The word which best renders these meanings in English is the term 'to undergo', which according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* counts among its connotations:

To get under, search below. [...] To occupy oneself with; to investigate. [...] To get knowledge of. [...] To bear, endure, sustain, suffer, go through (pain, suffering, danger, etc.). [...] To bear, sustain (a burden, etc.). [...] To experience, pass through (a change or alteration). [...] To partake of, enjoy. [...] To expose oneself to (risk). [...] To take in hand; to undertake.<sup>94</sup>

The decline of man, as Nietzsche thinks it, comprises all of these meanings and it is in this sense that it also constitutes the potential of man. This is not to say that it does not imply the end of man as he is – on the contrary. A man capable of bearing and sustaining a burden, of exposing himself to risk and of taking matters in his own hand would be the very opposite of the dialectical man. In the dialectic, all action is in essence negation and therefore nothing can ever be done or undertaken in the true sense; nothing can ever be truly borne or carried. Every act of *Aufhebung*, that is, every attempt at lifting-up, every attempt at safe-keeping and at sublimation implies the annihilation of whatever was initially meaningful enough for the dialectical man to aim to keep it safe. And nothing is ever truly at stake, for everything is ultimately annihilated and yet ultimately preserved in the double meaning of *aufgehoben*. It is this dialectical man who meets his death in Nietzsche's thinking of the *Untergang* of man; quite clearly so in the *Untergang* thought as man's 'going under' but ultimately no less in the

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<sup>93</sup> Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, XI. Band, III. Abteilung: *Un-Uzvogel*, pp. 1570-1571.

<sup>94</sup> Murray, James A. H. / Bradley, Henry et al (eds), *The Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), XVIII: *Thro-Unelucidated*, p. 965.



*Untergang* thought as man's new 'undergoing'. In that this *Untergang* of man, which Zarathustra anticipates, stipulates that man bear a burden and take matters into his own hand again, it implies that he will finally overcome the nihilism, the lightness and the hollowness which allowed the dialectical man to rise above himself. And once man becomes strong and grounded again, he will at last be able to bear the thought of eternal return which Nietzsche described first of all as a burden.<sup>95</sup> In this sense, Nietzsche's usage of the language confirms that his controversial dictum of the 'overcoming' of man is such that it cannot be attained in the dialectics of *Aufhebung*. Somewhat curiously, perhaps, the overcoming of man, as Nietzsche thinks it, requires of man a movement first and foremost not of 'Auf-' but of 'Nieder-'. And conversely, he discerns in the dialectics of *Aufhebung* its inherent *Niedergang*, its downfall. This is not, however, simply an instance of Nietzsche's 'eccentricity'; in fact, it shows that he thinks through - and sees through - the dialectic, to the extent that he recognizes the end of the dialectic already in its very beginnings. In *Twilight of the Idols*, he ventures:

This irreverent notion that the great sages are *declining types* [*Niedergangs-Typen*] first dawned on me in regard to just the case in which learned and unlearned prejudice is most strongly opposed to it: I recognized Socrates and Plato as symptoms of decay.<sup>96</sup>

In the work of the first dialecticians, Nietzsche recognises the fact that contrary to its upward aspirations, the dialectic can achieve nothing but its downfall. He knows that from the very beginning, the dialecticians worked only towards their own down-going and that in this

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<sup>95</sup> Nietzsche, 'Die fröhliche Wissenschaft' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, v/2: *Idyllen aus Messina / Die fröhliche Wissenschaft / Nachgelassene Fragmente*, pp. 11-320 (p. 250). 'Das grösste Schwergewicht' could be translated as 'The greatest burden', as it has been in: Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, II: *The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, pp. 19-23.

<sup>96</sup> Nietzsche, 'Twilight of the Idols' in: *Twilight of the Idols / The Anti-Christ*, pp. 29-122 (pp. 39-40); and 'Götzen-Dämmerung' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 49-157 (p. 61).

sense the dialectical principle of *Aufhebung* is always treacherous in its claim as an upward movement. Thus, he notes in *Ecce Homo*:

My readers perhaps know the extent to which I regard dialectics as a symptom of *décadence*, for example in the most famous case [Fall] of all: in the case [Fall] of Socrates.<sup>97</sup>

The expression '*im Fall des Sokrates*' certainly means here first of all 'in the case of Socrates'. The term *Fall*, however, is somewhat ambiguous in that it can also refer to a fall. And it is precisely on this double meaning that Nietzsche is playing here, suggesting that the famous case of Socrates is also the famous fall of Socrates. Read thus, the expression anticipates the inevitable down-going of Socrates and implies that the down-going of man already began with the thinker who first aspired to elevate man in the dialectic. It is in this sense that Nietzsche's thinking is essentially related and yet fundamentally opposed to the dialectic. The decline of man that he describes has, in fact, already begun in the thought of those with high and ever higher aspirations for man; and conversely, in man's final *Untergang* he anticipates a down-going which will have an *uplifting* effect on man. Notwithstanding its tenor of decline and down-going, in other words, Nietzsche's understanding of man implies that 'all genuine human activity should have an upward propelling effect'.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, Zarathustra, who precedes man in his down-going, is in essence a *climber* and shortly after his down-going already seeks out ascents again.

In the light of how profoundly his thinking is involved with the dialectic, it is remarkable how little Nietzsche mentions it explicitly. Most of his engagement with the dialectic, and certainly some of his most lucid criticism of it, takes the form of subtexts,

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<sup>97</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 9, and 'Ecce Homo' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 253-372 (p. 262).

<sup>98</sup> Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of his Philosophical Activity*, p. 168.

similes and allusions. In a letter to Lou Salomé, for instance, Nietzsche speaks of their relationship such that his comments could also be read in a broader context. He writes:

How often have I experienced in all possible ways just this – everything perfectly clear, but also at an end! And how happy I am, my beloved friend Lou, that I can now think of the two of us – ‘Everything is beginning, and yet perfectly clear!’<sup>99</sup>

Without the references to their personal relationship, which was incidentally not quite as clear as Nietzsche seems to think, these lines read like a reflection on the turn in Nietzsche’s thinking which was imminent at the time. Everything perfectly clear, but also at an end – is this not a very lucid diagnosis of the dialectic, all the more poignant for its simplicity? The letter was written about a year after Nietzsche first had the thought of eternal return, at a time, that is, when he is coming into his own as a thinker. In that he no longer abides by the fallacious rules of the dialectic, which grant clarity only after the event, but now sees everything as beginning, he is indeed beginning to think his fundamental thought in its full implications. As early as 1882, it seems, he was to some extent aware of the fact that his thinking constitutes the end of the dialectic; and he had begun to realize its consequences long before he staged in Zarathustra an example of the down-going of man. In this sense, his thinking engages with the dialectic from the very beginning of his creative life, even if it is only later on that his depictions of his position *vis-à-vis* the dialectic become more frequent and more expressive. More and more he recognizes himself as the thinker who thought beyond the principle of *Aufhebung* and who thought it through to the point where it turns downwards. In 1887, he writes to Franz Overbeck:

...I am now lacking ... this first and most essential condition, the loneliness, the profound undisturbedness, the remoteness, the strangeness, without which I cannot get *down* to my problems (for, between us, I am in a downright

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<sup>99</sup> Nietzsche to Lou Salomé (around 20 July 1882) in: Christopher Middleton (ed.), *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, translated by Christopher Middleton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 188-189.

frightening sense a man of *depth*; and without this subterranean work I cannot stand life any more).<sup>100</sup>

It is Nietzsche's last work, *Ecce Homo*, however, which contains what might well be the clearest statement of his intrinsic relationship with the dialectic. At the very end of his creative life, he notes:

I have a subtler sense for signs of ascent [*Aufgang*] and decline [*Niedergang*] than any man has ever had, I am the teacher *par excellence* in this matter - I know both, I am both.<sup>101</sup>

Acknowledging his philosophical position between ascent and decline, between *Auf-* and *Nieder-*, he concedes here that his thinking is intrinsically linked to the dialectic. Indeed, in that he grants that he is not only familiar with both principles, but actually identifies with both, he locates his thinking at their intersection: at the turning point and at the end of the dialectical age. And yet, even in this account of his position *vis-à-vis* the dialectic he does not mention the dialectic explicitly. It is nothing short of curious how often Nietzsche speaks of the dialectic without actually mentioning it. And even less than the dialectic, he mentions the philosopher of the dialectic, Hegel. In this sense, his silence surrounding Hegel may well be what Heidegger calls a telling silence.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> '... es fehlt mir jetzt ... jene erste und wesentlichste Bedingung, die Einsamkeit, die tiefe Ungestörtheit, Abseitigkeit, Fremdheit, ohne welche ich nicht zu meinen Problemen hinunter kann (denn, unter uns gesagt, ich bin in einem geradezu erschrecklichen Sinn ein Mensch der Tiefe; und ohne diese unterirdische Arbeit halte ich das Leben nicht mehr aus).' Nietzsche to Franz Overbeck (14 April 1887) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/5: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889*, p. 56.

<sup>101</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 8, and 'Ecce Homo' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 253-372 (p. 262).

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, II: *The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 208.

## **Nietzsche and Hegel: Between Immortality and Eternal Return**

Where Nietzsche and Hegel are mentioned in the same context, the emphasis is usually on their differences. Hegel's thinking is thought to be incompatible with Nietzsche's, and Nietzsche is thought to be largely ignorant of Hegel. Their irreconcilable differences in their own right, however, betray the fact that theirs is not simply a reconciliatory and therefore dialectical relationship. And on the other hand, the two thinkers do, despite their differences, share some common ground. Heidegger recognized in Nietzsche 'the *last metaphysician* of the West',<sup>103</sup> and to the extent that Nietzsche remains grounded in Western metaphysics, he remains grounded in the dialectical tradition, which Hegel's work epitomizes. Indeed, Nietzsche's writing often gives the impression that his thinking is haunted by the ghosts of the dialecticians. More than by anyone else, he is haunted by Plato, but in his many allusions to the dialectic it also seems that his thoughts are often accompanied by the ghost of Hegel. It is, thus, all the more curious that he hardly ever speaks of Hegel explicitly and never at length. And yet, if the 'utterance of thinking is', as Heidegger suggests, 'a telling silence',<sup>104</sup> this peculiar silence of Nietzsche's would in fact confirm that his thinking is profoundly engaged with Hegel's.

Nietzsche gives the impression of being, at best, indifferent to Hegel and is often taken to have been unfamiliar with Hegel's work. He 'knew barely more of Hegel than a standard popularization',<sup>105</sup> Bataille, for instance, notes. But a lack – or at any rate a conspicuous absence – of formal engagement with Hegel's work notwithstanding, Nietzsche's writing

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<sup>103</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, III: The Will to Power as Knowledge and as Metaphysics*, p. 8.

<sup>104</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 208.

<sup>105</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, translated by Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 109 (note 2).

implies, however tacitly, an unprecedented depth in its understanding of Hegel's thought in all its implications. Like Hegel, and in fact as the first philosopher after Hegel, Nietzsche thinks the history of philosophy philosophically.<sup>106</sup> And conversely, he thinks philosophy in historical terms, which not only allows him to recognize his own thinking as a moment in the philosophical tradition of the West but in a similar sense also grants him his particular perspective on Hegel. He does not mistake Hegel for the inventor of the dialectic or for an advocate of the dialectical method; he knows that the roots of the dialectic lie in ancient Greece. And to this extent he is aware that Hegel's thinking marks not the beginning but the *end* of the dialectic. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, man has attained absolute knowledge and has become god; thus, he has achieved the only goal that the dialectical age ever had. Hegel's work describes the end of this age and spells, thus, also the end of the dialectical method. In fact, Hegel never strictly speaking employed a dialectical 'method'; he merely describes the dialectical progress of the world. If, as Kojève explains,

... the thought and the discourse of the Hegelian Scientist or the Wise Man are dialectical, it is only because they faithfully reflect the 'dialectical movement' of the Real of which they are a part ...Hegel's *method*, then, is not at all dialectical, and Dialectic for him is quite different from a method of thought or exposition. And we can even say that, in a certain way, Hegel was the first to abandon Dialectic as a philosophical *method*. He was, at least, the first to do so voluntarily and with full knowledge of what he was doing.<sup>107</sup>

If Hegel's thinking marks, thus, the end of the dialectical method at the same time as the end of the 'dialectical movement' of the real, it is because the dialectic is, as 'a philosophical *method* ... abandoned only at the moment when the *real* Dialectic of the active transformation of the given stops'.<sup>108</sup> Thus it is that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* could have been written from

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<sup>106</sup> Cf. Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 205.

<sup>107</sup> Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, assembled by Raymond Queneau, edited by Allan Bloom, translated by James H. Nichols jr (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 178-179.

<sup>108</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 191.

the point of view of absolute knowledge: it marks the historical moment at which absolute knowledge has become possible because the world does not change any more. And in that it describes the end of the dialectic, Hegel's work in fact describes the end of the philosophical tradition of the West as a whole, given that philosophy has been defined by dialectics since its inception in ancient Greece. In this light, it certainly seems that Hegel's thinking betrays a point of view that is not altogether different from Nietzsche's. Hence, if Nietzsche cannot, by all accounts, see very much of Hegel's thinking, could this be not because Hegel is too far away, but because he is in fact too close?

In many respects, Hegel's thinking already touches on the thoughts that Nietzsche would later express more explicitly. It was Nietzsche who *proclaimed* the death of god, but on second thoughts it seems doubtful that he actually killed him himself. If man, as Deleuze suggests, killed god in order 'to take his still warm seat',<sup>109</sup> it would have been Hegel who killed god, for it was Hegel who, at the end of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, took god's place. Similarly, Hegel already knew that 'there is no transcendence'<sup>110</sup> before Nietzsche said so, and he already knew of the falsehood of truth before Nietzsche brought it to light in *Beyond Good and Evil*.<sup>111</sup> It is not simply a case of Hegel anticipating Nietzsche's work, however; the relationship between the two thinkers is actually far more complex. Kojève, for one, offers a clue as he mentions, more or less in passing, that Hegel

speaks of a period of total depression that he lived through between the twenty-fifth and the thirtieth years of his life: a 'Hypochondria' ... that was so severe as to 'paralyze all his powers', and that came precisely from the fact that he could not accept the necessary abandonment of *Individuality* - that is, actually, of humanity - which the idea of absolute Knowledge demanded. But, finally, he surmounted his 'Hypochondria'. And becoming a Wise Man by that final

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<sup>109</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 151.

<sup>110</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 162.

<sup>111</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 187; cf. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, III: *The Will to Power as Knowledge and as Metaphysics*, pp. 32-38.

acceptance of death, he published a few years later the First Part of the 'System of Science', entitled 'Science of the Phenomenology of Spirit', in which he definitively reconciles himself with all that is and has been, by declaring that there will never more be anything new on earth.<sup>112</sup>

Is this experience of Hegel's not uncannily similar to Nietzsche's experience of thinking the thought of eternal return for the first time? It is not only that Kojève describes Hegel's coming to terms with his thought in its entirety as a life-changing experience; even the thought itself, the thought that there will never be anything new on earth, seems in both its content and its implications very similar to Nietzsche's thought of eternal return. But if Kojève's account shows that Hegel, the thinker of the dialectic, already encountered a thought not unlike Nietzsche's, it also betrays the difference between the two. Indeed, the difference between these thoughts is no less significant than their similarity. Hegel's suffering, Kojève recounts, is caused by the thought that there will never be anything new and everything will remain the same. Nietzsche, on the other hand, suffers at the thought that the despicable will return; he suffers at the thought that

the little men, too, *are*; as beings they too recur forever. They cannot be put out of action; they pertain to that side of things that is dark and repulsive. If being as a whole is to be thought, the little men too wait upon their 'Yes'.<sup>113</sup>

So if Hegel suffers at the thought that everything remains the same and Nietzsche suffers at the thought that everything returns, they are, it seems, thinking the same thought but thinking it differently. The difference between their thoughts could, thus, resemble the difference between Zarathustra's and the dwarf's respective take on the eternal return, separated as they are by only 'the smallest gap'.<sup>114</sup> The dwarf's thinking of the eternal return, however, is characterized by the fact that he takes this thought lightly; he thinks it

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<sup>112</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 168.

<sup>113</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 57.

<sup>114</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 234.



'disdainfully'<sup>115</sup> and such that it does *not* cause him any suffering. This is certainly not how Hegel's thinks this thought; he took it, after all, seriously enough for it to throw him into a five-year depression. And if he does not take this thought any more lightly than Nietzsche does, it is also clear that he does not think it like Zarathustra's animals, for

the animals' talk is only more effervescent, more buoyant and playful than – yet at bottom identical with – the talk of the dwarf, to whom Zarathustra objects that he makes things too easy for himself. [...] In spite of their marvelous talk about the Ring of Being, Zarathustra's animals too seem to dance over and beyond what is essential.<sup>116</sup>

Hegel may be the thinker of elevation, *Aufhebung*, but the fact that he describes the upward surge of the dialectic does not mean that his thinking is effervescent and dances over and beyond what is essential. Hegel thinks the thought of forever-the-same as thoroughly and painstakingly as Nietzsche thinks the eternal return, and no less than Nietzsche's, his thought refers to being as a whole. Indeed, if his thought makes him ill, it is because, as Heidegger notes, '[p]recisely the knowledge that chokes us is what must be known if being as a whole is to be thought'.<sup>117</sup>

It appears, thus, that Hegel's thought resembles not so much the dwarf's or the animals' as Zarathustra's own thinking of the eternal return. In this sense, the difference between his and Nietzsche's thought might simply reflect a different historical perspective. The difference might, in other words, show that they posed the metaphysical question differently; it might reveal what Heidegger calls a 'development' of the metaphysical question.<sup>118</sup> To be sure, Heidegger recognizes in Nietzsche's thinking a development of the

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<sup>115</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 178.

<sup>116</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>117</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 55.

<sup>118</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, pp. 184-197.

metaphysical question; thus, it certainly seems that this could account for the difference between his thought and Hegel's. Ascribing the difference between their thoughts to a *development* in the strictest sense, however, implies that Hegel's determination of being clearly comes before Nietzsche's, whereas Blanchot suggests that

Nietzsche can only come after Hegel, but it is always before and always after Hegel that he comes and comes again.<sup>119</sup>

In Blanchot's view, the relationship between these two thinkers is far more intricate than the notion of a development would indicate. If Nietzsche always comes before and yet always after Hegel, it would follow that he can only be understood in relation to Hegel; and conversely, it would follow that Hegel can only be understood in relation to Nietzsche and *after* Nietzsche in the strictest temporal sense. In this light, the originality of Kojève's reading of Hegel in the 1930s is certainly no less a coincidence than the fact that it revived an interest in Hegel 'at a time when he seemed no longer of living significance'.<sup>120</sup> It was Kojève, at any rate, who grasped the importance of the thought of forever-the-same, which threw Hegel into years of depression, but even the fact that he considers Hegel's life in a philosophical sense at all makes his reading stand out from other interpretations of Hegel. In general, commentaries on Hegel tend to focus on his work and do not explore his life in a philosophical way, whereas most commentators on Nietzsche agree that his work cannot be separated from his life. In Nietzsche's case, his illness is thought to be intrinsically linked to his thinking; in Hegel's, it is usually hardly mentioned beyond a passing remark to draw a background picture. It is, of course, much easier to disregard the illness in Hegel's case because he emerged as a philosopher only with the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, written a few

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<sup>119</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, translated by Lycette Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 22.

<sup>120</sup> Allan Bloom, 'Editor's Introduction' in: Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. viii.

years after he finally 'surmounted this "Hypochondria"'.<sup>121</sup> Nietzsche, by contrast, has been propelled towards the illness precisely by his thinking; and as the consequence of his thought, his illness can hardly been ignored even in the most rigorously philosophical of commentaries. If, however, the two thinkers are indeed tormented by the same thought, their curious relationship would simply indicate that Nietzsche comes before the illness and Hegel afterwards. It would mean that the profound crisis which is implicit in this thought is the axis of their relationship, Hegel's thinking picking up at the point of Nietzsche's collapse and Nietzsche's thinking, in turn, coming down with meaning once the upward surge in Hegel's thought turns against itself. Their relationship revolves, thus, around the crisis point in the history of the West which Heidegger describes as the end of metaphysics; they both, albeit from different perspectives, think the end of metaphysical thought.



The convergence of Hegel's and Nietzsche's thought at the crisis point in the history of philosophy confirms that the metaphysical tradition overcomes *itself*. Hegel's thinking epitomizes this tradition but describes thus also its inherent end. And Nietzsche, conversely, remains entrenched in it even as he expressly thinks its end; as the 'last metaphysician', he is still, after all, a metaphysician. In both cases, it is implicit that the philosophical tradition of the West will, and will have to, be overcome from *within*, as Heidegger indicates in his reading of Zarathustra's simile of the snake. Heidegger explains that

[t]he black snake is drear monotony, ultimately the goallessness and meaninglessness of nihilism. It is nihilism itself. Nihilism has bitten the young shepherd during his sleep and is now firmly entrenched. [...] When Zarathustra sees the young shepherd lying there, he does the first thing anyone would do. He pulls at the snake, tugs at it, ' - in vain!'

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<sup>121</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 168.

The implication is that nihilism cannot be overcome from the outside. We do not overcome it by tearing away at it or shoving it aside... The black snake of nihilism threatens to incorporate humanity altogether; it must be overcome by those who are themselves inflicted with it and endangered by it. [...] Here nothing avails if human beings themselves do not bite into the danger, and not blindly, not just anywhere. We must bite off the *head* of the black snake, its properly definitive and leading part, which looms at the forefront.

... everyone who is affected – and that means each of us – must bite into the matter for himself or herself; for if we leave it to another to tug at the darkling need that is our own, all will be futile.<sup>122</sup>

If the snake stands for nihilism itself, it also stands for metaphysics, for according to Heidegger, metaphysics is '*nihilism proper*'; conversely, the '*essence of nihilism is historically as metaphysics*'.<sup>123</sup> Metaphysics has always been nihilistic, and ultimately '*the metaphysics of Plato is no less nihilistic than that of Nietzsche*'.<sup>124</sup> In fact, all metaphysical thought since Socrates and Plato has been nihilistic because it has in essence been dialectical. And in this sense, Heidegger observes, even '*Nietzsche's metaphysics is not an overcoming of nihilism. It is the ultimate entanglement in nihilism*'.<sup>125</sup> In the terms of the simile, it is therefore not Nietzsche who bites the head off the snake. Indeed, it was Zarathustra who overcame the snake of dialectical reason, which worms its way into everything and winds itself out of everything. It was Zarathustra who finished off the elegant, majestic serpent, the most discerning of animals, which had turned into a thick, black constrictor, the snake that god had set upon man – and man, in turn, had set upon god. So who is Zarathustra to bite its head off? Once again, he is at some distance from Nietzsche, and he is much more than a prophet. In the simile of the snake it is, indeed, Nietzsche who announces and prophesies and Zarathustra who realizes his prophecies. In this sense, Zarathustra clearly comes after Nietzsche, but in order to overcome the snake of dialectics in the only way it can be overcome, he must still be a dialectician at heart. And as a thinker of dialectics who comes

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<sup>122</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, pp. 179-180.

<sup>123</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, IV: Nihilism*, translated by Frank A. Capuzzi, p. 205.

<sup>124</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, IV: Nihilism*, p. 205.

<sup>125</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, IV: Nihilism*, p. 203.

before and comes yet after Nietzsche, is Zarathustra not beginning to show an uncanny resemblance to Hegel?



The relationship between Nietzsche and Hegel, where one comes after the other and comes yet always also before him, pertains to the temporality of the return in very much the same way as the relationship between Nietzsche and Zarathustra. In fact, Hegel and Zarathustra coincide not only in their position *vis-à-vis* Nietzsche; the thinker of *Aufhebung* and the mountain climber also share an essential upward aspiration. In this sense, Zarathustra may well be Hegel as he returns in Nietzsche's thinking; he may, in other words, be the reincarnation of Hegel in the eternal return. Since Zarathustra's down-going begins as 'Zarathustra wants to be man again',<sup>126</sup> it begins with Zarathustra *not* being man and in this sense at a point when man has become other than man: when he has become god. In this respect, it certainly seems that Zarathustra's down-going begins with Hegel. And it seems that *Zarathustra's Prologue* begins with Hegel, for is not Hegel's story precisely that of a thirty-year old who left behind what he knew, who left behind the lake in which he was threatening to drown, and set off into the heights?<sup>127</sup> In this sense, Hegel comes very much before Nietzsche, and yet in his reincarnation as Zarathustra, he clearly comes after him; thus, he announces the end of his down-going:

I spoke my teaching, I broke upon my teaching: thus my eternal fate will have it –  
as prophet do I perish!  
Now the hour has come when he who is going down shall bless himself. Thus –  
*ends Zarathustra's downgoing.*<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 39.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 39.

<sup>128</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 238.

At the end of his down-going, Zarathustra blesses himself, reconciling himself with himself and with everything that is – just as Hegel had done when he had convalesced after a long period of depression and set about writing the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. At this stage, Hegel is, conversely, reminiscent of Zarathustra, the ‘Convalescent’,<sup>129</sup> who shortly after his down-going regained himself and begins to *climb* again. In many respects and certainly in his anticipation of the end of metaphysics, Hegel comes before Nietzsche; in this sense, however, he also returns as the convalescent who comes after Nietzsche and after the illness. Zarathustra, in turn, betrays his kinship with Hegel as he announces that he will die as a prophet. Unlike Nietzsche, who was no doubt prophetic but died not as prophet but as madman, Hegel, too, perished as a prophet; he perished from his teaching, from his *word*, which was in fact never anything but a prolonged death: for what is Hegel’s word if not the equivocal and yet all-consuming annihilation and negation of *Aufhebung*? Hegel died, thus, as a prophet, even if he who declares that there will never be anything new on earth is a prophet who speaks but of the past. Ultimately, however, this is the fate of every prophet. A prophet is always too early and yet always already too late; in this sense, he pertains to the temporality of the return. And Hegel, who died of his teaching, of the promise, that is, of immortality, appears indeed to be no less adverse to down-going than Zarathustra is. In his lectures on *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, Heidegger reminds us that

...we have to hear the positive in Hegel’s negative, when he speaks of perishing: Perishing is returning to the ground [*Das Zugrundegehen ist das Zum-Grund-Zurückgehen*].<sup>130</sup>

Essentially, Hegel’s entire thinking depends on the ambiguity of perishing, given that death is the very life – and the *only* life – of the dialectic. In that Hegel anticipates the end of

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<sup>129</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 232-238.

<sup>130</sup> Heidegger, *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 83.

metaphysics, he realizes that his own thinking works only towards its down-going; he knows the dialectic to be nihilistic to the point where it can only aim for its own annihilation. But it is precisely this realization which sparks his recovery after years of depression. In this sense, at least, it seems that Hegel embraces not so much the principle of *Aufhebung* as indeed the down-going in which it results. And conversely, Nietzsche seems at times to long for the end and the *negation* of the eternal return. In Zarathustra, he created after all a *climber*, someone who has the propensity for dialectics. And on a more personal note, he writes:

Can you understand my longing, the longing for the finite? Of him who saw the ring of recurrence –<sup>131</sup>

In that he longs for the finite, it seems that Nietzsche, the thinker of the eternal return, longs for annihilation and perhaps even for the all-encompassing annihilation of the dialectic. Dialectical annihilation, however, is never complete and final. As it equates annihilation and preservation in the principle of *Aufhebung*, the dialectic promises eternal death and eternal life alike. In the dialectical death, there looms also immortality – and in this sense a trace of the eternal return. This is the paradox at the heart of the relationship between Nietzsche and Hegel. Just as there is in Hegel's thinking an indication that the dialectic will come to an end, there appears to be in Nietzsche's thinking a sense that it will return. Separated in mutual antagonism which always returns but is never final, their thoughts intersect between immortality and eternal return.



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<sup>131</sup> 'Versteht ihr wohl meine neue Sehnsucht, die nach dem Endlichen? dessen, der den Ring der Wiederkunft schaute -'. Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VII/2: *Nachgelassene Fragmente: Frühjahr bis Herbst 1884* (1974), p. 224.

'One could die of being "immortal"!',<sup>132</sup> Nietzsche writes in the summer of 1888: '*Man kann daran zugrunde gehn, "unsterblich" zu sein!*'<sup>133</sup> He hints, thus, no doubt at his own imminent tragedy; the neutral pronoun 'one', however, suggests that it is not *only* his own. In the broadest sense, he states that *man* could die of having become immortal, of having become god. Only in his death, thought as *zugrundegehen* in all its connotations, however, will the immortal man finally be able to realize the essence of the world. In this sense, Nietzsche recognizes in the paradox that one can die of being immortal the prospect of a new life for mankind, defined as *Niederkunft* and as eternal return of the same. The paradox that one can die of being immortal is, indeed, the paradox which harbours the end of the dialectic. And in the sense that he, too, anticipates the end of the dialectic, Hegel, too, realized this paradox. In Kojève's reading, at least, Hegel realized that man must be mortal despite all dialectical claims to the contrary and in fact even *because* of them. For, Kojève explains, 'if Man lived eternally and could not die, he could not render himself immune to God's omnipotence';<sup>134</sup> he would not be truly human and he certainly could not become god. Even the man who has in his quest for immortality become god - and especially the man who has become god - must die and must go down. In this sense, Hegel's thinking shows, no less than Nietzsche's, how the end of the dialectical age hinges on the paradox that one can die of being immortal. It is in this paradox that Hegel's and Nietzsche's thoughts coincide. They coincide at the end of the dialectical age as man's quest for immortality becomes the quest for eternal return. And they will converge again at the point which Nietzsche describes as the end of Zarathustra's down-going: as the thought of eternal return threatens to become tainted with a sense of forever-the-same and thus with a sense of

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<sup>132</sup> Nietzsche to Malwida von Meysenbug (late July 1888) in: Middleton (ed.), *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, p. 302.

<sup>133</sup> Nietzsche to Malwida von Meysenbug (late July 1888) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/5: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889*, p. 377.

<sup>134</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 247.



immortality. The convergence of Nietzsche's and Hegel's thinking always marks a crisis, and at the juncture of immortality and eternal return, it is always a question and in fact a matter of life and death. That one can die from being immortal is, indeed, the tragic fate of Hegel and Nietzsche alike. Hegel's tragedy is that he sought convalescence, that is, the return to *life*, in the principle of *Aufhebung*, which only ever harbours death and annihilation. And Nietzsche's tragedy is that he perished, at least in his capacity as a rational human being, from thinking the thought that promises the return to life. In July 1888, when he wrote of his fear that one could die from being immortal, Nietzsche knew that his time was up. And he knew that his time had come. For – *incipit tragoedia*<sup>135</sup> – is this not also his beginning?

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<sup>135</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 274.

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## The Birth of Tragedy: *Niederkunft* as the Tragic Conception of Being

*I have been the first to discover the tragic. The Greeks, thanks to their moralistic superficiality, misunderstood it. Even resignation is not a lesson of tragedy, but a misunderstanding of it! Yearning for nothingness is a denial of tragic wisdom, its opposite!*<sup>1</sup>

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*

Nietzsche is no stranger to tragedy: misunderstood during his lifetime, driven mad by his lucidity and perishing at last from being immortal, he suffers no doubt a tragic fate.<sup>2</sup> But he is not just a tragic figure, a commentator on tragedy or a tragedian: he is a tragic thinker and *the* thinker of the tragic. It is not a coincidence that his *oeuvre* begins with an analysis of *The Birth of Tragedy* and that it is this work which marks his transition from a young philologist to a philosopher in the strictest sense, for Nietzsche's thinking pertains, no less than his life, *essentially* to the order of the tragic. Indeed, *The Birth of Tragedy* marks not only the beginning of Nietzsche's thinking proper; it foretells of the *end* of his thinking in a new tragic age. And in the sense that Nietzsche speaks specifically of the *birth* of tragedy, it seems that he anticipates in his first published work already his fundamental thought in its configuration as *Niederkunft*. It is certainly remarkable that his work on *The Birth of Tragedy*, whilst it does

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, pp. 531-532.

<sup>2</sup> 'In tragedy the hero dies ... of immortality'. Benjamin, 'Trauerspiel and Tragedy', translated by Rodney Livingstone, in: Bullock / Jennings (eds), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 1: 1913-1926*, pp. 55-58 (p. 56).

not mention the word *Niederkunft* as such, abounds in terminology that implicates precisely this thought. When Nietzsche speaks of tragedy, he speaks of birth and rebirth, of giving birth, of being born and reborn, of fertility and of the mother's womb, so consistently, indeed, that his choice of the terms does not seem to be fortuitous. The imagery of *The Birth of Tragedy* suggests, thus, that Nietzsche is at the time already preoccupied with the thought of *Niederkunft* and in this sense with the thought that he is later to realize in all its implications as the eternal return of the same.

### ***The Birth of Tragedy* as Nietzsche's first Encounter with his Central Thought**

If Nietzsche claims that he 'discovered' the tragic it is because he was the first thinker in the West to interpret the tragic not in line with the scholarly opinion since Aristotle as a moral experience, but saw instead its primordial significance. Beneath the 'moralistic superficiality' of the Greek interpretation,<sup>3</sup> he recognized the tragic as a metaphysical experience: as a glimpse into the nature of being. Tragedy, Nietzsche concludes,

wishes to convince us of the eternal delight of existence – but we are to seek that delight not in phenomena themselves but behind phenomena. It wishes us to acknowledge that everything that comes into being must be prepared to face a sorrowful end. It forces us to look at the terrors of individual existence, yet we are not to be petrified with fear.<sup>4</sup>

In the tragic we are acquainted with the nature of being as perpetual birth and death, such that we are no longer terrified of the circle of life and of the pain it entails but learn to find consolation in the constant process of life bringing forth life. Tragedy, in other words, aims to console us in the revelation that being is a perpetual process of *Niederkunft*; in this sense, the

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<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 531.

<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Shaun Whiteside (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 80.

tragic is *essentially* related to the thought of *Niederkunft*. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, it seems, Nietzsche makes precisely this connection. Although he does not mention the thought of *Niederkunft* as such, he always describes the tragic in the terminology of birth, and the *absence* of the term itself in a text that contains so many references to it makes the presence of this thought all the more striking; it reveals, indeed, what Heidegger calls a 'telling silence': a silence that arises when a thought that is implicit everywhere is left unmentioned.<sup>5</sup>

In Nietzsche's literal or at best figurative references to birth, the thought of *Niederkunft* is, indeed, well concealed; it is always implicit and yet, as a *metaphysical* thought it is left unmentioned. The images of birth in Nietzsche's first work certainly do not betray their metaphysical roots easily. In and of itself, none is particularly striking; it is only as a whole that the imagery of the text is remarkable – and remarkable, indeed, not only for the sheer number of references to birth but for Nietzsche's specific usage of the terms. He always speaks of the birth and the rebirth of tragedy, and not, as one might expect, of its inception or its return. And it is *only* of tragic art that he speaks in these terms; he never relates the imagery of birth to what he calls 'Socratic culture' or the culture of the 'theoretical man'.<sup>6</sup> The distinction may not always be obvious or even straightforward, but the terms are never used arbitrarily. At first, it might not be clear why Nietzsche speaks not of the birth but of an 'awakening' of tragedy as he remarks:

To return from these hortatory notes to a mood more appropriate to contemplation, I shall repeat that only the Greeks can teach us what such a sudden and miraculous awakening [*Aufwachen*] of tragedy means to the innermost soul of a people.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 208.

<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 99, and 'Die Geburt der Tragödie' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke, III/1: Die Geburt der Tragödie / Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen I-III, 1872-1874* (1972), pp. 3-152 (p. 128).

In this context, however, Nietzsche's choice of the terms does not contradict his otherwise consistent usage but actually underlines his argument. It is in a *contemplative* mood, he points out, that he speaks of the 'awakening' of tragedy; in this sense, he is precisely in the sober and scholarly frame of mind which, as he explains prior to this passage, is not at all suited to discovering the tragic truth. Indeed, he holds the theoretical thought of the dialecticians responsible for putting an end to the tragic age of ancient Greece. The fact that he speaks of the 'awakening' of tragedy in this instance simply highlights, thus, that his notion of tragedy is such that contemplation, theory and dialectical thought will not and cannot reveal its origin as birth. And if tragedy commences *essentially* as birth, Nietzsche's argument also implies that the contemplative approach of an age that is in essence still dialectical will not allow us to grasp the essence of the tragic because it will not allow us to grasp the *birth* of tragedy as such.

On several other occasions, Nietzsche refers not to the 'birth' but to the 'origin' of tragedy, but since the translation renders more than one German word as 'origin',<sup>8</sup> only the original can shed light on these passages. Of the '*Ursprung*'<sup>9</sup> of tragedy, Nietzsche writes:

We must now call upon all the aesthetic principles we have so far discussed in order to find our way around the labyrinth, which is how we must refer to the *origin of Greek tragedy*. I do not think I am making an extravagant claim when I say that the problem of this origin has not yet even been seriously tackled, however many times the tattered rags of the classical tradition have been sewn together in various combinations, and ripped apart again.<sup>10</sup>

The term *Ursprung* is indeed not altogether devoid of connotations of birth. Amongst its meanings, the Grimms' dictionary records '*das hervorgehen aus etwas, der ausgangspunkt,*

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<sup>8</sup> Shaun Whiteside's translation of *The Birth of Tragedy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche, 'Die Geburt der Tragödie' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, III/1: *Die Geburt der Tragödie / Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, pp. 3-152 (p. 48).

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 35-36.

*anfang, begin, geburt, gründung u. dgl'*.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, it seems that in the context of Nietzsche's argument the origin or *Ursprung* of tragedy denotes something altogether different from the *birth* of tragedy. When Nietzsche speaks of the 'origin' of tragedy, he speaks of it as a labyrinth and as a problem that has not been addressed beyond a patching together of the evidence in ever more random combinations. In this sense, he certainly does not speak of the origin of tragedy in the same way as he speaks of its birth. And read thus, would this passage not suggest that as long as one is looking for the 'origin' of tragedy and not its birth, the essence of tragedy will remain shrouded and the scholars' search will be reduced, as it has been hitherto, to random shots in the dark? A sense that the essence of tragedy cannot be grasped by looking for its *origin* certainly emerges in the wider context of Nietzsche's argument here and particularly in the light of the conclusion he draws. For, having considered the different attempts at determining the *origin* of tragedy and how they are flawed, Nietzsche concludes:

I fear that the *birth* of tragedy may no more be explained with reference to respect for the moral intelligence of the masses than with reference to the concept of the spectator without a play, and I consider this problem too profound even to be touched on by such shallow interpretations.<sup>12</sup>

As long as he spoke of the manifold misconception of the tragic, Nietzsche spoke of its 'origin', but when he refers to the truth of tragedy, as he does here, he speaks of its 'birth'. In this sense, the passage proves to be one of the most perspicuous illustrations of the way Nietzsche's choice of the terms conveys that the *birth* of tragedy is something altogether different and altogether more profound than its *origin*, and that in order to grasp the origin

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<sup>11</sup> Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, XI. Band, III. Abteilung: *Un-Uzvogel*, p. 2540.

<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 37 (my italics).

of tragedy one must first of all grasp it as birth. On another occasion, Nietzsche says of the origin, 'Ursprung',<sup>13</sup> of tragedy:

Let us remember our own surprise at the *chorus* and the *tragic hero* in that form of tragedy, which we could not reconcile either with our own habits or with tradition, until we recognized that this duality was the very origin and essence of Greek tragedy, the expression of two interwoven artistic impulses, *the Apolline and the Dionysiac*.<sup>14</sup>

In this instance, Nietzsche's remark is no doubt informed by the preceding analysis of Euripidean tragedy, in the course of which he explains that contrary to popular belief, Euripides 'did not understand his great predecessors'<sup>15</sup> and by 'confronting traditional conceptions of tragedy with his own',<sup>16</sup> ended up being responsible for the *death* of tragedy. In Nietzsche's eyes, Euripides was actually ignorant of the true nature of the tragic. And his is the perspective that effectively still frames our understanding of tragedy today - a perspective, that is, from which the beginning of tragedy will always appear to be its *origin* and *not* its birth. If the spirit of our age originated, indeed, in Euripides *not* realizing the essence of the tragic, it is no wonder that we are *surprised* at the origin of tragedy, as Nietzsche observes. In that he comments on 'our own surprise'<sup>17</sup> at the tragic - his, it seems, included - he points to the fact that we still live in an age that is not receptive to the tragic because it depends in essence on *forgetting* the tragic truth. As long as our thinking stipulates the *denial* of tragic wisdom, we can contemplate the *origin* of tragedy but we will not grasp its birth; and hence we remain surprised at its inception. Similarly, Nietzsche notes our surprise at the origin of tragedy as he writes:

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<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, 'Die Geburt der Tragödie' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, III/1: *Die Geburt der Tragödie / Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, pp. 3-152 (p. 78).

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 59.

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 59.

<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 59.

The satyr, the Dionysiac chorist, lives in a world granted existence under the religious sanction of myth and ritual. That tragedy begins with him, that the Dionysiac wisdom of tragedy speaks through him, is for us a phenomenon just as surprising as the very origin of tragedy ...<sup>18</sup>

Again, his words imply that our age is not ready to understand the tragic. In this instance, however, 'origin', stands not for *Ursprung*, but for *Entstehung*,<sup>19</sup> which may, at least to the contemporary ear, sound a little more deliberate and controlled than *Ursprung*. In this sense it is only too fitting a word to describe how we of the dialectical age are approaching the question of the tragic and how we are, precisely for this reason, missing its essence. The word *Entstehung*, however, also has different connotations. According to the Grimms' dictionary, it can mean not only 'beginn', origin, but also 'abgang', exit, deficit, departure.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, Nietzsche's wording of the passage would imply that our approach to tragedy leaves us in the dark not only as to its birth but also as to its death. And as the word *Entstehung* comprises both meanings, it points to the fact that the two are actually connected. In Nietzsche's reading of Euripides, it certainly seems that it was his failure to understand the origin of the tragic which led to the demise of tragedy in his works. Our own ignorance of the birth of tragedy leaves us, in turn, also blind to its end at the hands of Euripides. In this light, Nietzsche's use of the term *Entstehung* in this context actually reflects on the essence of his understanding of the tragic. Indeed, if *Entstehung* counts amongst its meanings also 'abgang' - would this not imply that the misunderstanding of tragedy that we cultivate in our attempt to grasp its origins as *Entstehung* leads us not to the birth of tragedy but to a miscarriage?<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 38.

<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, 'Die Geburt der Tragödie' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, III/1: *Die Geburt der Tragödie / Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, pp. 3-152 (p. 51).

<sup>20</sup> Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, III. Band: *E-Forsche* (1862), pp. 634-635.

<sup>21</sup> *Abgang*: miscarriage, in: W. Scholze-Stubenrecht / J. B. Sykes et al (eds), *The Oxford-Duden German Dictionary*, revised edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), p. 37.





It is not only that Nietzsche always speaks of the *birth* and not the origin of tragedy when he speaks of tragedy proper; he is also consistent in that he reserves the imagery of birth for tragic art only. In this respect, his writing in *The Birth of Tragedy* is already every bit as precise as in his later years, even where this may not be immediately obvious. There are indeed a couple of occasions where Nietzsche, contrary to his customary usage of the terms, relates the word 'rebirth' to opera, which by his own reasoning pertains to Socratic art. He asks:

Is it conceivable that the music of opera, thoroughly externalized and incapable of reverence, should have been enthusiastically welcomed and cherished, as the rebirth, so to speak, of all true magic, by an age that had just produced the ineffably sublime and sacred music of Palestrina?<sup>22</sup>

In this instance, however, the terms are connected in the context of a *question* and a rhetorical question at that, and in this sense, their connection is actually drawn into question from the outset. Nonetheless, Nietzsche immediately qualifies his expression by adding that it is only '*so to speak*' that he considers opera as 'rebirth', acknowledging thus that he does *not* actually consider it in terms of a rebirth proper. And in this sense, the passage testifies not to a break with Nietzsche's usage of the terms but, in fact, to its precision. On the other occasion that Nietzsche uses the image of birth in reference to opera, he writes:

Opera is the offspring of theoretical man, the critical layman, not the artist: one of the most surprising facts in the history of all the arts. It was truly unmusical listeners who demanded that the words should be understood above all else; so that a rebirth of music could only occur when a way of singing was discovered in which the words would hold sway over counterpoint as a master holds sway over his servant.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 89.

<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 91.

In this case, it is not only Nietzsche's usage of the term 'rebirth' that seems at odds. In that he introduces opera as the offspring, *Geburt*,<sup>24</sup> of the theoretical man, he applies the imagery of birth not only to a 'theoretical' form of art but also to the theoretical man himself. Thus, no doubt, this excerpt contradicts Nietzsche's customary usage of the terms – unless opera is understood in line with Nietzsche's view not as a paragon but as the *degeneration* of art. If opera is in essence degenerate, Nietzsche's phrasing of this passage does not contradict his usage of the terms elsewhere; it highlights, rather, his understanding of opera as the creation of those who are essentially incapable of creation: as the *Geburt* and more precisely even as the *Missgeburt*, the monstrosity, brought forth by the inherently unfruitful dialecticians. These 'theoretical' men, Nietzsche proceeds, demanded a rebirth of music on the terms they specified and thus created the aberration that is opera. Again, it appears that the use of the word 'rebirth' runs counter to Nietzsche's usage of the term elsewhere. But in the sense that Nietzsche, writing in the subjunctive now, clearly presents a hypothetical argument that demonstrates its own absurdity, his use of the word 'rebirth' in reference to opera does not actually contradict his usage of the term; it merely reflects the absurdity of the scenario he describes. And it is, indeed, the phrasing of Nietzsche's argument that most readily betrays the absurdity of the dialectical man's demand for a rebirth of music – for is it not absurd to *demand* a birth? So alien, however, is the dialectical man to the concept of *Niederkunft* that he who still thinks in negation and in terms, incidentally, of master and slave, fails to realize that it is the essence of birth and rebirth that it cannot be demanded or plotted, that it happens *to* him and *despite* of him as well as because of him, and that it occurs, in this sense, tragically.

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<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche, 'Die Geburt der Tragödie' in Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, III/1: *Die Geburt der Tragödie / Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, pp. 3-152 (p. 119).

The closest Nietzsche comes in *The Birth of Tragedy* to spelling out that the link between birth and tragedy is an essential one is his statement that 'the idea of the birth of an "artistic Socrates" is itself a contradiction in terms'.<sup>25</sup> In the first instance, it is no doubt in the notion of an 'artistic Socrates' that Nietzsche perceives the contradiction. The phrasing of the sentence, however, suggests that the idea of the *birth* of an artistic Socrates presents as much of a contradiction. Read thus, Nietzsche's statement reveals that he is indeed thinking birth metaphysically, that is, as *Niederkunft* here; for the *biological* birth of Socrates hardly presents a contradiction. And as he suggests, thus, that the thought of *Niederkunft* is essentially contrary to the Socratic task, Nietzsche illustrates how it coincides in precisely this respect with the tragic.



In the sense that *The Birth of Tragedy* engages with the metaphysical thought of birth, it shows that Nietzsche was at the time already immersed in what is effectively his fundamental thought. And notwithstanding the fact that *Niederkunft* is the one formulation of his thought that he himself never clearly saw as such, his first published book shows that it is precisely as *Niederkunft* that his central thought first came to him. In this sense, it is actually *The Birth of Tragedy* which marks Nietzsche's first encounter with his fundamental thought, whereas his first mention of the eternal return in the summer of 1881 marks his *recognition* of the thought that had in one form or another been shaping his thinking for ten years. Now, Heidegger makes the case that

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<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 70.

when he thinks it for the first time, each thinker thinks his sole thought in its completion, though not yet in its full unfolding; that is, not yet in the scope and the dangerousness that always grow beyond it and must first be borne out.<sup>26</sup>

It seems, thus, that if Nietzsche first encounters his fundamental thought in *The Birth of Tragedy*, it is actually its configuration as *Niederkunft* which describes his thought in its entirety and not, as Heidegger suggests,<sup>27</sup> the thought of eternal return. Indeed, the thought of *Niederkunft* does not have 'the scope and the dangerousness' of the thoughts that come to Nietzsche later in his life; it seems positively benign compared to the thought of eternal return of the same, announced, quite fittingly, by a daemon, or the doctrine of the will to power. This conclusion certainly challenges Heidegger's view that Nietzsche first thinks his fundamental thought as eternal return on that summer's day in the Engadine, but in the sense that it actually follows from Heidegger's argument, it does not contradict his reading categorically. It seems, rather, that if Heidegger did not see Nietzsche's first encounter with his fundamental thought in *The Birth of Tragedy*, it is because his reading relies almost exclusively on Nietzsche's later material. This approach actually testifies to Heidegger's fidelity to Nietzsche's thinking, for Nietzsche's own verdict certainly advises against ascribing too much importance to *The Birth of Tragedy*. In his *Attempt at a Self-Criticism*, added to the new edition of the book in 1886, Nietzsche dismisses it as a work of youth, 'racked with every youthful defect for all its old man's problems';<sup>28</sup> over the years, however, he gradually makes his peace with it. Indeed, he no longer depicts his first work as a youthful folly when he writes in December 1888:

Very curious! For four weeks now I have understood my own writings – what is more, I appreciate them. In all seriousness, I never knew what they meant; I would be lying if I said that, except for the *Zarathustra*, they had impressed me. It is the mother with her child: perhaps she loves it, but in total ignorance of what

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<sup>26</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, III: The Will to Power as Knowledge and as Metaphysics*, p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, III: The Will to Power as Knowledge and as Metaphysics*, p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche, 'Attempt at a Self-Criticism' in: *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 3-12 (p. 5).

the child is. – Now I am absolutely convinced that everything has turned out well, from the beginning, – ... The day before yesterday I read the *Birth*: something indescribable, *profound*, tender, content ...<sup>29</sup>

At the point when he finally recognizes the full magnitude of his writings, Nietzsche illustrates his view of them in a metaphor of the mother and child: a metaphor, that is, which reveals more than shrouds the thought of *Niederkunft*. And as example of his new insight into the nature of his works he cites not *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, often considered, not least by Nietzsche himself, as the pinnacle of his *oeuvre*, or the plans for what was to be his *magnum opus*, *The Will to Power*; he cites his first work, *The Birth of Tragedy*. It is not a coincidence that he is looking back to the very beginning of his creative life, for as he finally grasps his thought in its entirety, he grasps it in the way that it first came to him: as the thought of *Niederkunft* and as tragedy. And if 'Nietzsche's retrospective and circumspective glances at his life are never anything else than prospective glances into his task',<sup>30</sup> as Heidegger suggests, the terms in which he looks back on his life here certainly betray his imminent task, his goal, his future: that he is to bring forth a tragic age.

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<sup>29</sup> 'Sehr curios! Ich verstehe seit 4 Wochen meine eigenen Schriften – mehr noch, ich schätze sie. Allen Ernstes, ich habe nie gewußt, was sie bedeuten; ich würde lügen, wenn ich sagen wollte, den Zarathustra ausgenommen, daß sie mir imponirt hätten. Es ist die Mutter mit ihrem Kinde: sie liebt es vielleicht, aber in vollkommener Stupidität darüber, was das Kind i s t . – Jetzt habe ich die absolute Überzeugung, daß Alles wohlgeraten ist, von Anfang an, –.... Ich las vorgestern die 'Geburt': etwas Unbeschreibliches, t i e f, zart, glücklich...'. Nietzsche to Heinrich Köselitz (22 December 1888) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/5: Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889, p. 545.

<sup>30</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, II: *The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 10.

### **The Metaphysics of *Niederkunft* as Tragedy**

Since its beginnings in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche's thinking has been a promise and an anticipation of a tragic age<sup>31</sup> – an age, that is, in which being is determined as tragedy. When we think Nietzsche's central thought, Heidegger explains,

... the tragic as such becomes the fundamental trait of beings. Viewed historically, this marks the beginning of the 'tragic age for Europe'.<sup>32</sup>

Heidegger refers here to the eternal return as Nietzsche's fundamental thought, but if the thought of *Niederkunft* is another configuration of the same thought, it is likewise connected to the tragic. Indeed, the thought of *Niederkunft* betrays its tragic essence much more readily than the thought of eternal return. If it is not usually recognized as tragedy, it is only because the West has to date never professed a great deal of philosophical interest in the act of giving birth. Even today, thinking of pregnancy and birth is largely confined to feminist discourses, although a truly philosophical account transcends the biological fact of birth as something pertaining strictly to the female experience. Johanna Oksala, for one, presents such an approach to thinking pregnancy and birth in the article 'What is Feminist Phenomenology? – Thinking birth philosophically'. Although Oksala, too, sets out from a feminist discourse, she suggests that the philosophical thinking of birth quickly exceeds this framework and challenges our philosophical tradition as a whole. Of the experience of giving birth, she writes:

First-person descriptions of giving birth often depict birth as an event ..., as an upheaval akin to being caught in a violent storm. In both, there is a cessation of

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 52.

<sup>32</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 28.

time, of intention and activity, or there is an alien intention, an intention of life. [...] The subject is wrenched from itself; instead of a constituting subject, in birth there is an upsurge of life beyond control or comprehension...<sup>33</sup>

In brief, giving birth constitutes an instance of human individuality being overcome by the forces of life; in this sense, it is an encounter with the Dionysiac and a veritable experience of the tragic as Nietzsche defines it. A similar picture emerges in Simone de Beauvoir's account of pregnancy and birth in *The Second Sex*, which remains one of the seminal texts on the subject. Pregnancy, de Beauvoir argues,

is above all a drama that is acted out within the woman herself. She feels it as at once an enrichment and an injury; the foetus is part of her body, and it is a parasite that feeds on it; she possesses it, and she is possessed by it; it represents the future and, carrying it, she feels herself vast as the world; but this very opulence annihilates her, she feels that she herself is no longer anything. A new life is going to manifest itself and justify its own separate existence, and she is proud of it; but she also feels herself tossed and driven, the plaything of obscure forces. It is especially noteworthy that the pregnant woman feels the immanence of her body at just the time when it is in transcendence; it turns upon itself in nausea and discomfort; it has ceased to exist for itself and thereupon becomes more sizeable than ever before. The transcendence of the artisan, of the man of action, contains the element of subjectivity; but in the mother-to-be the antithesis of subject and object ceases to exist; she and the child with which she is swollen make up together an equivocal pair overwhelmed by life. Ensnared by nature, the pregnant woman is plant and animal, a storehouse of colloids, an incubator, and egg; ... she is a human being, a conscious and free individual, who has become life's passive instrument.<sup>34</sup>

In de Beauvoir's reading, too, the experience of pregnancy and birth amounts to the annihilation of the woman's individuality and to her being thrown and immersed into life, 'the plaything of obscure forces'; it constitutes, in short, an encounter with the incessant forces of life and in this sense a tragic experience. De Beauvoir also points out that during pregnancy the woman's body is in a state of transcendence. In pregnancy, she discerns thus a

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<sup>33</sup> Johanna Oksala, 'What is Feminist Phenomenology? - Thinking Birth Philosophically', *Radical Philosophy*, 126 (July/August 2004), 16-22 (p. 19).

<sup>34</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997), pp. 512-513.

transcendence which is, contrary to the traditional Western concept of the transcendent, a bodily sensation and does not contradict but actually *affirms* the body's immanence. The transcendence of the pregnant body is a transcendence in and within the world; in this sense, it corresponds to the transcendent as it emerges in Nietzsche's thinking.<sup>35</sup> De Beauvoir contrasts this transcendence in pregnancy with the transcendence of the artisan which, she argues, contains an element of subjectivity in that the artisan, unlike the pregnant woman, has a *deliberate* effect on the world. Thus, however, the artisan transcends the world *in negation* for, as Kojève explains, 'to act is to transform what is real. And to transform what is real is to *negate* the given'.<sup>36</sup> But as a human being, the artisan is also part of the 'given' world himself; in negating the given, he ends up negating himself. The transcendence of the dialectical man – the artisan, the worker, the slave – is such that man comes to be regarded as a thing not only by the other but eventually even by himself. It is therefore not just the things around him that man experiences by way of their instrumentality, as Heidegger observes; ultimately, he also sees his fellow human beings and even himself as instrument, equipment, stuff.<sup>37</sup> There is here, however, an essential difference between man and woman, and Heidegger's notion of the instrumentality of the world does not apply to woman or take the feminine experience into account.<sup>38</sup> De Beauvoir argues that

[t]he world does not seem to woman 'an assemblage of implements' intermediate between her will and her goals, as Heidegger defines it; it is on the contrary something obstinately resistant, unconquerable; it is dominated by fatality and shot through with mysterious caprices.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of his Philosophical Activity*, p. 324.

<sup>36</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 54.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 97.

<sup>38</sup> Sara Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), p. 73.

<sup>39</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 609.



In essence, woman cannot negate the given to the same extent as man. It is not that she cannot work in the same way as man and have the same effect on the world as him. But however persistent she is in her negation of it, the world is always more than an instrument at her disposal. Accordingly, she is much more conscious than man of being not only in command of the given world but also being, in turn, overcome by it. And as she cannot negate the world to the same extent as man, she cannot negate *herself* to the same extent; thus, she is also more aware than man of being an instrument not just of her own will but of life itself. In this sense, woman is essentially more adverse than man to the negative transcendence of the dialectic, and more disposed than him to the *affirmative* transcendence in an overcoming of life that is not its cessation but its upsurge. Her different standing in life shapes her consciousness differently to man's and this distinction determines, in turn, the relationship between the sexes. De Beauvoir concludes that

[t]he female, to a greater extent than the male, is the prey of the species; and the human race has always sought to escape its specific destiny. The support of life became for man an activity and a project through the invention of the tool; but in maternity woman remained closely bound to her body, like an animal. It is because humanity calls itself in question in the matter of living – that is to say, values the reasons for living above mere life – that, confronting woman, man assumes mastery. Man's design is not to repeat himself in time: it is to take control of the instant and mould the future. It is male activity that in creating values has made of existence itself a value; this activity has prevailed over the confused forces of life; it has subdued Nature and Woman.<sup>40</sup>

Woman's standing in society depends, thus, on her position *vis-à-vis* the forces of nature, but it is not inherent in it, for it is not her position in life itself but the *interpretation* of it which determines her social standing. As long as the dialectical man creates values over and above life, woman is but the uncomfortable reminder that life cannot be entirely negated. As living proof of the futility of the dialectical project, she becomes the alienated and suppressed other. *Only* a dialectical age, however, interprets the fact that woman is subjected to nature

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<sup>40</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 97.

more than man such that it rates her less than him, for only a dialectical age is essentially opposed to life. A tragic age, by contrast, values the encounter with the Dionysiac forces of life as a metaphysical insight, and will rate woman's standing in life accordingly. Indeed, in a tragic age, woman is by the fact of her position in life better disposed to metaphysics than man.



In the sense that the experience of pregnancy and birth is one of being overcome by the forces of nature, it is an experience of the Dionysiac as Nietzsche describes it; thus, it is in essence tragic. And it seems, indeed, that the act of giving birth, the act of *Niederkunft*, is not just one tragic experience among many, but *the* tragic act *per se* – even if this does not correspond to the contemporary understanding of the tragic. Today, it is only an untimely death that we think of as being tragic. Our profoundly dialectical belief that there is no situation that cannot be amended and no fate that cannot be averted in and through work<sup>41</sup> makes us insensitive to the tragic truth of life. The only fact that even we of the dialectical age accept as inevitable is that of our death: that each and every man will have to die. The dialectical man can work at prolonging his life or he can take his own life, but he does not escape the fact of his death. No amount of dialectical work will change the fact that he has to die – and die prematurely, for every human death is in a sense premature<sup>42</sup> and therefore tragic. Despite all his efforts to the contrary, the dialectical man is aware that at the end of his existence, the eternal forces of life which he always denied will lay claim to him again, but he has practically convinced himself that his death is the *only* instance where he cannot avert the forces of nature. It is precisely this conviction that is reflected in the contemporary usage of

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<sup>41</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 66.

<sup>42</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 256.

the word 'tragic'. In truth, of course, even the dialectical man is regularly overcome by the forces of nature during his lifetime, albeit less so than woman. And crucially, woman experiences in the act of giving birth the forces of life as such, that is, as *life* and as the propagation of life, whereas man never encounters the forces of nature immediately. As long as he defines himself dialectically, man never experiences the forces of life *as such*; he works at negating them all throughout his life and even when he succumbs to them in the end, he only acknowledges them in the negative: on his deathbed, he interprets the eternal forces of nature as the very *absence* of life. In this sense, even the most obviously tragic experience in the life of man is obscured by the dialectic. Woman, on the other hand, has an immediate experience of the eternal forces of life regardless of the spirit of the age. In a dialectical age, it is indeed *only* in the act of giving birth that the nature of being appears *as such* - that is, as *life*; hence, it seems that the act of giving birth is the tragic act *per se*. And in this sense, Nietzsche's thought of *Niederkunft* actually describes an encounter with the forces of life that cannot be obscured and negated even in the dialectical age.



In the wake of Nietzsche's thinking, the dialectical age is gradually becoming aware of the tragic and woman's essential role in the tragic, but even today it seems that we acknowledge the tragic at best in absences and implications. As Derrida inquires into *The Gift of Death*, he does make the point that to give life is to give death, but he does not speak of birth any further. He argues that

[d]eath is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. My irreplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, 'given', one can say, by death. It is the same gift, the same source, ... and the same law.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 41.

Since the same clearly holds true of birth, it is remarkable that Derrida does not discuss birth in this context at all. Being born and giving birth, strictly speaking, also constitute events which nobody can undergo in the other's place; in this sense, birth speaks no less than death of someone's irreplaceability. The fact that Derrida omits this aspect altogether shows that his analysis is ultimately still grounded in a dialectical worldview. Derrida looks at death and not at life, and he still looks to god, to the altogether other and the one who is *opposed* to life, as the one who bestowed life and death upon him. *The Gift of Death* leaves out – or leaves open, at least – the question of giving life. It does not look into the possibility of living such that you have life bestowed upon you by woman, rather than death bestowed upon you by god – which would amount to a life without a god and a world which is in essence immanence and tragedy. On the few occasions that the question of woman arises, Derrida comments on her absence, but does not go beyond a simple statement of this fact. The tragic and woman's role in the tragic remains, thus, in Derrida's thinking at best a conspicuous absence.

Of the most influential commentators on Nietzsche, it is Bataille who furthest explores Nietzsche's thinking of the tragic. He recognizes that the human is perpetually torn between the forces of Dionysos and Apollo and that man – even the dialectical man – is never *entirely* opposed to the forces of life, for he regularly succumbs to them in sacrifice, sexuality and religious ecstasy.<sup>44</sup> Hence, Bataille is aware that the existence of the dialectical man in the negation of the world is condemned to failure and only propels him towards his death; and he also knows that god has in the wake of Nietzsche's thinking become a woman – a whore,

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Bataille, *Eroticism*, and *The Accursed Share*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone, 1991/1993).

in fact.<sup>45</sup> In this sense, Bataille certainly recognizes the implications of the tragic as they emerge in Nietzsche's thinking and at times also discusses the tragic explicitly,<sup>46</sup> but even though he clearly sees man's and woman's respective standing in relation to the forces of life, he does not elaborate on woman's particular role in the tragic. He looks at woman only in terms of eroticism and sexuality and barely touches on her role in reproduction; he does not think about birth in a philosophical sense and he does not recognize its tragic essence.

Heidegger, on the other hand, does not even raise the question of woman; in fact, he does not speak about sexual difference at all, as Derrida notes in an essay which he introduces with the words:

Of sex, one can readily remark, yes, Heidegger speaks as little as possible, perhaps he has never spoken of it. Perhaps he has never said anything, by that name or the names under which we recognize it, about the 'sexual-relation', 'sexual-difference', or indeed about 'man-and-woman'.<sup>47</sup>

In this very silence, however, Heidegger may well prove himself to be a faithful heir to Nietzsche, for it seems to be the silence of an unlikely intimate who cannot find the words for what he reads in Nietzsche's work. Derrida is, indeed, very careful to point out that it is not that Heidegger does not speak of sexual difference but that he does not *appear* to speak of it; thus, he states only that Heidegger does not speak of sexual difference in a way we would recognize. Heidegger, he argues,

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. Bataille, 'Mme Edwarda' in: *My Mother / Mme Edwarda / The Dead Man*, translated by Austryn Wainhouse (London: Marion Boyars, 1995), pp. 135-159.

<sup>46</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, II: *The History of Eroticism* (1993), p. 119.

<sup>47</sup> Derrida, 'Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference', translated by Ruben Bevezdivin, in: Kamuf (ed.), *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, pp. 378-402 (p. 380).

... apparently said nothing about sexuality by name in those places where the best educated and endowed 'modernity' would have fully expected it given its panoply of 'everything-is-sexual-and-everything-is-political-and-reciprocally' ...<sup>48</sup>

It is, however, the very fact that Heidegger does *not* speak of sexuality where we would expect him to which suggests that he thinks of sexual difference in the aftermath of Nietzsche's work. In thinking being as a whole such that it is defined as *Niederkunft*, Nietzsche effects a paradigmatic shift in our understanding of sexual difference, which has now become a *metaphysical* question. It seems, thus, that if Heidegger remains silent on the question of sexual difference, it is because he knows that it can no longer be addressed – or even posed – as it had been before Nietzsche. He knows that we can no longer speak of sexual difference in the way we used to and in those places where Derrida still half expects him to, for in Nietzsche's thinking the question of sexual difference has changed essentially. It is not just that the tragic age that Nietzsche heralds will value the experience of the Dionysiac as a true insight into the nature of being and will, therefore, appreciate woman's standing *vis-à-vis* the forces of life. In a tragic age, *all* human beings, irrespective of their biological sex, will know themselves to be prey to the forces of life and will recognize their metaphysical essence in creation, in bringing forth, in *Niederkunft*. In this sense, Nietzsche's thinking introduces an age which will, in philosophical terms, define all human beings as women.

### **Socrates, Faust, Bartleby: The Tragedy of the Dialecticians**

In Nietzsche's thinking, the question of sexual difference is not a question of biology but one of metaphysics; it bears not so much on gender relations as on the definition of the human

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<sup>48</sup> Derrida, 'Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference' in: Kamuf (ed.), *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, pp. 378-402 (p. 381).

essence. The dialectical age considers man to become truly human in and by his work; accordingly, it discerns more of a disposition towards a truly human existence in the working, world-and-life-negating *man* than in woman. For Nietzsche, on the other hand, man is truly human only when he is a creator and affirms life in bringing forth life. '[I]t shall be your curse', he warns the 'immaculate' men of dialectical knowledge,

... that you will never bring forth [*gebären*], even if you lie broad and pregnant on the horizon!<sup>49</sup>

It is precisely because they will never bring forth that the dialectical men will never be truly human in Nietzsche's eyes: such is their 'curse'. In the German original, Nietzsche does not even use the more neutral expression 'to bring forth', but actually says 'to give birth', *gebären*. In this sense, his wording of the argument accentuates, if anything, that it is only as woman that he considers man to be truly human. This is not to say that he aims to obliterate the male consciousness. In the aftermath of Nietzsche's thinking, men and women will of course coexist as they always have done. Whilst the dialectical age, however, perceives the male situation in life to lend itself more to a truly human existence, Nietzsche thinks the human such that it is the female situation which facilitates a truly human life; but both perspectives persist in either age, just as the tragic and the dialectic coexist in every life and in every age. Thus, Nietzsche traces the roots of the dialectical culture to the tragic age of ancient Greece, as he observes that

[t]he Greeks knew and felt the fears and horrors of existence: in order to be able to live at all they had to interpose the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians between themselves and those horrors.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 145-146 and 'Also Sprach Zarathustra' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/1, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, pp. 153-154.

<sup>50</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 22.

In the need to avoid the gaze into the true nature of being, Nietzsche describes the dialectic in its nascent form as it arises out of the tragic. Dialectics originates as a method for *not* looking into the essence of things; it amounts to a refined complication of thinking which averts the realization of the true nature of being. And in the sense that it thinks being such that it does *not* think it, a dialectical age is an age of metaphysics.<sup>51</sup> It is, thus, also essentially unaware of its own essence and of its inherent contradictions: for metaphysics is blind to the blindness of metaphysics. This is the *tragic* aspect of the dialectical age – and the tragedy of the dialectical man, who, however hard he works at escaping his fate, is always caught out by it in the end. He cannot see that his incessant efforts at negating the world are ultimately futile and that he ends up negating himself in the process; he does not realize that his actions propel him only towards his demise. The tragedy of the dialectic unfolds as the history of the West; and its stages are epitomized in the fate of Socrates, Faust and Bartleby the scrivener.

Socrates is, even at a cursory glance, a profoundly tragic figure. For all his love of wisdom, he can only conclude that he knows nothing at all – and he dies for this insight. In the fate of its founding father, the dialectic reveals thus already its pitfalls, and more clearly perhaps than ever since. As it does *not* look at the essence of being, however, the dialectical age proceeds unaware of its own essence and its inherent contradictions, and builds its wisdom on this initial ignorance. And indeed, the extent to which Socrates grounds his philosophy and therefore the Western tradition as a whole on a *refusal* of knowledge is nothing short of remarkable. In his lectures on *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, Nietzsche says of Socrates:

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. Heidegger's argument that '[b]eing itself necessarily remains unthought in metaphysics'. Heidegger, 'Nihilism as Determined by the History of Being' in *Nietzsche, IV: Nihilism*, pp. 197-250 (p. 211).



Astronomy he considered among the divine secrets, which would be nonsense to investigate. There is indeed advantage to knowing the motion of the celestial bodies as a leader of sea and land journeys and nightwatches – one may learn this much from navigators and watchmen – but everything beyond that is wasting valuable time. Geometry is necessary insofar as it puts everyone in the position properly to carry out buying, selling, and measuring land – a man with normal attentiveness learns this without a teacher – but silly and worthless if it leads to the study of juxtaposed mathematical diagrams.

He dispenses entirely with physics: 'Do these researchers think that they know human relations sufficiently that they begin to mix into the divine? Do they think that they are in the position to provoke wind and rain in any way they want? Or will they content themselves only with idle curiosity? They should remember how the greatest men diverge in their results and present opinions just as the mad do'. Socrates never came to know physics ... Likewise, he thinks nothing of art; he grasped only its practical and agreeable aspects, and he belongs among the despisers of tragedy.<sup>52</sup>

This account of the foundations of Western philosophy certainly betrays the fact that the dialectical quest for absolute knowledge rests essentially on a determined ignorance. With the first dialectician, the tragedy of the dialectic is set out: for Socrates' life and thought illustrates at the very beginning of the dialectical age already the circumstances of its inevitable downfall.

It is only centuries later, however, that the dialectical age begins to suspect something of its essence, most prominently in the case of Faust, who is the first scholar to realize the futility of dialectical knowledge in modern times. Thus, Nietzsche remarks:

How unintelligible to a true Greek must *Faust* appear, the modern man of culture, intelligible in himself, as he storms unsatisfied through all the faculties, devoting himself to magic and the devil because of his urge for knowledge. We need only compare him with Socrates to see that modern man has begun to sense the limitations of the Socratic delight in knowledge, and yearns for a shore from the wide and barren sea of knowledge.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Nietzsche, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, translated by Greg Whitlock (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), pp. 143-144.

<sup>53</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 86.

In Faust's plight, the dialectical man begins almost despite himself to see the truth of the dialectic. It is in this sense that Faust is a tragic figure: for in the vacuity of his knowledge, he is beginning to recognize something of the truth of existence. As opposed to Socrates, who knew that he knew nothing but still delighted in knowledge, Faust has grown disillusioned with knowledge itself and turns instead to magic and to the devil. He has realized that the truth of existence is not to be found by means of 'grey theory'<sup>54</sup> but only in life itself; indeed, this eminent scholar professes himself to feel truly human only when he mingles in the village festivities *Without the City-Gate*.<sup>55</sup> And yet, Nietzsche makes of Faust as much, if not more, of a mockery than he does of Socrates. 'Faust, the tragedy of recognition?', he teases, 'Really? I *laugh* at Faust'.<sup>56</sup> He is, however, never just poking innocent fun at Faust, for his mockery always harbours a poignant diagnosis of Faust's position; thus, as he mimics the chorus at the end of the second part of *Faust*:<sup>57</sup>

Dedicated to All Creators	[ <i>Allen Schaffenden geweiht</i>
Inseparable from this world	<i>Welt-Unabtrennliche</i>
Let us be!	<i>Laßt uns sein!</i>
The Eternally-Masculine	<i>Das Ewig-Männliche</i>
Draws us in.	<i>Zieht uns hinein.</i> <sup>58</sup> ]

As he dedicates these lines to 'all creators', Nietzsche speaks here to all that bring forth and in this sense to all those who are metaphysically speaking women, and he suggests that it is

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Parts I & II*, translated by Albert G. Latham (London: Dent & Sons, 1908), p. 91.

<sup>55</sup> Goethe, *Faust: Parts I & II*, p. 43.

<sup>56</sup> 'Faust, die Tragödie der Erkenntniß? Wirklich? Ich lache über Faust'. Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VII/1: *Nachgelassene Fragmente: Juli 1882-Winter 1883/84*, p. 102.

<sup>57</sup> 'All things corruptible / Are but reflection. / Earth's insufficiency / Here finds perfection. / Here the ineffable / Wrought is with love. / The Eternal-Womanly / Draws us above.' Goethe, *Faust: Parts I & II*, p. 342; from the German: 'Alles Vergängliche / Ist nur ein Gleichnis; / Das Unzulängliche, / Hier wird's Ereignis; / Das Unbeschreibliche, / Hier ist's getan; / Das Ewig-Weibliche / Zieht uns hinan'. Goethe, 'Faust: Der Tragödie zweiter Teil', in: *Werke*, III: *Dramatische Dichtungen, Erster Band* (Hamburg: Christian Wegner, 1957), pp. 146-364 (p. 364).

<sup>58</sup> Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VII/3: *Nachgelassene Fragmente: Herbst 1884-Herbst 1885* (1974), p. 5.

precisely the eternally-masculine which draws us towards this state of being. The parody serves, thus, not only to highlight Nietzsche's own position in contradistinction to Faust's striving for pointless knowledge; it also makes a general statement about the relationship between the tragic and the dialectic. The passage that Nietzsche refers to suggests in the original version that the eternally-feminine draws us upwards, out of this world and into the transcendence that is the proper position of the philosopher in the dialectical age. In this sense, Nietzsche's parody points not only to the contradictions but also to the reciprocity between the tragic and the dialectic. The dialectical man, who is determined by his aim to negate the world, is in essence *man*. His ultimate incentive, however, is the eternally-feminine, for he strives to negate precisely that part of himself which will always fall prey to the forces of life. As such, the eternally-feminine is the goal and the end of the dialectical man. Conversely, the eternally-masculine, that is, man's eternal negation of himself, is the inherent crux of the dialectic and the reason for its inevitable downfall; in this sense, the eternally-masculine is, indeed, the force that propels us towards a tragic age which will define the human as creator and in this sense as woman. In Faust's disillusionment with knowledge, the West has no doubt taken a significant step towards the age that Nietzsche heralds. If Nietzsche mocks him nonetheless, it is because he remains even in his criticism of the dialectic a dialectician at heart. Although he can no longer share Socrates' enthusiasm about knowledge, is still driven by a quest to understand, to rationalize and to come to terms with the world. He has realized the vacuity of his own knowledge, but he has not given up on other ways of acquiring knowledge or ruled out the possibility of another truth about the world. The fact that he dispenses with his own method, however, and looks for the truth elsewhere, and indeed all his probing and negotiating, only make Faust's thinking all the more dialectical in essence. It is in this sense that Faust's fate shows the plight – and the truth – of every dialectician: for whatever the dialectical man apprehends as the truth, it is always

the opposite and in all his questioning, he only perpetuates the negation at the heart of the dialectic. Ultimately, whatever he does, he still acts and therefore negates. In his quest for ever more mastery over the world, the dialectical man must therefore eventually negate himself: he must *cease* to act. This spells of course his death, but such is the impasse of the dialectical man that he ceases to negate himself only when he is no longer. At its culmination, the tragedy of the dialectician is the tragedy of Herman Melville's 'Bartleby'.

Bartleby the scrivener eschews every 'yes' or 'no' and reacts to every stimulus with the words 'I would prefer not to'. He has nothing 'ordinarily human'<sup>59</sup> about him and resembles not so much a man as a ghost.<sup>60</sup> Eventually he ceases whatever little activity he used to undertake and dies through his inactivity – because he 'preferred not to' eat. In his active indecision, Bartleby succeeds Faust in the philosophical tradition of the West, for where Faust was merely pessimistic, he is a nihilist proper – and as such also the more accomplished dialectician. Hegel may dismiss the nihilist who dies because he is no longer 'an agent of historical evolution',<sup>61</sup> as Kojève points out, but would it not seem that the nihilist plays a role in the historical change of the world, even if he dies, insofar as his death, his suicide, is one last *action* on his part? On several occasions towards the end of his life, Bartleby repeats that he 'would prefer not to make any change',<sup>62</sup> but precisely in no longer striving to change anything about the world, he *does* make a change, for his death, though seemingly passive, is in fact a conscious and wilful act. The only way for Bartleby to achieve his wish of not making any more changes would have been to live forever – as is indeed the *ultimate* aspiration of the dialectic, which under the pretence of change strives for eternity. It

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<sup>59</sup> Herman Melville, 'Bartleby' in: *The Standard Edition of the Works*, x: *The Piazza Tales* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), pp. 19-65 (p. 30).

<sup>60</sup> Melville, 'Bartleby' in: *The Standard Edition of the Works*, x: *The Piazza Tales*, pp. 19-65 (p. 55).

<sup>61</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 54.

<sup>62</sup> Melville, 'Bartleby' in: *The Standard Edition of the Works*, x: *The Piazza Tales*, pp. 19-65 (p. 58).

is in this sense that Bartleby's death illustrates the paradox of the dialectic. On the one hand, it is clearly a dialectical action that changes the world; on the other, it *ends* Bartleby's existence as a dialectician and returns him to the eternal forces of life. And yet, in this respect, too, it is essentially a dialectical act, for the dialectical man works ultimately only towards his death. It seems, thus, that Bartleby's story puts him amongst those who Nietzsche praises for willing their own downfall,<sup>63</sup> although he generally dislikes nihilists and suicides and the 'preachers of death'.<sup>64</sup> In negating his dialectical existence, however, Bartleby rejects the *denial* of life that it amounts to and succumbs of his own volition to the forces of life again. In this sense, his tragic end illustrates the ambivalence of the dialectical death which Nietzsche felt so keenly, particularly in Zarathustra's speeches *Of the Preachers of Death* and *Of Voluntary Death*. In principle, Nietzsche objects to those who advocate death and wish to die, but he celebrates their death nonetheless as the dawning of a new age. And it is, indeed, not only in this sense that he appreciates the pessimists and the nihilists. He actually credits them with a metaphysical insight, for he knows that if dialectical men cease to act, it is a sign that they have seen the fallacy of the dialectic. 'This', he explains,

is something that Dionysiac man shares with Hamlet: both have truly seen to the essence of things, they have *understood*, and action repels them; for their action can change nothing in the eternal essence of things, they consider it ludicrous or shameful that they should be expected to restore order to the chaotic world. Understanding kills action, action depends on a veil of illusion – this is what Hamlet teaches us, not the stock interpretation of Hamlet as a John-a-dreams who, from too much reflection, from an excess of possibilities, so to speak, fails to act. Not reflection, not that! – True understanding, insight into the terrible truth, outweighs every motive for action, for Hamlet and Dionysiac man alike.<sup>65</sup>

And, indeed, for Bartleby the scrivener: he, too, ceases to act because he has seen into the essence of things. Even if, as a dialectician, he does not experience the tragic truth *as such*, he

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<sup>63</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>64</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 71-73.

<sup>65</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 39.

can see the essence of being *in the negative*. He recognizes the truth of the dialectic in its shortcomings, in its pitfalls, in its irrelevance to life – and there could hardly be a better place for this insight than the Dead Letter Office where he used to work. The more a dialectician sees of the truth of the dialectic – which is always artefact, fabrication, untruth – the closer he is to understanding the tragic truth; in this sense, Bartleby is closer to the tragic than Faust or Socrates, although he is, by the same token, also the more accomplished dialectician. And this is his tragedy: Bartleby has seen something of the truth of the dialectic and negates it now to the point of his own death, but in this very death he still *negates* the negation that is the dialectic – and in this sense he ultimately remains true to the dialectical formula. Adorno identifies as the first principle of the dialectic that it equates the negation of the negation with positivity.<sup>66</sup> In this light, putting a positive slant on the death of the dialectical man would essentially still be dialectical reasoning. At the end of the dialectical age, however, it seems that this first assumption of the dialectic is no longer just its flawed axiom. The dialectical man works in order to change the world according to his idea of it, and in the sense that the basic ‘idea’ of the dialectical age is that the negation of negation equals positivity, he works to change the world such that this initially flawed axiom becomes true. And at the end of the dialectical age, he has indeed effected a situation where the negation of the negation becomes something positive – even if it is only in his own death. In the history of the dialectic, Kojève explains,

it was not the (erroneous) discourse that changed in order to conform to given Being ...; it was that Being that was transformed in order to conform to the discourse. The action which transforms the given real so as to make true a human error – that is, a discourse that was in disagreement with this given – is called *Work*.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 158.

<sup>67</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, pp. 188-189.

In the sense that the dialectical man strives to change the world according to his initially fictitious idea that the negation of the negation should be something positive, the dialectical age aims, for all its inherent negativity, above all for something positive to come out of the dialectic. It is, indeed, the unshaken belief that something positive will come from his work that spurs the dialectical man into action – and into tragedy. This is, no doubt, Socrates' belief, when he lets himself be killed; it is Faust's, when he lets the other, the woman, be killed, and it is Bartleby's, when he lets himself kill himself.

It is the tragedy of the dialectical man that he is always already condemned to death and cannot, for all his efforts, avert his fate; in fact, all his efforts at escaping his fate only propel him further towards it. All dialecticians, from Socrates, who dies because he believes that there is something more important than this world, to Bartleby, who dies because he has realized that there is nothing other than this world, are driven by the belief that they can master their fate in the eternal course of life. The dialectical age does, indeed, go to great length to sustain this view, but for all its obscurantism it can never shield the nature of being entirely. There always remains a sense of tragedy in the thought of the dialecticians – and there always remains the question of woman. In the story of Bartleby, however, Derrida is struck by the distinct absence of woman. He observes that 'Bartleby ... doesn't make a single allusion to anything feminine whatsoever, even less to anything that could be construed as a figure of woman',<sup>68</sup> and takes this to be a point which distinguishes the story from tragedy, where 'woman is present, her place is central'.<sup>69</sup> But even if woman is largely absent from the story of Bartleby, it seems that she actually plays a central part in its unfolding. The scrivener enacts his death in the conscious surrender to the eternal forces of life; thus, he works at becoming, metaphysically speaking, woman and he dies in order to become woman. In the

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<sup>68</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 76.

<sup>69</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 76.

biological sense, woman is no doubt conspicuously absent from Bartleby's story; but in the metaphysical sense, she is actually its driving force, for the story of Bartleby is the story of the last of the dialecticians and the man who takes the dialectical quest for positivity to its conclusion in woman.



Just as there is in all dialectics an element of tragedy, the tragic always conveys a sense of imminent dialectics. Nietzsche's account of tragic art certainly illustrates how the tragic harbours a potential for dialectics, in the sense that he discerns in tragic art the play, the conflict and the opposition of two forces – the Apolline and the Dionysiac. He explains that

[t]hese two different tendencies walk side by side, usually in violent opposition to one another, inciting one another to ever more powerful births, perpetuating the struggle of the opposition only apparently bridged by the word 'art'; until, finally, by a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic 'will', the two seem to be coupled, and in this coupling they seem at last to beget the work of art that is as Dionysiac as it is Apolline – Attic tragedy.<sup>70</sup>

In their perpetual interplay, it seems almost as if the relationship between these two forces could pertain to the order of the dialectic. The crucial point, however, is that Nietzsche thinks the conflict of the Dionysiac and the Apolline in tragic art such that no one of the two forces ever gains the upper hand for good; the conflict is never annihilated, never superseded and never taken to another level. And as long as it recurs in forever the same way, with no one force gaining a lasting advantage, the relationship between the two powers is essentially *not* dialectical. Indeed, the relationship between the forces of life actually remains unchanged throughout the ages; it is only people's interpretation of it that varies in the course of history. In this sense, the tragic awareness of the conflict at the heart of life

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<sup>70</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 14.



precedes the dialectic – and will also succeed it. The dialectic, by contrast, purports to free man of the grip of life; and to this effect, the dialectician has to deny his knowledge of the Dionysiac and convince himself that in the conflict of the forces the Apolline has now won the upper hand. As the interplay of the two forces proceeds, however, as always, the dialectical attempt at denying the Dionysiac must lead to ever greater absurdities; and rather than providing man with an insight into the nature of being, it removes him ever further from it. Ultimately, the dialectic cannot altogether deny the existence of two contradicting forces even by its own logic, and its fundamental reliance on opposition readily reveals the absurdity of its aim for totality. Hence, it harbours the *illusion* that the forces of life could be reconciled into one universal power and that what it likes to call evil *could* be defeated, but it only ever pictures this in the future and in another world. Indeed, Christianity – the dialectics or the ‘Platonism for “the people”’<sup>71</sup> – is only too aware that it has not yet defeated the devil, even if it claims that this aim can ultimately be achieved. At the time of Goethe’s *Faust*, however, the Christian relationship between god and the devil has already changed fundamentally. In the *Prologue in Heaven*, god and the devil are hardly depicted as serious opponents any more; they get on fabulously and enjoy their game with Faust. It does not seem that Faust’s fate, whatever the outcome, will have a lasting impact on their relationship; theirs is, precisely, a game that could be played over and over again. In the days of *Bartleby the scrivener*, god and the devil do not actually exist any more. At the height of the dialectic, this antagonism is resolved and superseded – *aufgehoben*. Bartleby’s fate is in the hands of his fellow human beings, and in particular in the hands of his employer, who never appears to be anything but a rational and humane man and yet, by his seemingly well-meaning actions, propels Bartleby further towards his demise. In his employer, Bartleby faces the man who has become god and the god who has become man – and who is, thus,

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<sup>71</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 32.

also the devil set on his ruin. At the end of the dialectical age, there are, despite all efforts to the contrary, still both forces at work. The distinction between god and the devil may now appear to be resolved in man, but ultimately, life is still determined in the balance of the two opposing forces that constitute the basis of tragedy.

The tragic and the dialectic coincide to a certain extent in every age of human history, but the *interpretation* of the nature of being that defines an age characterizes it as tragic or dialectical in spirit. Thus, Nietzsche usually ascribes philosophy and tragedy to different ages, delineated by Socratic thought and again by his own, which marks the end of philosophy and the rebirth of tragedy. On one occasion, however, he equates the end of philosophy with the *end* of tragedy and suggests that every philosophy is 'in its inception a long tragedy'.<sup>72</sup> This remark may be at odds with his usage of the terms elsewhere, but it seems that Nietzsche indicates, thus, that dialectical thought will eventually also lead to the realization of the tragic and therefore to the truth that it denied so ardently. In this sense, his comment highlights the intricate relationship between the tragic and the dialectic, which actually remains in either age arcane. The dialectical age denies, above all, the tragic truth and the fact that its own reasoning leads to tragedy. And the tragic age, in turn, denies its potential for dialectics. The tragic truth depends, indeed, very much on its claim to eternity and crumbles at the possibility of lasting change. The 'consolation ... with which ... every true tragedy leaves us'<sup>73</sup> - that is, the knowledge that life is indestructible and remains forever the same - rests on the premise that the world can *not* be changed permanently. The claim of the dialectic, however, is precisely that it can; and this is the threat it poses to the tragic age. Tragic wisdom therefore denies the dialectical project, just as dialectical knowledge, in turn, denies the tragic truth. In his remark that '[e]very philosophy also

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<sup>72</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 57.

<sup>73</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 39.

conceals a philosophy',<sup>74</sup> Nietzsche highlights, thus, the essence of the relationship between the tragic and the dialectic as one of mutual dependence and mutual denial.



The intricate relationship between the tragic and the dialectic certainly accounts for the fact that Nietzsche feels himself to have been close - and too close - to Hegel when he first thought his fundamental thought in *The Birth of Tragedy*. It is not a coincidence that he sees Hegel's proximity more clearly here than in his later writings. *The Birth of Tragedy* and the *Phenomenology of Spirit* are the two thinkers' first works, and despite their authors' later concern that they are unsophisticated works of youth,<sup>75</sup> it is in these early works that they think their fundamental thoughts in their entirety. At this stage in their respective development, it is more apparent than ever again that Hegel and Nietzsche approach the same thought. In the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel announces that his task is

[t]o help bring philosophy closer to the form of Science, to the goal where it can lay aside the title 'love of knowledge' and be *actual* knowing.<sup>76</sup>

In the sense that he aspires to the *end* of philosophy as the love of wisdom and as it has been hitherto, his task appears to be the same as Nietzsche's. And indeed, as Hegel anticipates the end of philosophy, his language abounds in the terminology of *Niederkunft*, just as Nietzsche's does in *The Birth of Tragedy*. '[I]t is not difficult to see', he writes,

... that ours is a birth-time and a period of transition to a new era. Spirit has broken with the world it has hitherto inhabited and imagined, and is of a mind to

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<sup>74</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 216.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. J. N. Findlay, 'Foreword', in: G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. v-xxx (p. v); and Nietzsche, 'Attempt at a Self-Criticism' in: *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 3-12 (p. 5).

<sup>76</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 3.

submerge it in the past, and in the labour of its own transformation. Spirit is indeed never at rest but always engaged in moving forward. But just as the first breath drawn by a child after its long, quiet nourishment breaks the gradualness of merely quantitative growth – there is a qualitative leap, and the child is born – so likewise the Spirit in its formation matures slowly and quietly into its new shape, dissolving bit by bit the structure of its previous world, whose tottering state is only hinted at by isolated symptoms.<sup>77</sup>

The fact that Hegel, quite contrary to his habit, speaks here in the terms and the images of childbirth shows the extent to which his thinking anticipates the final destiny of the dialectic and its end in the thought of *Niederkunft*. Indeed, even the very first image that Hegel employs to illustrate the dialectical nature of being – the image of the bud and the blossom – actually speaks also of the tragic and of *Niederkunft*. Hegel writes:

The bud disappears in the bursting-forth of the blossom, and one might say that the former is refuted by the latter; similarly, when the fruit appears, the blossom is shown up in its turn as a false manifestation of the plant, and the fruit now emerges as the truth of it instead. These forms are not just distinguished from one another, they also supplant one another as mutually incompatible. Yet at the same time their fluid nature makes them moments of an organic unity in which they not only do not conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole.<sup>78</sup>

The image of the bud and the blossom, however, not only illustrates the dialectical process from one state to the other that Hegel describes; it also shows that underneath all the dialectical changes life itself lies unperturbed and remains in essence the same. In this sense, Hegel's illustration of the dialectical mutability of the world also points to its primordial tragic constancy. And in the bud and the blossom, Hegel actually chooses an example which could likewise be described as an act of *Niederkunft*; thus, he betrays how close he comes to Nietzsche's thought. As Hegel speaks from the point of view of absolute knowledge, however, he contemplates the bud and the blossom from a perspective where their transformation does not appear as *Niederkunft*. From Hegel's point of view, the bud

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<sup>77</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 2.

disappears in the blossom and is refuted by it, but from the point of view of life, the bud gives birth to the blossom, which in turn brings forth the fruit. And yet, even Hegel's position in its own right reveals something of the tragic. As a philosopher, he looks at being in retrospect, and in the futurity of this position alone, there is a sense of the tragic: a notion that everything has been and will be repeated as it is in all eternity. Again, Hegel's thinking betrays how close he comes to anticipating Nietzsche's fundamental thought. And indeed, when Nietzsche later says of *The Birth of Tragedy* that 'it smells offensively Hegelian'<sup>79</sup> – '*sie riecht anstößig Hegelisch*'<sup>80</sup> – it seems that he acknowledges not only the fact that his first book engages with Hegel more than the rest of his work. The word *anstößig* and the corresponding noun *Anstoß* – like the English terms 'repulsive' and 'repulsion' – denote not only offence or disgust but can also describe an impulse. In this sense, Nietzsche's remark about *The Birth of Tragedy* is the singular occasion where he acknowledges Hegel as the departing point of his thinking and as its impetus.

### **'The trees have nothing to teach me': Beyond the Anthropomorphism of Being**

As Nietzsche thinks his fundamental thought for the first time in *The Birth of Tragedy*, he is for the first time confronted with his task in its entirety. Indeed, the analysis of the forces of life that he undertakes as his first published work describes his standing in the history of philosophy and his philosophical project at least as precisely as his later works. Nietzsche, A. R. Orage argues, believes that he 'would transform Europe, and deliver men's minds from the dull oppression of Apollo'.<sup>81</sup> In this sense, Orage, whose insight into Nietzsche's position

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<sup>79</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 48.

<sup>80</sup> Nietzsche, 'Ecce Homo' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 253-372 (p. 308).

<sup>81</sup> A. R. Orage, *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Dionysian Spirit of the Age* (London: Foulis, 1914), p. 41.

is second to none at the time, recognizes in the conflict between the Apolline and the Dionysiac the question at the heart of Nietzsche's task. He writes:

Sworn deadly enemy of Apollo as Dionysos might be, could Apollo really live without him? Might not Dionysos, the eternal foe, be also the eternal saviour of Apollo? The question was afterwards put by Nietzsche in a myriad of forms. The whole of his work may be said, indeed, to be no less than the raising of this terrible interrogation mark. He divined and stated the problem for modern Europe as it had been stated for ancient Greece. He asked Europe the question which Greece had already asked herself, and which Greece had magnificently answered. For the answer of Greece is recorded in her Tragic Mysteries. In Greek tragic drama the answer of the Greek mind to the momentous question is a splendid affirmative. Not Apollo alone; not Dionysos alone; but Apollo *and* Dionysos. – What will be Europe's reply?<sup>82</sup>

This is the awe-inspiring question that Nietzsche's thinking presents for all of us at every moment to answer. In his discussion of the Apolline and the Dionysiac in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche is no doubt already confronted with this question, but at the time he does not yet mention his task explicitly. He introduces the book as a study of ancient Greece and does not relate it to his own task in the history of thought. Even in retrospect, he treads very carefully in judging its significance for his future *oeuvre*. The closest he comes to tracing his first realization of his task to *The Birth of Tragedy* is an unpublished note, which reads:

Very early in my life I took the question of the relation of *art* to *truth* seriously: even now I stand in holy dread in the face of this discordance. My first book was devoted to it. *The Birth of Tragedy* believes in art on the background of another belief – that it is *not possible to live with truth*, that the 'will to truth' is already a symptom of degeneration.<sup>83</sup>

In the question of the relationship between art and truth, Nietzsche recognizes the question that has preoccupied him since the very beginning of his philosophical life, namely, the question of the relationship between the two principal forces of life. In *The Birth of Tragedy*,

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<sup>82</sup> Orage, *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Dionysian Spirit of the Age*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>83</sup> Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VIII/3: *Nachgelassene Fragmente: Anfang 1888-Anfang Januar 1889* (1972), p. 296; translation as quoted in: Heidegger, *Nietzsche, I: The Will to Power as Art*, p. 74.

he argues that the Greeks needed the beauty of Apolline art in order to endure the truth of life. The lives of the founding fathers of Western civilization illustrate, thus, that art is the first requisite of a human life, that it is *essential* to man and belongs to the core of his being. Accordingly, Nietzsche concludes that it is 'only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*',<sup>84</sup> and that 'art - ... *not* morality - is ... the properly *metaphysical* activity of man'.<sup>85</sup> And as art is essentially creation, Nietzsche's first major work already reveals that he thinks man such that he is truly human only in creating, in bringing forth, in *Niederkunft*, and in this sense as woman. Although this notion of the human emerges throughout Nietzsche's writing, it is never explicit; in fact, Nietzsche seems to be at pains to emphasize that he is opposed to a 'woman's aesthetic'.<sup>86</sup> '[O]ne ought not', he notes, 'demand of the artist, who gives, that he should become a woman - that he should receive'.<sup>87</sup> This juxtaposition of woman and the artist certainly seems to be at odds with Nietzsche's notion of their essential kinship as creators, but it does not contradict it categorically. Even the fact that Nietzsche characterizes woman in this instance not as bringing forth but as receiving does not undermine her essence as the human being defined in *Niederkunft*, for she is, indeed, destined to bringing forth only because she receives the given more readily than man. And similarly, the artist is able to create because he is in the first instance *receptive* to the tragic truth of life, which he brings to light in his art. In this sense, Nietzsche's juxtaposing of woman and the artist betrays not an inconsistency in his understanding but shows, indeed, that in its manifestation as *Niederkunft*, Nietzsche thinks his fundamental thought in its entirety, but not in its full unfolding.



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<sup>84</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 32.

<sup>85</sup> Nietzsche, 'Attempt at a Self-Criticism' in: *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 3-12 (p. 7).

<sup>86</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 429.

<sup>87</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 429.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche reads in ancient Greek art the essence of the tragic age and establishes, thus, that art is the truly metaphysical activity of man, which determines the nature of being as a whole and defines the spirit of an age – whether or not the age actually acknowledges its metaphysical quality. Indeed, Jean-François Lyotard's inquiry into *The Postmodern Condition* shows that there is a fundamental connection between the art and the essence of the dialectical age, even though the dialectic denies the metaphysical aspect of art. Lyotard, to be sure, does not discuss the metaphysical quality of art explicitly, but in the sense that he reads in different forms of art the changing spirit of the age, it is, no doubt, implicit in his work.<sup>88</sup> As he compares the 'fantasy to seize reality'<sup>89</sup> that he discerns in realist art with the terrorsome demand for unity, simplicity and totality inherent in Enlightenment reason, his argument implies, conversely, that the perspective developed by the artists of the Italian *quattrocento* reveals the essence of the dialectical age. In modern works of art, by contrast, Lyotard reads the "'lack of reality" of reality',<sup>90</sup> which points to a significant change in the essence of the age, even if Lyotard's distinction is not primarily a chronological one. If modern art represents a lack of reality, if it represents 'the fact that the unrepresentable exists'<sup>91</sup> and shows the unrepresentable as the 'missing contents',<sup>92</sup> it grants an insight into the essence of the age, which thinks being such that 'thinking ... always passes over Being itself in

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<sup>88</sup> To read into Lyotard's text a more fundamental connection than he himself makes between the essence of the age and the art it produces is not, incidentally, to agree with Fredric Jameson, who, in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* appears to make this connection much more explicitly. For Jameson, however, this connection is not essential but contingent upon circumstances of politics, economics and culture. And unlike Lyotard's, Jameson's account does not even indicate a growing sensitivity of the age to the metaphysical character of art, on the contrary; for Jameson, art remains very much an instrument at the hands of the capitalists, politicians and pedagogues. Cf. Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' in: Thomas Docherty: *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 62-92.

<sup>89</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 82.

<sup>90</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 77.

<sup>91</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 78.

<sup>92</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 81.



thought, not as an oversight, but in such a way that it does not enter into Being as such, into what is questionable about its truth'.<sup>93</sup> In this sense, Lyotard's reading of the changes in artistic expression in the West reveals the changing spirit of an age that is becoming increasingly aware of its dialectical essence and of the void at its core. As 'the modern aesthetic question', Lyotard identifies, 'not "What is beautiful?" but "What can be said to be art ...?"',<sup>94</sup> implying, thus, that modern art does not even profess an interest in anything besides itself and certainly does not lay claim to metaphysical revelations. And yet, precisely in that it refers only to itself, modern art reveals the essence of the dialectical age: its self-centredness and its dismissal of anything outside of itself and hence, its inherent totality. In this sense, Lyotard's inquiry certainly shows, albeit stealthily, that art grants an insight into the essence of being, even if it most ardently denies its metaphysical grounds.

Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* gives a very different account of contemporary art, but his reading equally points towards its metaphysical quality. What Lyotard celebrates as 'the invention of new rules of the game',<sup>95</sup> Adorno reads as an 'uncertainty about the purpose of art and the conditions for its continued existence'; thus, he asks whether art did not 'lose its foundation when it gained complete freedom from external purposes'.<sup>96</sup> Notwithstanding their differences, however, both interpretations concede that art has begun to question itself, and both illustrate, thus, that contemporary art reveals the essence of the dialectical age, which ever more frantically undermines not just everything other, but ultimately even itself. That contemporary art lends itself to different interpretations does not contradict its metaphysical quality; indeed, it testifies to it in its own right, for the art of the dialectical age discloses the contradictions and complications at the heart of the dialectic in the very fact

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<sup>93</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, IV: *Nihilism*, p. 211.

<sup>94</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 75.

<sup>95</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 80.

<sup>96</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 2.

that it is self-referential, but never self-explanatory. 'Today', Adorno notes, 'it goes without saying that nothing concerning art goes without saying, much less without thinking'.<sup>97</sup> And in this sense, the art of the dialectical age reflects the dialectical intolerance of all immediacy and the linguistic roots of dialectics. In the dialectic, nothing is as it appears and nothing goes without deliberation or indeed without thinking and saying also its opposite. If art has become such that it involves thinking and if it has actually become thinking, it shows, conversely, that thought is the dialectical form of art. In fact, the refinement of thought that is dialectics is the *only* truly creative deed of the dialectical man, and ultimately, it is what confronts him with the essence of being as a whole, albeit not in the sense that it claims to do precisely that. The dialectical system of thought eventually reveals the impossibility of dialectics, and as such the tragic truth; thus, it affords a real metaphysical insight and proves to be a work of art in the Nietzschean sense.

In this light, Lyotard's inquiry into *The Postmodern Condition* is not only a *Report on Knowledge*, as the title suggests, but, inasmuch as his reasoning reveals the essence of being in its own right, also a work of art. Especially his concluding plea to '[l]et us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable, let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name',<sup>98</sup> brings to light the essential contradictions at the heart of the dialectical age. Lyotard appeals against the claim to totality that he discerns in the dialectics of Enlightenment reason, but in declaring what appears, by all accounts, to be a total war on totality, is he not closing his eyes to the primordial totality, to the first and last universal that is being as a whole? In this sense, he rejects the totality inherent in dialectics, but as he avoids, thus, the question of being as a whole, he still perpetuates the dialectical tradition of thinking being as a whole such that it remains, in essence, unthought. In urging us to 'be

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<sup>97</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 1.

<sup>98</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 82.

witnesses to the unrepresentable ... and save the honor of the name', Lyotard similarly rejects the dialectical aspiration to totality, which he recognizes, in this instance, in its efforts to represent even the unrepresentable. And yet, in his concern for the honour of the *name*, he replicates precisely this totalitarian aspiration, for the name itself – any name – is already a form of representation and a dialectical attempt at ordering reality. It is in this sense that Lyotard's essentially dialectical reasoning reveals the essence of the dialectic and grants a metaphysical insight into the nature of an age that anticipates its own demise.

In the dialectical age, only thought is acknowledged as a metaphysical activity of man, and only thought is defined such that it is a form of art in the Nietzschean sense. The dialectical age, however, does not acknowledge thinking *as art* and is, indeed, always at pains to emphasize the distinction between the two. Accordingly, it entertains the view that art is in decline. Adorno certainly expresses the *zeitgeist* when he concedes that 'art may, as Hegel speculated it would, soon enter the age of its demise',<sup>99</sup> for this is the sentiment generated by an age that does not acknowledge the metaphysical quality of what it calls art and therefore treats the truly human activity of man as a pastime. And on the other hand, the dialectical age does not recognize its ever-more-refined system of thought as art. It is precisely in this blindness to its own metaphysics, however, that it reveals its metaphysical essence. The dialectic denies art as the human activity that *reveals* the essence of being because the truth it seeks is not the truth as it is revealed – it seeks its own truth elsewhere; indeed, it *creates* its own truth in thinking. In the dialectic, the truth is only ever to be found in the artefact that is dialectical thought; and in this sense, the dialectical age, for all its claims to the contrary, seeks the truth *only* in art.

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<sup>99</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 5.



In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche's quest for the truth of being opens with a study of art, and in this sense, his philosophical project certainly betrays its roots in the dialectical tradition of the West. It is only in his early work, however, that he privileges the contemplation of art in his metaphysical inquiry, and even there he already extricates himself from the dialectical tradition in that he actually acknowledges the metaphysical quality of art. As the first thinker of the dialectical age, Nietzsche seeks not the manufactured truth of the dialectic but the tragic truth of life, which resides not *only* in art. And in his later writings, particularly in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he actually proves to be the first thinker of the West to recognize the essence of being in the mountains, the sea and the sun: in short, in the natural world. Since Socrates, philosophy has rested on the premise that the natural world is not the object proper of metaphysics. 'I'm an intellectual', Socrates declares, '... and country places with their trees tend to have nothing to teach me, whereas people in town do'.<sup>100</sup> Thus, Kojève explains, Socrates communicates the dialectical premise that,

starting from (false or true) myth and opinion, one can attain science and truth only by way of discussion – that is, by way of dialogue or dialectic.<sup>101</sup>

Only the engagement with other people can produce the truths that the dialectic hankers for, but conversely, it is, of course, *only* the artificial, dialectical truth and not the tragic truth of life that can be attained in this way. It may seem as though Socrates qualifies his statement and actually 'avows that trees can teach people some things, if their ears are sensitive enough

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<sup>100</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, translated by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 7.

<sup>101</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 180.

to hear',<sup>102</sup> as he discusses the speaking oak later on in the dialogue. '[T]he people at the sanctuary of Zeus at Dodona', he recounts,

say that the original prophecies there were spoken by an oak. In those days people weren't as clever as you young ones nowadays, and they were so foolish that they happily listened to oak and rock, as long as they told the truth.<sup>103</sup>

The speaking oak, however, is no ordinary tree and does not instruct people as other trees would. If it teaches people, it teaches them in the same way as another human being, for in its speech, it already has the propensity for dialectics. And in his day, Socrates points out, people are no longer foolish enough to listen to oak and rock, even if they do speak, which implies that they have already realized that in the dawning age of dialectics only human beings can produce the truth in their dialogue. In this sense, Socrates' tale of the speaking oak only confirms that the trees do not have anything to teach the dialectician.

It is not until Hegel, who in many ways already thinks the end of the dialectic, that the West contemplates the trees in a philosophical sense again. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel turns to the natural world to demonstrate the ubiquitous truth of the dialectic, choosing the examples of the bud and the blossom<sup>104</sup> and the acorn and the oak tree<sup>105</sup> to describe the essence of being in its entirety. Even if in Hegel's interpretation as Spirit, being as a whole has a potential, a tendency and indeed a need for self-consciousness reminiscent of the human, it therefore seems that he is the first thinker of the West who seeks the essence of being also in the trees around him. Hegel, Kojève argues,

... does not need a God who would reveal the truth to him. And to find the truth, he does not need to hold dialogues with 'the men in the city', or even have a

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<sup>102</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, p. 79.

<sup>103</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, p. 69.

<sup>104</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 2.

<sup>105</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 7.



'discussion' with himself or to 'meditate' *à la Descartes*. [...] He can find it all alone, while sitting tranquilly in the shade of those 'trees' which taught Socrates nothing, but which teach Hegel many things about themselves and about men. But all this is possible only because there *have been* cities in which men had discussions against a background of fighting and work, while they worked and fought for and because of their opinions (cities, moreover, which were surrounded by these same trees whose wood was used in their construction). Hegel no longer discusses because he benefits from the discussion of those who preceded him.<sup>106</sup>

Kojève grants, thus, that Hegel's philosophical thought takes account of the natural world, but he actually opposes Hegel's 'absurd philosophy of Nature',<sup>107</sup> and argues against Hegel that 'it is only History that can and must be understood *dialectically*'.<sup>108</sup> Indeed, he takes it to be Hegel's 'basic error'<sup>109</sup> that he extends the dialectical interpretation of being to being on the whole. And ultimately, his account of how Hegel learns from the trees illustrates, in fact, that Hegel does not learn from the trees *as such*, for in looking at the trees, Hegel sees only the cities that human work can build from them and hence only the course of *human* history. This is, indeed, not just a foible on Hegel's part, for the fact that he can see in everything only man actually reflects the essence of the dialectic, which describes being only in human terms. As the human is, thus, at the heart of the dialectical determination of being, the essence of the dialectic emerges at its clearest in the fate of dialectical men like Socrates, Faust and Bartleby. Woman, on the other hand, who is always and even in a dialectical age to a greater extent subjected to life, reveals the essence of the dialectic less clearly, perhaps, but all the more poignantly, in that she actually reveals it as aberration: thus, in the case of the hysteric, who escapes, however briefly, the tyranny of reason or the anorexic, who deprives herself of the life that the dialectic threatens to appropriate. In either case, however, the dialectical age is anxious not to recognize in her its own essence; it attributes the negation not to itself but to

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<sup>106</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 186.

<sup>107</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 146.

<sup>108</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 146.

<sup>109</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 146.

her, and dismisses her as a pathological aberration, incongruous with proper philosophical considerations. In its reading of the women who resist its dominance, the dialectical age betrays the anthropocentrism at its core and the fact that woman, inasmuch as she is tied to the forces of life, teaches the dialecticians no more than the trees that surround them. As the dialectic strives for totality, however, it vehemently denies the anthropomorphism at its centre and lays claim to a universal definition of being. It is not a coincidence that Hegel's philosophical work comprises accounts of the natural world, even if his is essentially still the anthropocentric perspective of the dialectical age. The clearest illustration of Hegel's view of the natural world emerges therefore not in his philosophical writing but in his impressions of the Swiss Alps, which he recorded on a journey undertaken in his youth:

Hegel's descriptions of the journey nowhere reveal any sense of awe or astonishment in the face of the overpowering might of the mountains around him. Even the glacial formations of Grindelwald could hardly stir his interest in their geological constitution. And why not? 'The sight of them presents nothing of further interest to the view. One can only really describe it as another kind of snow which offers nothing of any further interest to the spirit'. [...] As he contemplates the upper slopes of the region in all its barren bleakness the Enlightenment notion of a nature perfectly fitted to serve our human needs and purposes strikes him as an absurdity ... The sheer 'might and necessity of nature' cannot properly be understood or appreciated in Hegel's eyes...

[...] However, Hegel was pleased to record one thing at least, namely that he now understood the local language of the Alpine dwellers rather better than he did that of the Bernese townspeople. And after all, in order to know what such people think, one must possess some 'knowledge of the older form of the German language' which has survived in these regions better than it has in Germany itself.<sup>110</sup>

Hegel's experience of the Alps is essentially that of a dialectician. Although he has recognized the Enlightenment notion of nature adapted to man's need as an absurdity, he still looks at the natural world as, at best, an instrument at the hand of man and otherwise irrelevant to a thinker. His is interested only in the people he encounters and particularly in

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<sup>110</sup> Horst Althaus, *Hegel: An Intellectual Biography*, translated by Michael Tarsh (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), p. 22.

their *language*, and thus reveals an essentially dialectical focus on man and on his propensity for dialectics in his thinking. Nietzsche's experience of the Swiss Alps barely a century later could hardly be more different. His correspondence and his notebooks show that he, too, is concerned with the people he encountered on his travels and interested in their way of life. But he is also affected by the mountains themselves; his experience of the Alps is integral to his thinking and in fact prompted his fundamental metaphysical thought. As he mentions the thought of eternal return for the first time, Nietzsche adds the postface:

Early August, 1881, in Sils-Maria, 6,000 feet above sea level and much higher above all human things!<sup>111</sup>

For Heidegger, '[t]he very fact that Nietzsche expressly records the time and occasion of the note speaks for the extraordinary nature of its content and its intent',<sup>112</sup> but it could also indicate that the time and the occasion of his thought are actually integral to it. Nietzsche's descriptions of the thought of eternal return in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* certainly suggest that it pertains essentially to the mountains and to the height of summer. And if it is, indeed, the mountains of the Upper Engadine which grant him his principal metaphysical insight, Nietzsche is the first thinker of the West who recognizes the essence of being in the natural world, although he is also the first who consciously sought it in art. The contradiction actually reflects the nature of the dialectic and testifies, thus, in its own right to Nietzsche's historical position at the end of the dialectical age. Similarly, the inference that Nietzsche thinks being as *Niederkunft* would suggest that, if anything, Nietzsche *introduces* an anthropocentric definition of being,<sup>113</sup> when in fact his thinking spells the end of the dialectical anthropocentrism and determines being such that it has become truly universal.

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<sup>111</sup> Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, v/2: *Idyllen aus Messina / Die fröhliche Wissenschaft / Nachgelassene Fragmente*, pp. 337-585 (p. 392); translation as in Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, II: *The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 75.

<sup>112</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, II: *The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 75.

<sup>113</sup> The term *Niederkunft* is commonly used only in reference to human beings.



Again, the contradiction simply reflects that the dialectic is overcome only in the exposition of its tacit assumptions, which may initially appear like an endorsement of them. And it is, indeed, only when he *first* thinks his fundamental thought that Nietzsche thinks it as *Niederkunft*. In his later years, he thinks it in its full implications as the eternal return of the same, and in this configuration, it clearly shows that for Nietzsche, man is not at the centre of the metaphysical question any more.



At the same time as man loses his position at the centre of the metaphysical question, he gains at last a grasp on it. The dialectical man, who thinks being as anthropomorphism, never looks into the essence of being as such and cannot even apprehend what he takes to be the nature of being other than in reflection and in retrospect. Hegel thus notes:

Only one word more concerning the desire to teach the world what it ought to be. For such a purpose philosophy at least always comes too late. Philosophy, as the thought of the world, does not appear until reality has completed its formative process, and made itself ready. [...] When philosophy paints its grey in grey, one form of life has become old, and by means of grey it cannot be rejuvenated, but only known. The owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering.<sup>114</sup>

Indeed, Hegel's own work epitomizes the way in which the dialectical age can only ever look back and has its truth in the past, for it is only he who, as the *last* thinker of the dialectical age, begins to see its essence. In that he sees the retrospection inherent in the dialectic not least as a *shortcoming* of philosophy and realizes that philosophy cannot tell the world what it ought to be, Hegel proves that he is aware of the tragic fact that philosophy and indeed all human endeavours will not change life itself essentially. The work of the last dialectician

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<sup>114</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, translated by S. W. Dyde (London: Bell, 1896), p. xxx.

shows, thus, how the tragic truth that life goes on regardless is the very premise of the dialectic, even if the dialectical age has more faith in its own power of negation than in the tragic, to the extent that it harbours thoughts of apocalypse. To be sure, thinking the apocalypse through reveals it to be a dialectical impasse,<sup>115</sup> but the dialectical age avoids this encounter with its essence at all cost and therefore proceeds in the belief that man could negate all being. Indeed, it seems that even Nietzsche nurtures doubts about the dawning of a tragic age; although he has seen through the self-deception of the dialectical age, his thinking reflects, thus, the impasse inherent in the dialectic. At moments in his writing, the '*incipit tragoedia*' has, no doubt, less of an air of inevitability than elsewhere; thus, as he muses:

I myself, having made this tragedy of tragedies all by myself, insofar as it is finished – I, having first tied the knot of morality into existence before I drew it so tight that only a god could untie it ... – I myself have now slain all gods in the fourth act, for the sake of morality. Now, what is to become of the fifth act? From where am I to take the tragic solution? – Should I begin to think about a comic solution?<sup>116</sup>

In contemplating a comic solution, Nietzsche contemplates essentially a *dialectical* solution, for comedy resides in the scope for misunderstanding and mishap, falsity and deceit that is peculiar to the dialectic. Comedy requires men to be individual in the way that only dialectical men can be individual; thus it is that Nietzsche argues, conversely, that 'all individuals, as individuals, are comic and consequently untragic'<sup>117</sup> – that is, dialectical. In ancient Greece, Nietzsche interprets the rise of comedy as a monument to the 'miserable and violent death'<sup>118</sup> of tragedy; hence, if he contemplates a 'comic solution' to the dialectical age, he does not altogether dismiss the possibility that the decline of tragedy in antiquity was,

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<sup>115</sup> Cf. Derrida, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives)', translated by Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis, *Diacritics*, 14/2 (1984), 20-31.

<sup>116</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 197.

<sup>117</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 51.

<sup>118</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 55.

indeed, its final death and that the dialectic will reign now in all eternity. The prospect of man trapped in the dialectic, entangling himself in ever more absurd negations and achieving in all his actions the very opposite of what he intended would certainly make for a comic solution to the dialectic age. Heidegger, it seems, does not dismiss the possibility of this outcome either. It is not so much his Nietzsche lectures which convey doubts about the dawning of a tragic age in the wake of Nietzsche's thinking, but a posthumously published interview in the *Spiegel* magazine, where he concludes:

Philosophy will not be able to effect an immediate transformation of the current state of the world. This is true not only of philosophy but of all merely human brooding and striving. Only a god can save us now. There remains for us only the possibility of preparing in thought and in poetic composition a willingness for the appearance of the god or for the absence of the god in decline; that we go down in the face of the absent god.<sup>119</sup>

In the realization that philosophy - and indeed all human activity - will not be able to change the world, Heidegger accepts the truth of life, but unlike a truly tragic experience, this insight does little to console him. His famous phrase that 'only a god can save us now' resounds, no doubt, with dialectical worry more than with tragic joy. Indeed, it seems that Heidegger describes here not the inception of a new tragic era but precisely what Nietzsche refers to as the comic solution to the dialectical age. Man has over-zealously killed the god that could have saved him and is now praying to a god that he knows does not exist any more. The absent god, however, is still a god, and a dialectical god at that; and in this sense, the dialectical determination of being persists: even in the face of the absent god, the world is still *only* the world. 'Around the hero', Nietzsche notes, 'everything becomes a tragedy,

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<sup>119</sup> 'Die Philosophie wird keine unmittelbare Veränderung des jetzigen Weltzustandes bewirken können. Dies gilt nicht nur von der Philosophie, sondern von allem bloß menschlichen Sinnen und Trachten. Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten. Uns bleibt die einzige Möglichkeit, im Denken und im Dichten eine Bereitschaft vorzubereiten für die Erscheinung des Gottes oder für die Abwesenheit des Gottes im Untergang; daß wir im Angesicht des abwesenden Gottes untergehen'. Martin Heidegger, 'Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten', *Der Spiegel*, 23/1976 (31 May 1976), 193-219 (p. 209).

around the demi-god a satyr-play; and around God everything becomes – what? Perhaps a ‘world’? –<sup>120</sup> Now, in the *Spiegel* interview, at least, Heidegger anticipates precisely a world that still revolves around the now-absent god and in this sense remains *only* the world. In a tragic solution to the dialectical age, on the other hand, god is not just absent, but no longer even possible; thus, the question of being itself has to be posed differently. Man can transcend the dialectical age only once he has acknowledged the dialectical anthropomorphism of being and realized that being as it is determined in the dialectic is determined not by nature or by god, but by himself. In the wake of Nietzsche’s thinking the question of being is therefore no longer directed at god, or even at the semi-god or at the hero: it is directed at man and woman. Around man and in work, everything remains dialectics and metaphysics, past, nightfall and grey theory; around woman and in labour, in *Niederkunft*, everything becomes tragedy, futurity, return, midday and noontide: everything becomes life and everything comes to life.

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<sup>120</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 102.

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## On Man and Woman: The Determination of the Human in Work and Labour

From lack of rest, our civilization is ending in a new barbarism.<sup>1</sup>

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*

It is not often that Nietzsche speaks of work at all, and where he does, he makes no secret of his distaste for the industriousness of the modern man. He considers art, not work, to be the truly human activity of man and speaks of work practically only to vent his suspicions and to advocate, against the restless toiling of the world, a life of contemplation, leisure and *otium*.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, Nietzsche's thoughts on work are not given much consideration in most commentaries on his work. Where they enter the discussion at all, they are thought of as entertaining curiosities, on a par, perhaps, with his dietary advice; they are read as illustrations of his unconventional ways as a philosopher, but they are hardly seen to pertain to the core of his thinking. Most remarkable, however, is not *what* he says about work, but the fact that he does not seem to think in terms of work in the first instance. This is deeply rooted in his philosophical system and marks his position at the end of Western metaphysics. Since Socrates and certainly since Plato, philosophy has always – explicitly or implicitly – been concerned with what man *does* or is to do; in this sense, it has always been concerned with man's work. Nietzsche is the first thinker of the West who looks at man not in terms of

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 172.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 11 and p. 171, and *The Gay Science*, p. 259.

what he does – not in terms of his work – but in terms of what he *is*, what he is becoming and what he is to become. And as he defines the human not in work but in creation and in bringing forth, in *Niederkunft*, Nietzsche is the first thinker of the West who thinks the human essentially not as man but as woman.

### **'Arbeit' and 'Werk': Notions of Work and Labour in Nietzsche's Writing**

Work, to Nietzsche, is not something that is essential to the human and indeed not even something that befits a man. It is, thus, no surprise that he does not refer to his own thinking as work, *Arbeit* – despite the fact that he is often troubled by what he is, to all appearances, working at. Especially during the most introspective periods of this life – around 1883/1884 and towards the end of his creative life – he speaks a great deal about his tasks and his goal, but never about his 'work'. To Heinrich von Stein, he writes:

I would have to reveal to you what I have never yet revealed to anyone – the task [*Aufgabe*] which confronts me, my life's task [*Aufgabe*].<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, he confides in Franz Overbeck:

I have an *aim* [*Ziel*], which compels me to go on living and for the sake of which I *must* cope with even the most painful matters,<sup>4</sup>

adding some months later that his 'aims [*Ziele*] and tasks [*Aufgaben*] are more embracing than anyone else's'.<sup>5</sup> At the time, the true scale of Nietzsche's thinking is only just beginning

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<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche to Heinrich von Stein (early December 1882) in: Middleton (ed.), *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, pp. 197-198, and in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/1: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1880-Dezember 1884*, p. 288.

<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche to Franz Overbeck (14 August 1883) in: Middleton (ed.), *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, p. 214, and in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/1: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1880-Dezember 1884*, p. 426.

to dawn on him, but his correspondence shows that he is already very much aware of the nature of his enterprise. Even where he uses the term *Arbeit*, it is never so as to challenge the standing of his project as something that is precisely *not* work. From Sils-Maria, he reports, thus, to his sister:

It has been extremely cold here for weeks; right to the bottom, the mountains are deeply snow-covered, and the visitors are disgruntled. I myself am very industrious [*arbeitsam*], but when I come to from my work [*Arbeit*], I am *prey to melancholy* – this is unavoidable.<sup>6</sup>

At the time, his relationship to his sister was particularly strained;<sup>7</sup> hence, he may have been adapting the tone and the vocabulary of his letter to his sister's tastes, so different to his own. What is remarkable about this passage, however, is the fact that it depicts work as something out of which Nietzsche feels he has to *return to himself*. In this sense, the term *Arbeit* denotes here something categorically different from his thinking, which he usually describes such that it cannot be dissociated from himself.<sup>8</sup> Even as he declares: 'I am one thing, my writings are another',<sup>9</sup> it seems that he does not point to a difference in kind but lists, rather, the two parts that make up the whole of his *oeuvre*. It is, indeed, only in this letter to his sister that Nietzsche's writing appears as something distinctly other than himself, and it is only here that he refers to it as work, *Arbeit*. And in this sense, his use of the term in this instance does

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<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche to Franz Overbeck (30 April 1884) in: Middleton (ed.), *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, p. 224, and in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/1: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1880-Dezember 1884*, p. 497.

<sup>6</sup> 'Es ist hier, seit Wochen! äußerst kalt, die Berge tief bis hinab beschneit, die Fremden unzufrieden. Ich selber bin sehr arbeitsam, wenn ich aus meiner Arbeit zu mir komme, bin ich aber die Beute der Melancholie – das ist nicht zu ändern!' Nietzsche to Elisabeth Nietzsche (late July 1883) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/1: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1880-Dezember 1884*, p. 416.

<sup>7</sup> Only a few weeks later, he confides to Franz Overbeck that his relatives are too different from him to understand him. Cf. Nietzsche to Franz Overbeck (14 August 1883) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/1: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1880-Dezember 1884*, p. 425.

<sup>8</sup> Thus, he speaks of himself as the 'father of Zarathustra'. Nietzsche to Heinrich Köselitz (6 April 1883) in: Middleton (ed.), *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, p. 211.

<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 39.

not constitute an exception to his otherwise consistent usage of the terms, but actually testifies to it.

Indeed, in Nietzsche's writing, the term *Arbeit* always has negative overtones. As he writes to Franz Overbeck:

We – work too much: that is probably the reason why our engines have to crack up every now and then,<sup>10</sup>

Nietzsche even pauses before the word '*arbeiten*', as if he hesitates to use it. And his usage of the terms becomes, if anything, more conspicuous towards the end of his creative life. In *Ecce Homo*, he refers to his tasks [*Aufgaben*]<sup>11</sup>, his writings [*Schriften*]<sup>12</sup>, his books [*Bücher*]<sup>13</sup>, his ambition [*Ehrgeiz*]<sup>14</sup> – but he hardly ever speaks of his work as *Arbeit*. The English translation may in fact give the impression that he speaks of work more than he actually does. Thus, where the translation reads '[a]t times when I am deeply sunk in work you will see no books around me',<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche does not actually speak of work, *Arbeit*, in the original, but declares: 'in profoundly industrious [*arbeitsamen*] times, one will not see any book around me'.<sup>16</sup> The term *arbeitsam*, of course, still contains the word and the concept *Arbeit*, but it seems that there is nonetheless a crucial difference in that the original evokes notions of *Arbeit* in rather

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<sup>10</sup> 'Wir – arbeiten zuviel: da steckt wahrscheinlich der Grund, warum unsere Maschine ihren periodischen Knacks haben muß'. Nietzsche to Franz Overbeck (18 March 1884) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/1: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1880-Dezember 1884*, p. 488.

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 36, and 'Ecce Homo' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 253-372 (p. 293)

<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 39 and p. 42, and 'Ecce Homo' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 253-372 (p. 296 and p. 300).

<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 43, and 'Ecce Homo' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 253-372 (p. 300).

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 93, and 'Ecce Homo' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 253-372 (p. 360).

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 26.

<sup>16</sup> 'In tief arbeitsamen Zeiten sieht man keine Bücher bei mir...'. Nietzsche, 'Ecce Homo' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 253-372 (p. 282).



more remote a way than the translation would suggest. In fact, Nietzsche does *not* say that he immerses himself in work; he speaks, rather, of '*arbeitsamen Zeiten*', of industrious times. Work is, thus, not something that he relates to himself to the extent that it would appear in the translation; in this sense, the passage actually illustrates the discrepancy between his notion of work and the understanding he has of his own task. And indeed, as he proceeds to speak about his thinking proper, he speaks of it not as work but as a 'pregnancy' of the spirit.<sup>17</sup>

Another instance where the English term 'work' renders a German word other than '*Arbeit*' is Nietzsche's statement that

Zarathustra was the first to see in the struggle between good and evil the actual wheel in the working of things: the translation of morality into the realm of metaphysics, as force, cause, end-in-itself, is *his* work.<sup>18</sup>

The phrase 'in the working of things' renders the German expression '*im Getriebe der Dinge*',<sup>19</sup> which actually evokes quite different meanings from those of work in the sense of *Arbeit*. The word *Getriebe* does not have the negative connotations of *Arbeit*<sup>20</sup> or of work understood in the strict sense as the negation of the world; it describes, rather, the working of things in terms of their impetus, drive or initiative.<sup>21</sup> It seems, thus, that when Nietzsche speaks about the way that Zarathustra grasps the world, he speaks precisely *not* of work. And correspondingly, what the translation renders as Zarathustra's 'work' in this passage does not, in the original, evoke the connotations of work in the strictest sense either; for Nietzsche

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<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 98.

<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, 'Ecce Homo' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 253-372 (p. 365).

<sup>20</sup> Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, I: A – Biermolke (1854), pp. 538-541.

<sup>21</sup> Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, IV. Band, I. Abteilung, III. Teil: *Getreide – Gewöhnlich* (1911), pp. 4529-4535.

speaks not of Zarathustra's *Arbeit* but of his 'Werk'.<sup>22</sup> The term *Werk* is indeed one that Nietzsche also uses in reference to his own writing,<sup>23</sup> and the English word 'work' is certainly its obvious translation. Nonetheless, the connotations of *Werk* are quite different from those of work in the sense of *Arbeit*. In modern usage, *Werk* usually lacks the negative associations of work as something burdensome.<sup>24</sup> The word does have another, less common and now somewhat archaic meaning of pain and misery; this meaning, however, emerged only as the term *Werk* came to acquire the meaning of work in the sense of *Arbeit* in some contexts.<sup>25</sup> In its prevalent meaning, *Werk* denotes a work, often, as the Grimms' dictionary records, in explicit contradistinction to rhetoric or theory,<sup>26</sup> and sometimes also with an emphasis on the creative nature of the work.<sup>27</sup> *Werk* can also refer to the creative deeds of god and the devil or of nature and other forces, the effects or results of which are discernible in human works and deeds.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, *Werk* describes a *manifestation* of the forces of life, a manifestation of being and as such quite the opposite of *Arbeit*, understood as the dialectical negation of the world. Again, Nietzsche's choice of the terms is not fortuitous but reveals, in fact, that he does not perceive his work as *Arbeit* but precisely as *Werk*. Of *Arbeit*, he speaks only where he refers to a concrete chore as opposed to a creative process. When he recounts writing the *Twilight of the Idols*, he speaks of it as *Werk* – until he recalls a point where the completion of the book was no longer in the conceptual stages but had become a

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<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche, 'Ecce Homo' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 253-372 (p. 365).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Nietzsche, 'Ecce Homo' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 253-372 (p. 353).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, I: A – Biermolke, pp. 538-541, and XIV. Band, I. Abteilung, II. Teil: *Wenig – Wiking*, p. 328.

<sup>25</sup> Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, XIV. Band, I. Abteilung, II. Teil: *Wenig – Wiking*, p. 347.

<sup>26</sup> Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, XIV. Band, I. Abteilung, II. Teil: *Wenig – Wiking*, p. 329.

<sup>27</sup> Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, XIV. Band, I. Abteilung, II. Teil: *Wenig – Wiking*, p. 329 and p. 341.

<sup>28</sup> Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, XIV. Band, I. Abteilung, II. Teil: *Wenig – Wiking*, p. 343.

question of committing it to paper; in this instance, he speaks of *Arbeit*.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, he juxtaposes the terms when he writes to Malwida von Meysenbug:

... out of profound work [*Arbeit*] a word! [...] Nice has on average 210 days a year such as I need them: under this sky I want to advance my life's work [*Werk*], the hardest and most forfeitful work [*Werk*] that a mortal could take upon himself.<sup>30</sup>

In his introductory phrase, Nietzsche emphasizes the word *Arbeit* by the italics as well as by the exclamation mark, such that it seems almost as if work, *Arbeit*, is precisely *not* what he expects to be doing, or expects others to think he is doing. And in fact he speaks here, too, of *Arbeit* only in the sense of the actual physical chore, which he interrupts to write the letter, contrasting it thus with *Werk*, by which he refers to the accomplished work as well as to his life's great task.

On those occasions where Nietzsche is most explicit about his task, he underlines its nature as creation and actually describes it not just as *Werk*, but in terms of pregnancy and of giving birth.<sup>31</sup> And he actually points out that his *oeuvre*, his *Werk*, is such that it could not have been achieved in work, strictly speaking. He grants that he knows

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<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche, 'Ecce Homo' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 253-372 (p. 354).

<sup>30</sup> '...aus tiefer *Arbeit* heraus ein Wort! [...] Nizza hat im Jahre durchschnittlich 210 solcher Tage, wie ich sie brauche: unter diesem Himmel will ich schon das *Werk* meines Lebens vorwärts bringen, das härteste und entsagungsreichste *Werk*, das sich ein Sterblicher auflegen kann'. Nietzsche to Malwida von Meysenbug (late March 1884) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/1: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1880-Dezember 1884*, p. 489.

<sup>31</sup> Cf.: 'Versprochen ist Alles schon in 'Schop<enhauer> als Erz<ieher>'; es war aber ein gutes Stück Weg von 'Menschl<iches>, Allzum<enschliches>' bis zum 'Übermenschen' zu machen. Wenn Sie jetzt einen Augenblick an die 'fröhl<iche> Wiss<enschaft>' zurückdenken wollen, so werden Sie lachen, mich welcher Sicherheit, ja impudentia darin die bevorstehende Geburt 'annoncirt' wird...'. Nietzsche to Heinrich Köselitz (21 April 1883) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/1: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1880-Dezember 1884*, p. 364. Or: '... es gehört zu meinen Aufgaben, auch darüber Herr zu werden und fortzufahren, alle meine Schicksale zu Gunsten meiner Aufgabe 'in Gold zu verwandeln'. Es gab doch wieder Stunden, wo diese Aufgabe ganz deutlich vor mir steht, wo ein ungeheures Ganzes von Philosophie (und von Mehr als je Philosophie hieß!) sich vor meinen Blicken auseinander legt. Dies Mal, bei dieser gefährlichsten und schwersten 'Schwangerschaft', muß ich mir begünstigende Umstände zusammen holen und alle Sonnen

... of no other way of dealing with great tasks [*Aufgaben*] than that of *play*: this is, as a sign of greatness, an essential precondition. The slightest constraint, the gloomy mien, any kind of harsh note in the throat are all objections to a man, how much more to his work [*Werk*]<sup>32</sup>

It is only in play that man can approach the kind of task that Nietzsche faces and that he envisages for mankind in general, for work, in the strict sense of *Arbeit*, entails precisely the constraint, the gloom and the negation that is detrimental to all creation. And thus, work is indeed an *objection* to man as Nietzsche defines him: to him who is in essence play and pregnancy.



At times, Nietzsche is actually explicit about his objections to work, but his argument that work does not befit a man, much less a woman, that it pertains to the slave and makes of man a slave, is often so polemical that it does not make for comfortable reading and lends itself to all sorts of misconceptions. He argues that

[e]very elevation of the type 'man' has hitherto been the work [*Werk*] of an aristocratic society – and so it will always be: a society which believes in a long scale of orders of rank and differences of worth between man and man and needs slavery in some sense or another [*in irgend einem Sinne*].<sup>33</sup>

In those cases where Nietzsche seems to advocate slavery, as he does here, his reasoning is particularly hard to bear for a contemporary reader. Ultimately, however, he never calls for a

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*mir leuchten machen, die ich noch kennen lernte'*. Nietzsche to Franz Overbeck (18 August 1884) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/1: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1880-Dezember 1884*, pp. 520-521.

<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 37, and 'Ecce Homo' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 253-372 (p. 295).

<sup>33</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 192, and 'Jenseits von Gut und Böse' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/2: *Jenseits von Gut und Böse / Zur Genealogie der Moral (1886-1887)* (1968), pp. 1-255 (p. 215).

return to the ancient world order or for a reintroduction of slavery, although some of his comments could no doubt be interpreted in this way. In this instance, too, Nietzsche does not actually claim that for the elevation of man society requires slavery or even a form of slavery. He asserts, rather, that the elevation of man presupposes 'slavery in some sense or another', and read thus, the phrase may not even refer to slavery in the most literal sense but to the enslavement of man by himself. In this sense, Nietzsche's insistence on the necessity of slavery is not a political but a metaphysical statement and touches on the core of his thinking. Indeed, man remains a slave as long as he negates the world in his work, and if he is concerned with the elevation of himself, he is essentially *working* on himself. In his assertion that a society requires slavery in order to attain a higher type of man, Nietzsche simply states that a society which aims for a *higher* type of man is still a society of slaves who *work* on themselves. And conversely, his statement implies that *only* a society of slaves can bring forth a higher type of man and illustrates, thus, that the dialectical slave plays an essential part in Nietzsche's thinking of the human. In the sense that the elevation of man, which Nietzsche advocates so urgently, depends on man's existence as slave, Nietzsche's thinking emerges precisely from the *impasse* of the dialectic. He is the thinker who thinks the dialectic to its conclusion, who thinks it through – and who thinks through it. In terms of the human, his thinking originates in the inherent problematic of the dialectic, that is, in the dialectical aspiration for the elevation [*Erhöhung*]<sup>34</sup> of man, which actually, however, perpetuates the fact of his debasement and his existence as a slave. Nietzsche's view on slavery, however, shows that he thinks *beyond* the impasse of the dialectic. He acknowledges that man, even man as he has been and will be elevated, emerges from dialectical work, and yet, he describes the accomplished elevation of man as *Werk* and in this sense as a manifestation of life rather than as testimony to its negation. In his usage of the terms,

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<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche, 'Jenseits von Gut und Böse' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/2: *Jenseits von Gut und Böse / Zur Genealogie der Moral*, pp. 1-255 (p. 215).

Nietzsche highlights, thus, that thought to its conclusion, the impasse of the dialectical man leads to a new determination of man in creation, bringing forth and *Niederkunft*.

Notwithstanding the fact that all of us who are still aspiring to improve man remain in essence slaves, Nietzsche argues that we do not appreciate distinction because we do not actually know *proper* slavery. 'We lack', he explains,

the classical coloring of nobility because our feelings no longer know the slaves of classical antiquity. A Greek of noble descent found such tremendous intermediary stages and such distance between his own height and that ultimate baseness that he could scarcely see the slave clearly; even Plato could not really see him anymore. It is different with us, who are accustomed to the *doctrine* of human equality, though not to equality itself. One who is not at his own disposal and who lacks leisure does not by any means seem contemptible to us for that reason; perhaps too much that is slavish in this sense sticks to each of us, in accordance with the conditions of our social order and activities, which are utterly different from those of the ancients.

The Greek philosophers went through life feeling secretly that there were far more slaves than one might think – meaning that everybody who was not a philosopher was a slave. Their pride overflowed at the thought that even the most powerful men on earth belonged among their slaves. This pride, too, is alien and impossible for us; not even metaphorically [*im Gleichnis*] does the word 'slave' possess its full power for us.<sup>35</sup>

Again, Nietzsche's apparent approval of slavery rings very uncomfortably in contemporary ears, but again, he speaks as a philosopher and not as a politician. His argument is in fact not so much a call for slavery as, indeed, a call for the *acknowledgement* of slavery. The ancients, he points out, practised slavery but did not really acknowledge it because they thought themselves to be so far removed from the fact of the slave. And we, who are accustomed to the doctrine of human equality, do not acknowledge slavery either – not because it no longer exists, and not because we are too far removed from the reality of the slave, but precisely because we are too close to it. According to Nietzsche, it was only the ancient Greek

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<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 91, and 'Die fröhliche Wissenschaft' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, V/2: *Idyllen aus Messina / Die fröhliche Wissenschaft / Nachgelassene Fragmente*, pp. 11-335 (pp. 63-64).

philosophers who recognized slavery and therefore knew the pride and the nobility that, in the face of slavery, pertains to the free man. Indeed, only the philosophers could have defied slavery, for in the West, the question of the master and the slave is always a metaphysical question. In order for the slave to be understood as such, he has to be understood metaphysically. If Nietzsche suggests that Plato might not have seen the slave as such, he is, thus, questioning Plato's standing as a philosopher. Here as elsewhere in his writing, however, Nietzsche is *not* inferring that we lack nobility because we do not keep slaves; he argues, rather, that it is because our *feelings* no longer know of slavery. The question of nobility is decided *within* us and does not depend primarily on the external circumstances of whether or not we have slaves to carry out the mundane tasks of life. Thus it is that even the ancients, who kept slaves, could have *thought* themselves to be so far removed from the slave that their feeling also lacked the knowledge of the slave and they, too, fell short of nobility. If nobility is to this extent an *inner* question, it is also and perhaps most importantly a question of acknowledging the slave within ourselves. This is, indeed, the tenor of Nietzsche's thinking of the slave. He is not revelling in nostalgia for the way of life of the ancients and his notion of nobility certainly does not apply to the master who keeps slaves; for he who *needs* the slave is precisely *not* noble. Nietzsche's thinking of slavery actually reaches beyond the master and, indeed, beyond the slave as such. In the dialectic of master and slave, as Hegel describes it, the existence of the master is already impossible and has, in fact, been made impossible by the slave.<sup>36</sup> In the realization that the slave remains a slave even when he has freed himself of the master, Nietzsche communicates what had in Hegel's account remained implicit, and shows, thus, that the existence of the slave is equally impossible. His notion of nobility pertains neither to the master nor to the slave, but it implies the awareness that what he calls the 'free spirit' arises out of slavery. Nobility, for Nietzsche, entails an

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, pp. 21-30.

acknowledgement of the free spirits' dialectical ancestry and of the dialectic in general, but without the dialectical desire for reconciliation. This is, indeed, not unlike the Greek philosophers' acknowledgement of the slave: they knew of the circumstances of the slave, so different to their own, but rather than aiming to reconcile the situation, they prided themselves on their distinction. 'This pride, too', Nietzsche concludes, 'is alien and impossible for us; not even metaphorically does the work 'slave' possess its full power for us'. What the translation renders as 'metaphorically' here reads in the original as '*im Gleichnis*', and the Grimms' dictionary records that *Gleichnis* is only seldom employed in the sense of 'metaphor'.<sup>37</sup> In fact, the term usually evokes a sense of simile, comparison or equation, and connotes a similarity, a copy, a representation, an apparition, also a false or an apparent similarity.<sup>38</sup> It often describes an indirect, as opposed to an open comparison,<sup>39</sup> and can sometimes refer to the act of comparison itself. In a rare and now antiquated usage, the word can also be employed '*in der aktiven bedeutung "gleichmachung"*',<sup>40</sup> that is, in the sense of making-the-same. It is this usage which best illustrates the dialectical connotations of the term, in that it describes the barter principle which constitutes the basis for the 'exchange of things that are equal and yet unequal'<sup>41</sup> at the heart of the dialectic. The term *Gleichnis* denotes, thus, a fundamentally dialectical concept. If the word slave cannot, even as *Gleichnis*, have any real meaning for us, as Nietzsche argues, it is precisely *because* we look at the slave as *Gleichnis*, that is, in terms of a dialectical equation which inevitably obscures the truth *as such*. But for all its cunning, dialectical reason cannot convincingly reconcile the

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<sup>37</sup> 'selten nur wird als gleichnis auch eine eingliedrige figur bezeichnet, bei der das gemeinte unausgesprochen bleibt und aus dem bild zu erschliessen ist'. Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, IV. Band, I. Abteilung, IV. Teil: *Gewöhnlich-Gleve* (1949), p. 8197.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, IV. Band, I. Abteilung, IV. Teil: *Gewöhnlich-Gleve*, pp. 8184-8204.

<sup>39</sup> 'häufig wird gleichnis als eine umschreibende, verhüllende, indirekte, nur bildliche aussage einer unmittelbaren, unverhüllten und offenen äusserung entgegengestellt'. Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, IV. Band, I. Abteilung, IV. Teil: *Gewöhnlich-Gleve*, p. 8201.

<sup>40</sup> Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, IV. Band, I. Abteilung, IV. Teil: *Gewöhnlich-Gleve*, p. 8203.

<sup>41</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 147.



difference between feeling *like* a slave and actually being a slave; it cannot obscure the poignant truth of the slave entirely. A comparison with the slave will always resound with the inherent hollowness of the dialectic. If Nietzsche nonetheless uses the term, it is to show that we, who think of ourselves as free, have not actually proceeded beyond the master-slave-dialectic in our understanding of ourselves. Since the existence of the master became impossible very early on in the dialectical age,<sup>42</sup> man has been restricted to the possibilities of the slave. And in order to transcend the determination of the human as slave, Nietzsche's comment suggests, we will have to acknowledge the slave – that is, the slave within us and our heritage as slaves – such that our recognition does not fall prey to the distortion inherent in dialectics. We would have to apprehend the slave precisely not as *Gleichnis*, not as metaphor, simile, or comparison, but as the thing as such. And we would have to realize that *im Gleichnis*, in equation and in barter, in dialectics and in a *word*, we can never apprehend the truth as such, and certainly not the truth of 'the slave'.



Even where Nietzsche's opinions about work are less controversial but seemingly light-hearted and indeed often amusing, they go against the grain of our age and touch, not least in the reaction they prompt, upon the spirit of our times. We are incredulous when he lists '[o]verwork, curiosity and sympathy' as 'our *modern vices*',<sup>43</sup> for we recognize these precisely as our virtues. And there is nothing light-hearted about Nietzsche's remark at all, given that he lists as our vices the essential characteristics of the dialectic: its need not just to work but to *overwork*, its incessant curiosity for the other and its delusional faith in its 'sympathetic' and 'reconciliatory' nature. Nietzsche reveals, thus, that he recognizes that our vices have

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 20.

<sup>43</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 48.

their roots in the dialectic and that the dialectic is, in fact, the modern vice. Our reactions to his comments on work, on the other hand, show how central the concept is to our understanding of the human and how deeply engrained the premise is in us that there is nothing worse for man than being idle. For all his objections to work, however, Nietzsche does not advocate idleness. He criticizes the negativity inherent in work, but he does not promote indolent passivity in its stead, which constitutes, in fact, not so much an alternative to dialectical work as its logical conclusion. In recommending a life of contemplation, he certainly does not suggest that such a life would be easier than a life of work – on the contrary. He observes that '[t]he industrial races find leisure very hard to endure',<sup>44</sup> and raises the idea – later explored above all by Georges Bataille<sup>45</sup> – that the organization of its leisurely expenditure might be a more pressing task for a society than the accumulation of wealth in work, for 'it requires more genius to spend than to acquire'.<sup>46</sup> Where Nietzsche openly criticizes his contemporaries' industriousness, he is indeed very specific and does not dismiss all human action. He warns of 'a new kind of *stupidity*', which he traces to the 'desire to do and to undertake'.<sup>47</sup> Again, it is his choice of the terms which reveals that his criticism is directed at the dialectical man, for in '*thun*' and '*unternehmen*' he criticizes not doing *per se* but a very specific mode of doing. The term '*unternehmen*' can have connotations of 'to examine', 'to take into care' or 'to take into one's possession', also on the sly. Its main meaning today is 'to do' or 'to undertake' and in this usage it refers specifically to an undertaking or an enterprise, often also with the economic connotations that this entails.<sup>48</sup> It seems, thus, that in its various connotations, *unternehmen* describes a specifically dialectical

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<sup>44</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 112.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, *passim*.

<sup>46</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>47</sup> '*Eine neue Art Ver d u m m u n g – durch die Lust am Thun und Unternehmen*'. Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, v/2: *Idyllen aus Messina / Die fröhliche Wissenschaft / Nachgelassene Fragmente*, pp. 337- 585 (p. 495).

<sup>48</sup> Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, XI. Band, III. Abteilung: *Un-Uzvogel*, pp. 1696-1701.

mode of doing, and particularly in that it stresses the economic – which, in the form of the barter principle, lies at the heart of the dialectic.<sup>49</sup> Along with ‘*unternehmen*’, Nietzsche suspects doing in the sense of ‘*thun*’, which largely corresponds to the English term ‘to do’ and is certainly as broad in its meanings and usages. The crucial point, however, is that Nietzsche chooses the term ‘*thun*’ over ‘*machen*’, which roughly corresponds to the English ‘to make’, although the distinction is more equivocal in German. Broadly speaking, ‘*thun*’ is the more general and abstract term, whereas ‘*machen*’ implies that something is being made and therefore connotes a sense of creation and of bringing forth.<sup>50</sup> Nietzsche’s choice of the terms reveals, thus, that he does not object to doing in the sense of ‘*machen*’, but to the blindly raging necessity to undertake at all cost, without even bringing forth anything. And just as he is very specific in describing this particular mode of doing, he is very specific in his description of its effects: it leads, he suggests, to a new kind of ‘*Verdummung*’, stupidity, or rather, to a new way of becoming stupid – ‘*new*’ in that it is different from the dialectical notion of stupidity. In general, the dialectical age thinks stupidity as an un-reflected or ill-reflected action, that is, as doing something without thinking. This definition highlights, conversely, the connection between thinking and doing at the heart of the dialectic. The dialectic does not rate thinking in itself, without implementation of the thought, as Kojève’s reading of the Stoic shows.<sup>51</sup> And on the other hand, all dialectical action is the result and the realization of thought. Stupidity, in the dialectical age, denotes a break in the connection between thought and action, but the *ultimate* stupidity in the dialectical understanding is total idleness: *not* thinking and *not* acting. The new kind of stupidity that Nietzsche cautions against emerges precisely from the dialectical premise that what is being thought must be

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 146.

<sup>50</sup> For ‘*thun*’, cf. Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, XI. Band, I. Abteilung, I. Band: *T-Treftig* (1935), pp. 434-456; for ‘*machen*’, cf. Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, VI. Band: *L-M* (1885), pp. 1363-1395.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 119-124, and Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, pp. 53-54.

'realized'. This fixation with doing leads, by the dialectic's own logic, to the severing of the connection between thinking and doing that gave rise to it in the first place; quite independently of thinking, doing acquires validity in its own right. Thus originates the new kind of stupidity that Nietzsche anticipates. It corresponds essentially to the dialectical definition of stupidity as doing without thinking; it occurs, however, not as an oversight but in the systematic compulsion to act at any rate and at every cost. Ultimately it amounts, thus, not just to doing without thinking, but to doing at the expense of thinking. In this respect, the stupidity that arises from the dialectical fetishization of doing is quite unlike the placid stupidity that the dialectic acknowledges; the new kind of stupidity that Nietzsche warns us of is the raging stupidity that the dialectic generates but does *not* recognize.

It may, thus, seem odd that elsewhere Nietzsche discusses the ill effects of *not* working, noting that what 'the pessimists and art fanciers' lack is the 'feeling of well-being after an accomplished day's work [*Tagewerk*]'.<sup>52</sup> Once again, however, his argument rests on his specific choice of the terms. He does not suggest that it is work in the sense of *Arbeit* that these characters lack, but the satisfaction that comes from an accomplishment in the sense of *Werk*. Indeed, Nietzsche warns specifically against a lack of *creative* work, which he believes is just as detrimental to man as an excess of dialectical work. His thinking of the human hinges, thus, on the distinction between *Arbeit* and *Werk*. In a sense he is therefore still concerned with man's *activity*, even if he is the first philosopher of the West who thinks man in terms of what he is rather than of what he does. And indeed, Nietzsche explores in the mode of man's activity not the question of what man does – which, in comparison, barely

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<sup>52</sup> 'Wohlgefühl nach vollbrachtem Tagewerk – das fehlt den Pessimisten und Kunst-Schwärmern'. Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke, IV/3: Menschliches, Allzumenschliches (Zweiter Band) / Nachgelassene Fragmente: Frühling 1878-November 1879* (1967), pp. 343-479 (p. 420).

scratches the surface – but precisely the question of what man *is*, or is to be: worker or creator.



The two modes of activity that Nietzsche describes in the terms *Arbeit* and *Werk* are essentially different, but separated only by a very small gap. Nietzsche's remark that '[t]he Devil is merely the idleness [*Müßiggang*] of God on that seventh day...'<sup>53</sup> suggests, in fact, that they coincide. God *created* the world initially and does not work, whereas the devil, 'the Spirit that Denies',<sup>54</sup> aims to *change* the world and hence *works* in the strict sense. Nietzsche, however, illustrates how they are connected, even if they are in this respect categorically different. If the devil is 'god's idleness', his doings are actually prescribed by god, who advised rest on the seventh day; and the devil is, at any rate, part of god's creation. In this sense, god affirms the devil; and the devil, in turn, affirms god in his insatiable appetite for his creation. The most articulate of devils, Goethe's Mephistopheles, certainly entertains cordial relations with god and despite his protestations to the contrary appreciates god's creation; he readily declares his indifference to dull corpses and his love for all things living, for all things 'frolicsome'.<sup>55</sup> In this sense, god's creation and the devil's work complement each other and make up the world. Today, it may indeed seem that god is becoming more and more akin to the pessimists and art fanciers that Nietzsche identifies as *lacking* creative work, whilst the devil has turned into a nihilist who ends up destroying *all* of god's work, god, and finally himself. Thus, however, their relationship merely reflects the essence of the dialectical age. And yet, Nietzsche's remark also shows that he does not renounce dialectical

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<sup>53</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 83, and 'Ecce Homo' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), VI/3: *Der Fall Wagner / Götzen-Dämmerung / Nachgelassene Schriften*, pp. 253-372 (p. 349).

<sup>54</sup> Goethe, *Faust: Parts I & II*, p. 64.

<sup>55</sup> Goethe, *Faust: Parts I & II*, p. 22.

work altogether but accepts it as part of the world despite its self-perpetuating nihilism. In fact, his choice of the term '*Müßiggang*' for god's idleness highlights in allusion to the German proverb<sup>56</sup> that ultimately it is not the devil but *god* who is the root of all the devil's doing and hence also of all dialectics.

The life that Nietzsche recommends instead of the compulsive working of the dialectical man is one of contemplation and of *Müßiggang* – and as such, as the term suggests, clearly not one of inactivity.<sup>57</sup> It does, however, entail a certain amount of boredom.

'For thinkers and all sensitive spirits', Nietzsche explains,

boredom [*Langeweile*] is that disagreeable 'windless calm' of the soul that precedes a happy voyage and cheerful winds. They have to bear it and must wait for its effect on them. Precisely this is what lesser natures cannot achieve by any means. To ward off boredom at any cost is vulgar, no less than work without pleasure.<sup>58</sup>

As a 'windless calm' of the soul, boredom could indeed be interpreted as emptiness, nothingness and void, such as it is commonly understood. The German term *Langeweile*,<sup>59</sup> however, denotes not so much an absence as, indeed, an abundance – an abundance of time or rather, an *awareness* of the abundance of time and as such a glimpse of eternity. It may well be painful and 'disagreeable', as Nietzsche points out, but it is not to be understood in the negative. The thinker who affirms boredom as something that is necessary to his task affirms not nothingness, but anticipates, in fact, Nietzsche's glimpse into the eternal return of the same. In this sense, the experience of boredom grants a metaphysical insight and

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<sup>56</sup> '*Müßiggang ist aller Laster Anfang*'.

<sup>57</sup> The word *Müßiggang* has its roots in *gehen*, to go.

<sup>58</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 108, and 'Die fröhliche Wissenschaft' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, V/2: *Idyllen aus Messina / Die fröhliche Wissenschaft / Nachgelassene Fragmente*, pp. 11-335 (p. 83).

<sup>59</sup> *Langeweile*: from *lange* ('long') and *weile* ('while, moment'); cf. Grimm / Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, VI. Band: L-M, p. 173.

constitutes a kind of knowledge. Hence, Nietzsche criticizes the 'flight from boredom' that he detects in the West, and notes that '[i]n the Orient, wisdom puts up with boredom, a feat that the Europeans find so difficult that they suspect wisdom to be impossible'.<sup>60</sup> In its relentless fear of boredom, the West shies away from the glimpse into the abundance of time that boredom affords. And because we avoid the thought of eternity, we believe that wisdom is impossible. In the West, wisdom always remains an idea in the Platonic sense: it remains unattainable on earth. It is only when thinking allows for boredom and withstands, thus, the prospect of eternity that wisdom will be attainable in this world. Wisdom, in other words, descends, *kommt nieder*, into the world only when we can endure the thought of eternal return, which is the thought of *Niederkunft*. The Orient, Nietzsche suggests, already knows wisdom in this world, and in notions of rebirth and reincarnation, it has indeed come much closer than the West to thinking the thought of eternal return.

### **From 'Otium et Bellum' to 'Alea et Parturio': The Human in Western Thought**

In advocating a life of *Müßiggang* and boredom, Nietzsche clearly dissents from the philosophical tradition of the West, which has defined the human in his work for the last two thousand years. To be sure, the dialectical age actually began in 'the City-State of the nonworking warlike Masters',<sup>61</sup> where, as Kojève explains,

[o]nly he who makes war is a citizen, and it is only the citizen who makes war. The work is assigned to the Slaves, who are on the fringe of the Society and the State.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> 'Die Flucht vor der Langeweile! Im Orient findet sich die Weisheit mit der Langeweile ab, das Kunststück, das den Europäern so schwer ist, daß sie die Weisheit als unmöglich verdächtigen'. Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, v/1: *Morgenröthe / Nachgelassene Fragmente: Anfang 1880-Frühjahr 1881* (1971), pp. 337-769 (p. 452).

<sup>61</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 60.

<sup>62</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 57.

In the ancient city-state, work was deemed unsuitable for man; and yet, by this fact alone it was already a criterion of the human – albeit in the negative. According to Hegel’s account of master and slave, man ends up having to work only if he did not realize his human potential in the initial fight and stopped short of risking his life. To the master, work has therefore always a taste of the not-quite human; conversely, the master suspects work to be at the very least detrimental to the exercise of man’s human capacities. In antiquity, man is truly human only as long as he does *not* work; and correspondingly, the ‘ancient prejudice’, as Nietzsche points out, attaches ‘[n]obility and honor ... solely to *otium* and *bellum*’.<sup>63</sup> Even in the work of the dialecticians, the notion that leisure and war are the truly human pursuits of man is still prevalent, although dialectical thought eventually eradicates it. Aristotle captures the turning point in the history of thought as he argues that it is ‘generally acknowledged’ that

in a well-ordered state the citizens should have leisure and not have to provide for their daily wants ..., but there is a difficulty in seeing how this leisure is to be attained.<sup>64</sup>

On the one hand, Aristotle admits thus that he can see the problems with the idea of a leisurely existence for the citizens, but on the other, he still perpetuates it as the way man should live in order to realize his human potential. Aristotle is, in other words, certainly not openly embracing the ‘slaves’ revolt’<sup>65</sup> in Western thought – and yet, as a dialectician, he is propagating it in his thought. For even though he still advocates mastery as the truly human existence, he is already aware that it is problematic to *realize*: in this sense, he is beginning to see the life of the master as the ‘existential impasse’<sup>66</sup> that it is.

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<sup>63</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 260.

<sup>64</sup> Aristotle, ‘Politics’ in: Jonathan Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, volume II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 1986-2129 (p. 2014).

<sup>65</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, p. 21, and *passim*.

<sup>66</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 46.



The transition from the ancient understanding of man in *otium et bellum* towards the idea that man works and ought to work plays a particularly important role in the work of the very first dialecticians, Socrates and Plato. Plato, to be sure, does not actually speak of work very much and does not advertise its merits as explicitly as Hesiod did three centuries before him.<sup>67</sup> In fact, *The Republic* still reveals a good deal of the ancient belief that work does not benefit a man. Those who are engaged in work in the strict sense are, at best, third-class citizens, and Plato does not dwell on their existence but moves on to discuss the lives of the guardians, who specialise in warfare and *not* in work.<sup>68</sup> He is certainly not concerned with the work of the slaves or, indeed, with the slaves as a distinct social class. They 'are not mentioned, but their existence ... is assumed', and Plato regards them 'as appendages to the classes he has defined rather than a separate class on their own'.<sup>69</sup> In this sense, and to this extent, *The Republic* reflects the old world order – and yet, Plato's ideal state is certainly not a state of masters, for everybody works and everybody is defined – and defined solely – by what they do. At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates observes that '... no two of us are born exactly alike', and from the fact that '[w]e have different natural aptitudes', infers that these 'fit us for different jobs'.<sup>70</sup> His reasoning constitutes a departure from the ancient mindset, in more than one sense, for not only is work depicted as a natural expression of people's talents here; it also seems – and not only in this instance – that people's occupations

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. Hesiod's statement that 'Work is no disgrace'. Hesiod, 'The Works and Days', in: *The Works and Days / Theogony / The Shield of Herakles*, translated by Richmond Lattimore (n. p.: University of Michigan Press, 1959), p. 55. Hesiod is no doubt a precursor to the Greek philosophers; it is not quite clear, however, if he anticipates the dialectical understanding of work in this instance or if he even speaks of work in the strict sense at all, given that he refers to the management of a smallholding – which, strictly speaking, could be understood as labour rather than as work.

<sup>68</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, translated by Desmond Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 66.

<sup>69</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, p. 56.

<sup>70</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, p. 59.

precede and indeed take precedence over other distinctions between the citizens of *The Republic*.

In the sense that the guardians specialise in warfare, it may seem that fighting, as opposed to work, is still the distinction of the ruling class of *The Republic*. The guardians, however, are not masters in the strict sense. Like everybody else in *The Republic*, they work: they *work* at warfare. Socrates argues that the 'rulers must be trained for war',<sup>71</sup> and when asked whether the citizens could not, in the manner of the master, fight for themselves, explains that this would not be desirable, for 'soldiering is a profession' and 'one man could not do more than one job or profession ... well'.<sup>72</sup> What may seem obvious today actually constitutes a paradigmatic shift in thought at the time; it marks the transition from the era of the master, which maintained the categorical distinction between work and fighting, to the dialectical era, in which fighting becomes work like everything else. And the dialogue also illustrates the reason for this transition; it implies that mastery is inefficient because it is resistant to change. In order to defend his view that the guardians need to be trained for battle and need to *work* at warfare, Socrates argues that

... soldiering is not so easy a job that a man can be a soldier at the same time as he is a farmer or a shoemaker or follows some other profession; why, you can't even become a competent draughts or dice player if you don't practise seriously from childhood...<sup>73</sup>

Nothing, Socrates argues, can be done at its best unless one works at it; and thus originates the predicament of the master, who does not work. Indeed, Socrates objects to the guardians leading the life of masters, that is, of those who fight but do not work, on the grounds that in comparison to the soldiers who work at warfare, they would be inefficient. The masters,

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<sup>71</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, p. 266.

<sup>72</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, p. 65.

<sup>73</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, p. 65.

whose *essence* is fighting, cannot remain successful at it; their existence is an impasse because they cannot change,<sup>74</sup> and therefore cannot get *better* at anything, whereas the slave perfects himself in work. In an ideal dialectical state, everybody is therefore a worker – as indeed they are in *The Republic*, which, to be sure, does not depict Plato's own circumstances but an imagined future. His vision of a state where women as well as men work,<sup>75</sup> and are defined predominantly by their work, is no doubt a premonition of what is to come. As a vision of an ideal state, however, Plato's *Republic* nonetheless reflects the spirit of the time and illustrates, thus, the shift in the understanding of man that took place in the thought of the early dialecticians.



Christianity, the 'Platonism for the people',<sup>76</sup> only consolidates the conception of man that arises in the thought of the first dialecticians, and makes it explicit. It is not a coincidence that in the Christian understanding, man begins to be truly human at the same time as he begins to work and that god, when he orders man to work, also speaks of his death, of his 'return unto the ground';<sup>77</sup> the connection is essential. According to Genesis, man begins to work after he has been expelled from paradise; and it is only then that he becomes mortal. It is, therefore, only then that he becomes truly human, for the concept of an immortal man is an absurdity, a 'squared circle'.<sup>78</sup> And conversely, Kojève explains, it is his work that makes man mortal – and therefore human. Through his work, man changes the world essentially

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<sup>74</sup> Cf. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 51.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Plato, *The Republic*, p. 175.

<sup>76</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 32.

<sup>77</sup> Genesis 3.19 in *The Holy Bible*, containing the Old and New Testaments, translated out of the original tongues: and with the former translations diligently compared and revised by his Majesty's special command (Oxford: Oxford University Press, n. d.).

<sup>78</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 56.

and thus creates time.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, Kojève concludes, work is time – and time is man,<sup>80</sup> for time is the change of the world introduced only by human work. Since man changes the world in time, his own life is a life in time, that is, a *mortal* life. This is why god warned the first man of knowledge, *Bildung*, and advised him that

... of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.<sup>81</sup>

Accordingly, the Christian era is increasingly aware of the role of work as the essential criterion of its concept of the human. Very early on, it coins the phrase '*ora et labora*'<sup>82</sup> as the maxim of man's existence on earth, stating thus expressly that it seeks the truly human aspects of man in prayer and in work. And subsequently, the Reformation accentuates the role of work in the Christian understanding of man even further. In his analysis of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber discusses as 'one of the most important results of the Reformation' and particularly of Luther's work the 'moral justification of worldly activity',<sup>83</sup> and the conception of man that it entails. In the Protestant understanding, Weber argues, 'the fulfilment of worldly duties is under all circumstances the only way to live acceptably to God. It and it alone is the will of God'.<sup>84</sup> Whereas Catholicism prescribes a degree of contemplation, if not leisure, Protestantism understands man as human only as long as he works and to the extent that he works. Work is not only the means to salvation; it has become an end in itself – and in fact, the only worthy goal for man. Doing has become

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<sup>79</sup> The 'creative education of Man by work (*Bildung*) creates History – i. e., human *Time*'. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 53.

<sup>80</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 133.

<sup>81</sup> Genesis 2.17.

<sup>82</sup> '*Ora et labora*', 'pray and work', is a Latin proverb and the motto of the Benedictine order. The *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, edited by David J. Atkinson, David H. Field *et al* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), maintains that '[t]he influence of Benedict's Rule upon Christian spirituality in Western Europe is incalculable' (p. 189).

<sup>83</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons (London: Unwin University Books, 1974), p. 81.

<sup>84</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, p. 81.

the only acceptable and the only truly human way of being. The rise of Protestantism marks, thus, a significant change in the Christian understanding of man in '*ora et labora*', such that work is now prayer – and the only true form of prayer.<sup>85</sup>



It is only in the thought of Karl Marx, however, that the West actually begins to *examine* the role of work for the human in earnest. As the 'first premise of all human history', Marx presumes 'the existence of living human individuals',<sup>86</sup> but thus alone man is no different from other living beings. Human beings, Marx argues, 'begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence'.<sup>87</sup> In Marx's understanding, too, man is truly human as soon as he works. Marx then proceeds to show how the nature of work in a capitalist system of production creates the proletariat – which, as the truly universal and revolutionary class,<sup>88</sup> will bring about the '*appropriation* of the *human* essence through and for man'<sup>89</sup> in communism. Work is, thus, the means by which the realization of the human essence is attained. The worker recognizes his work as alienation and his estrangement from others<sup>90</sup> as a perversion of his human essence, and therefore comes to find his essence in the 'true community of man'.<sup>91</sup> Hence, work will be abolished,<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Cf. Holger Schatz, *Arbeit als Herrschaft: Die Krise des Leistungsprinzips und seine neoliberale Rekonstruktion* (Münster: Unrast, 2004), p. 81.

<sup>86</sup> Karl Marx / Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, edited by C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), p. 42.

<sup>87</sup> Marx / Engels, *The German Ideology*, p. 42.

<sup>88</sup> Marx / Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party' in: *Selected Works in Two Volumes*, volume I (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1950), pp. 21-61 (p. 42).

<sup>89</sup> Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts' in: *Early Writings*, translated by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin in association with New Left Review, 1992), pp. 279-400 (p. 348).

<sup>90</sup> Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts' in: *Early Writings*, pp. 279-400 (pp. 329-330).

<sup>91</sup> Marx, 'Excerpts from James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*' in: *Early Writings*, pp. 259-278 (p. 265).

<sup>92</sup> Marx / Engels, *The German Ideology*, p. 94.

and man will be able to produce in accordance with his human essence. His activities would then no longer be work in the strict sense, but 'the free expression and ... the enjoyment of life'.<sup>93</sup> Thus far, Marx's thinking does not actually differ very much from Hegel's, although Hegel treats the role of work for the constitution of the human essence more implicitly and in the abstract.<sup>94</sup> Ultimately, however, Marx also thinks beyond the man who is defined solely in work. He famously envisages a world where it would be possible

... to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, ... without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.<sup>95</sup>

Man would, thus, no longer be defined by his work, but as a *man* who can engage in these various activities if and as he pleases. In this attempt to think beyond an understanding of man in work, however, Marx also reproduces this very definition, for to think of man as somebody who hunts in the morning and fishes in the afternoon is still to think of man in terms of what he *does*. And yet, it is in this respect that Marx departs from Hegel and from the whole Western tradition. Hegel, too, had already begun to fathom a notion of man beyond work. Once man, Kojève explains, 'is truly and fully satisfied by what *is*, he no longer desires anything real and therefore no longer changes reality'<sup>96</sup> in his work; indeed, he 'no longer acts in the full sense of the term'.<sup>97</sup> In this sense, Hegel's thinking certainly anticipates a notion of the human which does not depend on work. But even if man was now satisfied with the world and did not desire to change it any longer, he would still be defined in the negative. Now that he no longer negates the world in his work, he negates himself *as*

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<sup>93</sup> Marx, 'Excerpts from James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*' in: *Early Writings*, pp. 259-278 (p. 278).

<sup>94</sup> Hence, Marx's criticism that Hegel only accounts for 'abstract mental labour' (Cf. Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts' in: *Early Writings*, pp. 279-400; p. 386), that is, 'thought' (cf. also pp. 279-280).

<sup>95</sup> Marx / Engels, *The German Ideology*, p. 54.

<sup>96</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 192.

<sup>97</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 191.

*negation*; and now that he is no longer defined as negation, he is in essence *not* doing: nothingness. When Marx, by contrast, thinks of man beyond the worker, he seems to revert to a definition that presumes work; and yet, in this very paradox he avoids the dialectical trap of defining man once again in the negative. In his vision of a man who hunts in the morning and fishes in the afternoon, he anticipates an understanding of man that incorporates action without, however, implying that man must therefore be defined in the negative.

In the terms of the master-slave-dialectic, Hegel had recognized the existence of the master as an 'impasse'<sup>98</sup> and therefore believed that the human essence would find its fulfilment in the working slave. Marx, however, also saw the nihilism inherent in work and hence the predicament of the slave. He saw 'the worker's *own* physical and mental energy, his personal life ... as an activity directed against himself'<sup>99</sup> in and by his work. In this sense, he recognized in alienated work the structure of work *per se* and the fact that it is essentially a negation of the worker. He realized that in and by his work man would end up killing himself; ultimately, however, he believed that man could avert his fate yet again and abolish work,<sup>100</sup> and he did not see how this would also be man's doing away with *himself*. It is Nietzsche who first recognizes the impasse of the working slave in all its implications and who thinks, thus, the dialectic of master and slave to its conclusion. The mantra that man is 'something that must be overcome',<sup>101</sup> reiterated throughout *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, is a poignant description of the predicament of the dialectical slave. For as long as he is in essence a working slave, man realizes himself only in order to become other than he is; he realizes himself only as 'something that must be overcome' and therefore in the negation of

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<sup>98</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 46.

<sup>99</sup> Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts' in: *Early Writings*, pp. 279-400 (p. 327).

<sup>100</sup> Marx / Engels, *The German Ideology*, p. 94.

<sup>101</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 279 and passim.

himself. He whose essence is becoming can no more than the master be satisfied by what *is*.<sup>102</sup> Hence, the dialectical man cannot simply cease the negation of himself, as Marx presumed; he *has* to negate himself in work until his untimely death. In his predictions of a 'period of catastrophe'<sup>103</sup> and 'the new warlike age',<sup>104</sup> Nietzsche also foretells of the implications of the slave's predicament. Having seen the full paradox of the slave's existence, he anticipates in the soon-to-come horrors of the twentieth century the work of the man who cannot stop negating and in all his fervour cannot see his fervour as negation.

Not even a century after Hegel had pinned all hope for the future of man on the potential of the working slave, Nietzsche's thinking marks, thus, the end of the understanding of man in '*ora et labora*'. The dialectical age believed that it had mastered the forces of life and that there is no longer any tragedy,<sup>105</sup> in that there is nothing that cannot be changed or averted by work. Even Marx still believed that the dialectical man could avert his fate and 'do away with' work before it kills him. Nietzsche, however, shows this belief to be an illusion and shows the price of this illusion – and he speaks of tragedy again. He is the first to see the tragedy of the dialectical man in its entirety and in this tragedy, the *truth* of man. He recognizes even in the dialectical distortion of man, trapped as he is in deadly negation, man as he essentially *is*. In the sense that he sees man in play and in creation, in *Niederkunft*, his understanding of the human resembles not so much the dialectical notion of man as that of woman. And thus it is that his thinking heralds the end of the dialectical

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<sup>102</sup> Cf. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 46.

<sup>103</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 39.

<sup>104</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 138.

<sup>105</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 66.



understanding of man and a new conception of the human in play and chance, in creation and bringing forth: in '*alea et parturio*'.<sup>106</sup>

### **A Marginal Threat: Woman's Standing in the Dialectic**

In all the time that the human has been defined in terms of work – from Socrates until Marx, even until Derrida – philosophy has hardly been concerned with woman. The fact that the West has for a long time viewed woman with suspicion is nowadays a much discussed commonplace for which various reasons are sought and given; ultimately, however, the position of woman on the margins of the human is defined in the structure of dialectical being. Dialectics determines being such that it is essentially anthropomorphic: such that *man* is at its centre, whereas woman, who remains more closely tied to the forces of life, is of barely more interest to the dialecticians than the natural world. In an era that defines the human as the negation of the world, the position of woman is always precarious and her humanity is constantly in question. And yet, although woman is left out of the dialectical understanding of the human, she is required for its perpetuation and she is the other for which the dialectic strives eternally. The dialectical age aims, thus, to eradicate the difference between man and woman, whilst at the same time maintaining it in all the dimensions of

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<sup>106</sup> The notion of the working man, however, is so deeply engrained in Western thought that even a century after Nietzsche it has not been entirely dissipated. Derrida's theorizing of work in *Specters of Marx* leads him to the conclusion that 'the work of mourning is not one kind of work among others. It is work itself, work in general' (Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 97). In the sense that Derrida sees in all work the structure of mourning, he is aware of the fact that all work seeks meaning in negativity and, seeks indeed, to *make* of negativity meaning. Nonetheless, the texts assembled in *The Work of Mourning* 'not only speak of or about mourning but are themselves texts of or in mourning' (Pascale-Anne Brault / Michael Naas, 'Editors' Introduction' in: Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, edited by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 3). Derrida mourns, no doubt, his deceased friends, but he also mourns the work that he knows to be impossible. In the full knowledge of the impossibility of his task, Derrida mourns work and mourns the fact that the only form of work that is still possible is mourning.

dialectical *Aufhebung*. At the very beginning of the dialectical era, Plato's *Republic* already depicts its goal – and its end – in a world where everybody, men *and* women, are defined solely in and through their work. It is because 'natural capacities are similarly distributed in each sex', Plato argues, that 'it is natural for women to take part in all occupations as well as men'.<sup>107</sup> The *Laws*, however, a later and more pragmatic text, reveals very different motives behind his argument for the equality of women. Here, Plato argues that

... the common tables of men are ... a heaven-born and admirable institution, but you are mistaken in leaving the women unregulated by law. They have no similar institution of public tables in the light of day, and just that part of the human race which is by nature prone to secrecy and stealth on account of their weakness – I mean the female sex – has been left alone by the legislator as hopelessly undisciplined, which is a mistake. [...] For women are accustomed to creep into dark places, and when dragged out into the light while exerting their utmost powers of resistance, will be far too much for the legislator.<sup>108</sup>

In this instance, it is clear that Plato does not advocate the equality of women in education and work for the benefit of women – very much on the contrary. He readily acknowledges that his policies on woman's place in society amount to dragging her out of her secret dark hiding places into the light of day in order to have a better account of her. In advocating the education of woman, Plato demands, thus, of woman that she, too, aim for the utmost *negation* of her essence. Woman, however, is always more bound up by the forces of life and can never negate herself to the same extent as man; hence, she always remains an uncomfortable reminder of the futility of the dialectical task. And as she represents the impossibility of the dialectical definition of the human, she is always portrayed as the downfall of man. In Hegel's understanding, Kojève argues,

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<sup>107</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, p. 175.

<sup>108</sup> Plato, 'Laws' in: B. Jowett (ed.), *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated by B. Jowett, volume IV (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), pp. 189-544 (p. 349).

the pagan World perishes because it excludes Work. But the immediate agent of its ruin is ... Woman.<sup>109</sup>

The dialectical age ascribes, thus, the demise of the ancient world to woman and has considered woman as a threat to a truly human existence ever since. In his analysis of the demise of Sparta, Aristotle may seem suspicious of the virtually equal standing of women in Spartan society; ultimately, however, he blames the demise of the city not on the women being educated and working just like the men, but precisely on the fact that they were *not*. Sparta, he believes, declined because

... the legislator wanted to make the whole state hardy, and he has carried out his intention in the case of the men, but he has neglected the women, who live in every sort of intemperance and luxury.<sup>110</sup>

The women, Aristotle argues, cause the downfall of Sparta because they do not, despite all appearances, negate themselves in work to the same extent as the men. In the works of the earliest dialecticians, it is, thus, already evident that woman poses a threat to a life defined purely in work and in negation and that such a life is indeed ultimately impossible for man.

In Christian thought, the notion of woman as the downfall of man is only accentuated further. She who ate of the forbidden tree prompted, after all, man's expulsion from paradise; she brought toil and suffering on mankind and in this sense led to his demise. And yet she is, thus, also the reason for man's *human* existence, which commences precisely with his expulsion from paradise. In this sense, woman – who is in the dialectical understanding never truly human to the same extent as man – is, in fact, human *before* man. The dialectical man seeks his realization in working on the given, but in working, he is obedient to god. He could breach god's command only in no longer working; hence, his predicament is that he

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<sup>109</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 62.

<sup>110</sup> Aristotle, 'Politics' in: Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, volume II, pp. 1986-2129 (p. 2015).

can only ever negate the world *or* negate god. And because he cannot *fully* realize himself in the negation of the given, he will incessantly seek to exceed himself in negation – until, at last, he ends up negating himself. Woman, on the other hand, acted against god *and* the given world – except, perhaps for the serpent – when she ate of the tree of knowledge. She has already realized her human essence at the time, and the expulsion of mankind from paradise confirms that she has changed the world. And because she has already realized herself *universally* in the world that began when she ate of the forbidden tree, she does not have to exceed herself in nihilism. She never negates the world as categorically as man and she does not negate herself as comprehensively as he does. Whereas man's existence after his expulsion from paradise is pure negation, she affirms the world she has created in her initial negation of the world by propagating it in childbirth, in *Niederkunft*.

In her initial deed of eating of the tree, woman has already negated the given more universally than man ever will; and yet, she can never define herself as negation to the same extent as man. Her position *vis-à-vis* the dialectic is, thus, always more complex than that of man, who *is* the very heart of dialectical being. Woman always remains left out, but she is never outside of the dialectic; she is not in essence un-dialectical. In the imagery of Genesis, the one thing she has not negated is the serpent – the serpent of dialectical reason, which, 'more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made',<sup>111</sup> worms itself into everything and winds itself out of everything. Woman in fact *obeyed* the serpent when she ate of the tree of knowledge; she was 'beguiled'<sup>112</sup> by the cunning of dialectics to delve into the other, the forbidden, and in the end to *eat* it. In this sense, woman has already affirmed the dialectic and has already acted in the dialectical sense. After she first ate of the tree, however,

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<sup>111</sup> Genesis 3.1.

<sup>112</sup> Genesis 3.13.

god announced to the serpent that he 'put enmity between [it] and the woman';<sup>113</sup> and there has been much enmity between woman and the serpent of dialectical reason ever since. Woman's life on earth is such that she is much less susceptible to the cunning of dialectics than man. And yet, precisely in forever opposing the dialectical serpent, she also affirms it, for it was the serpent who initially seduced her into this existence. In opposing the dialectic, in other words, woman constitutes the other that the dialectic stipulates; in this sense, her resistance to the dialectic contains an element of affirmation and *is*, ultimately, always an affirmation. In the imagery of Genesis, woman is, indeed, depicted as the anti-dialectical principle at the heart of the dialectic. She is, after all, made *from* man<sup>114</sup> and emerges, thus, out of the dialectical principle; but inasmuch as she originates in a *division* of man, she is essentially anti-dialectical. She testifies to the division at the very heart of the dialectic, which is negated in its subsequent aim for reconciliation. In this sense, the woman who was taken out of man is the first division and the first difference that the dialectic presumes in its quest for reconciliation; thus, she stands for the 'logic of disintegration'<sup>115</sup> that Adorno identified at the core of the dialectic.

In the Christian imagery, woman may be made from man, but it is she who marks the beginning of his human existence – as well as its end. In her first act of negation, she initiated man's life on earth and achieved thus already what the dialectical man is prepared to kill or risk his own life for: she attained recognition of herself as human, and recognition even by a god. In eating of the forbidden tree, woman has challenged and in a sense negated god, and unlike man, who can negate god only in his death, she did this without killing him. Woman is in this sense much better prepared for the sort of relationship with god that in Deleuze's

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<sup>113</sup> Genesis 3.15.

<sup>114</sup> Genesis 2.22.

<sup>115</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 144.

reading of Nietzsche pertains to the Overman. Deleuze interprets Nietzsche's notion of the Overman as a transformation of man's relationship to god: as an end to his present feelings of guilt, debt, *ressentiment* and revenge towards god and the beginning of a relationship of enjoyment and love that would be reminiscent of Dionysos and Ariadne.<sup>116</sup> The dialectical man, who strives for the other and the altogether-other<sup>117</sup> only to negate it, is essentially incapable of this kind of relationship with god. As Nietzsche emphasizes time and again, he needs to be 'overcome' for the relationship between man and god to be transformed. Woman, on the other hand, is in essence such that she could, indeed, establish a relationship of enjoyment and love with god; they already live in mutual recognition.<sup>118</sup> Ultimately it is, thus, only woman who can live with a god. Man can never realize himself as long as there is a god, because he has not yet negated the other; nor, however, can he realize himself once he has killed god, for now that he has negated everything and even the altogether other, he whose essence is negation ends up killing himself. Thus it is that, in Heidegger's famous words, only a god can save us now<sup>119</sup> – a god who will spell the end of the negation that is the dialectical man and subsequently becomes woman's lover. This, indeed, is the future of man that Nietzsche anticipates in his thinking of woman. His words on women are not the lightly spoken wisecracks of a misogynist, for which they have at times been mistaken, and it is not simply a curiosity that whole sections of his work are dedicated to women and the

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<sup>116</sup> Cf. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, pp. 147-194.

<sup>117</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, pp. 78-91 and *passim*.

<sup>118</sup> Thus, Zarathustra mocks: 'Ah, how you stand there, you unfruitful men, how lean-ribbed! And, indeed, many of you have noticed that. And they have said: 'Perhaps a god has secretly taken something from me there as I slept? Truly, sufficient to form a little woman for himself!' (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 143) His remark illustrates that god, as Nietzsche thinks him, created woman not as a companion for man, as he claims in Genesis, but as a lover for himself; and he deprived man in order to do so, and then fooled him into believing that it all happened for his benefit. Thinking the human as woman rather than as man would, thus, change god's attitude to man and in therefore change god essentially. In this sense, the West faces in Nietzsche's thinking not only the question of what it means to be human; it faces the question of who – or what – god is.

<sup>119</sup> Heidegger, 'Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten', *Der Spiegel*, 23/1976 (31 May 1976), 193-219 (p. 209).

question of woman,<sup>120</sup> whilst he hardly speaks of men in the narrow sense, of *Männer*, anywhere at all. The translation may actually be deceptive here, because the German term *Menschen*, human beings in general, also translates into English as 'man' or 'men'.<sup>121</sup> Nietzsche's choice of the terms, however, is never fortuitous. He speaks of woman and not of man because he thinks the human as woman and not as man. Marx had, no doubt, made out the impasse in the life of the dialectical slave, but like all thinkers before him, he still believed that the solution to man's predicament lay in the existence of *man*. Nietzsche, on the other hand, saw not only that the dialectical slave is an existential impasse; he also realized that the future of man lies in the existence of woman. And thought as woman, the Overman or the man of the future as Nietzsche conceives him, is such that he is in essence man – as he appears to be in Heidegger's reading – and yet precisely *not* man, as he appears to be for Deleuze.

In that he thinks the human as woman, Nietzsche poses the question of the human anew and poses it for the first time in the history of philosophy in earnest. The question of what man *is* has, strictly speaking, not been asked before Nietzsche; thus far, the West has been preoccupied with the question of what man does or ought to do – which presumes already that man is a *doer*, a worker. The West has, in fact, always asked of man what he does and of woman, what she *is*.<sup>122</sup> This is not a coincidence but emanates from the structure of

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<sup>120</sup> Most notably, perhaps, in 'Of Old and Young Women' in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and 'Woman and Child' in *Human, All Too Human*.

<sup>121</sup> The chapter 'Of Manly Prudence' in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is called 'Von der Menschen-Klugheit' in the German original. Indeed, Zarathustra speaks mostly not of man in the sense of *Mann*, but in the sense of *Mensch*; thus, also in Nietzsche's mantra that man is something that must be overcome. Nietzsche, 'Also Sprach Zarathustra' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VI/1: *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, passim.

<sup>122</sup> When Freud declares: 'The great question that has never been answered and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is "What does a woman want?"' (Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work*, II: *Years of Maturity: 1901-1919* (London: Hogarth, 1955), p. 468), he is in essence asking what woman *is*, since in the Western tradition, being is ultimately determined as willing. In Heidegger's words, '[t]o conceive of beings according to their

the dialectic, which sees itself and the dialectical man at its centre only ever as doing, but seeks to discover in the other, in woman, the essence – it seeks *being*. As the first philosopher to ask what man *is*, Nietzsche is also the first to grant that man could become truly other than he is. And if, as Kojève suggests,

to attribute value to a being not in relation to what he *does* ... but simply because he *is*, because of the simple fact of his *Sein*, his *Being* – is to love him,<sup>123</sup>

he is also the first philosopher to love man. The West has never loved man and *could* not love man as long as it saw him solely in the negative. In this sense, it is no coincidence and certainly no contradiction that Nietzsche, who thinks man as woman, is the first thinker of the West who truly loves man.



Although Nietzsche's thinking marks the end of the dialectical understanding of man, it does not 'overcome' the dialectic in the strictest and the dialectical sense of the term. Indeed, when Hegel returns after Nietzsche and after the crisis, he returns as Zarathustra, as Nietzsche's prophet who carries as his animal still the serpent of dialectical reason. Zarathustra, however, *carries* the serpent, rather than being beguiled and ultimately overthrown by it. This image is perhaps the best illustration of the impact of Nietzsche's thinking in the history of philosophy. Nietzsche does not abolish or even negate the dialectic, but determines man's relationship to the dialectic anew. He is not aiming to eradicate dialectical work, but he warns that it must not be understood as an end in itself, as it has been in the dialectical age. Accordingly, he notes that

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basic character as will is not a view held by particular thinkers; it is a necessity in the history of the Dasein which those thinkers ground'. Heidegger, *Nietzsche, I: The Will to Power as Art*, p. 36.

<sup>123</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 61.



[w]oman and the genius do not work. Woman has hitherto been the greatest luxury of mankind. In all those moments where we are *doing* our best, we are not working. Work is merely a means to those moments.<sup>124</sup>

In Nietzsche's thinking, work ceases to be the absolute essence of man and becomes a mere means to an end; correspondingly, the existence of woman is revaluated from the barely human to the highest luxury of mankind – and the end, the goal, the future of man. Nietzsche, in other words, does not abolish man; he redefines the human so that it is no longer *as man* that he is truly human, as he had been hitherto, but so that man is truly human only as woman. And in metaphysical terms, the difference between man and woman is, ultimately, the difference between the human as he is determined in work and the human as she is determined in labour.

### **Being-Towards-Death or Living on Earth: The Theory of Work and Labour**

The distinction between work and labour plays an integral part in Western thinking but it does not, to all appearances, feature very much in the philosophical writing of the West. Hannah Arendt's analysis of *The Human Condition* is perhaps the most comprehensive study on the theory of work and labour to date. Arendt certainly notes the curious silence of the Western tradition on the topic of work and labour, but she argues that against this

scarcity of historical evidence stands one very articulate and obstinate testimony, namely, the simple fact that every European language, ancient and modern, contains two etymologically unrelated words for what we have come to think of

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<sup>124</sup> 'Weib und Genie arbeiten nicht. Das Weib war bisher der höchste Luxus der Menschheit. In allen Augenblicken, wo wir unser Bestes thun, arbeiten wir nicht. Arbeit ist nur ein Mittel zu diesen Augenblicken'. Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VII/1: *Nachgelassene Fragmente: Juli 1882-Winter 1883/84*, p. 192.

as the same activity, and retains them in the face of their persistent synonymous usage.<sup>125</sup>

The fact that there are, or were, two different terms for work in circulation in most European languages, Arendt points out, would indicate that the distinction is ingrained in Western thought. She presents a somewhat 'unusual'<sup>126</sup> and yet apparently obvious argument for a distinction that corresponds to 'the distinction between productive and unproductive labor', on the grounds that the latter already 'contains ... the more fundamental distinction between work and labor'.<sup>127</sup> Accordingly, she explains that

[i]t is ... the mark of all laboring that it leaves nothing behind, that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent. And yet this effort, despite its futility, is born of a great urgency and motivated by a more powerful desire than anything else, because life itself depends on it.<sup>128</sup>

The defining characteristic of what Arendt calls labour is, thus, that it 'leaves nothing behind' and therefore does not change the world essentially. Labour, 'understood as a noun, never designates the finished product'<sup>129</sup> and does not, in fact, even imply a product; it 'never "produces" anything but life'.<sup>130</sup> In Arendt's understanding, the difference between work and labour is therefore the difference between producing objects for persistent and repeated use and producing objects for immediate consumption. She readily admits, however, that this difference is becoming more and more blurred today, for 'a chair or a table is now consumed as rapidly as a dress and a dress used up almost as quickly as

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<sup>125</sup> She explains that 'the Greek language distinguishes between *ponen* and *ergazesthai*, the Latin between *laborare* and *facere* or *fabricari*, which have the same etymological root, the French between *travailler* and *ouvrer*, the German between *arbeiten* and *werken*. In all these cases, only the equivalents for 'labor' have an unequivocal connotation of pain and trouble. The German *Arbeit* applied originally only to farm labor executed by serfs and not to the work of the craftsman, which was called *Werk*. The French *travailler* replaced the older *labourer* and is derived from *tripalium*, a kind of torture'. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 80.

<sup>126</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 79.

<sup>127</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 87.

<sup>128</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 87.

<sup>129</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 80.

<sup>130</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 88.

food'.<sup>131</sup> In the sense that her distinction has, thus, come under pressure, it is ultimately contingent upon the circumstances of man's life; hence, it is not an *essential* distinction between work and labour. And whilst Arendt considers the effect of work on man, in that she discusses work that is physically more or less demanding or work that is demeaning, she does not examine work as a constitutive aspect of the human; she does not think of work in metaphysical terms. As the title of her book suggests, she treats work and labour as *conditions* of the human – and not in terms of the human essence.

In this sense, Arendt approaches the question of work and labour on very different grounds than Nietzsche, who recognizes it as a metaphysical question of the human essence. Her analysis shows that she is essentially still taken in by the dialectical illusions that Nietzsche had already exposed as a deadly impasse. Indeed, she argues that

... unlike *working*, whose end has come when the object is finished, ready to be added to the common world of things, *laboring* always moves in the same circle, which is prescribed by the biological process of the living organism and the end of its 'toil and trouble' comes only with the death of this organism.<sup>132</sup>

Arendt evidently perceives labour – not work – to be such that it can be accomplished only in the death of the one who undertakes it. Her interpretation runs, thus, counter to any that delves into the *essence* of work and labour. In Hegel's thinking, *work* has been exposed as the negation that constitutes man as human and as the activity that is never finished with the product but only in the worker's death. By contrast, labour describes, as Arendt rightly notes, the actions that immediately sustain man's life; it may be relentlessly repetitive but it does not harbour the same degree of negativity and it is ultimately accomplished not in

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<sup>131</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 124.

<sup>132</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 98.

man's death but in his *life*. Indeed, even Arendt's approach does not entirely shield her from the negative structure of work; she concedes that

[f]rom the viewpoint of nature, it is work rather than labor that is destructive, since the work process takes matter out of nature's hand without giving it back to her in the swift course of the natural metabolism of the living body.<sup>133</sup>

But even though she acknowledges the structure of negativity in work here, Arendt's standpoint ultimately always leads her to regard labour as the destructive and demeaning activity and work as the truly human expression and manifestation of man. This position certainly informs her reading of Genesis; hence, she argues that

[n]owhere in the Old Testament is death 'the wage of sin'. Nor did the curse by which man was expelled from paradise punish him with labor and birth; it only made labor harsh and birth full of sorrow.<sup>134</sup>

In Arendt's view, man's expulsion from paradise is not a radical break, but almost a natural progression. Even in paradise, to be sure, man would have had *do* something and would have had to make however minimal an effort to sustain his life. Arendt's basic error, however, is that she does not see the *essential* difference between this kind of labour and man's toil on earth. She believes that the curse only made man's labour a little harsher, but in fact, it marks the beginning of human *work*; it is the point at which man's activity becomes tainted by negativity. Labour, no doubt, also implies a certain negation of the world, but in so far as it serves to sustain man's life, it is in all its ends and purposes an *affirmation* of life. After the fall, however, the man who has so far lived at one with the world becomes in essence its negation. Now he no longer labours but works, for his activity is no longer directed at simply sustaining his life but at realizing himself in the negation of the world. There can be little doubt that this kind of work, which is directed *against* the forces of life, is

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<sup>133</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 100.

<sup>134</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 107.

'harsher' than the labour man had undertaken previously. What Arendt fails to see, however, is that the difference is not merely one of degree – but one of kind.

The story of Genesis illustrates, thus, how the distinction between work and labour is connected to the very beginning of man and reaches into the core of what constitutes the human. It is this distinction between work and labour that Nietzsche returns to at the end of Western metaphysics as the first question and the first instance of man. Although he does not present an argument for the distinction and only his consistent usage of the terms *Werk* and *Arbeit* shows him to make it at all, it is implicit everywhere in his writing and particularly in his writing on women. To think the human in terms of labour at the end of the dialectical age is to think about woman, for man has in essence been reduced to *work*.<sup>135</sup> And in the juxtaposition of man and woman, Nietzsche thinks the distinction between work and labour in its implications for the human *essence*. In Arendt's reasoning it seems that some of the activities we undertake are labour and others are work, but they do not affect anything other than what we *do*. In Nietzsche's thinking, on the other hand, work and labour determine what man *is*; work constitutes the human as man and labour constitutes the human as woman. The distinction is essential; man is either truly human only as man – that is, only as he realizes himself in work, as he does in the dialectical age which has, consequently, always been suspicious of woman. Or man is truly human only as woman – that is, only as he realizes himself in *labour*. This is the concept of man that Nietzsche's thinking heralds, challenging, thus, the very notion of what it means to be human.

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<sup>135</sup> If Arendt argues that the West is becoming 'a society of laborers' (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 126) she is actually describing the same process of man being increasingly defined in the negative; the apparent contradiction stems from her usage of the terms.

In Nietzsche's understanding, the distinction between work and labour rests on very different criteria from those that Arendt presumes; the question, it seems, is not so much *what* is being done – What is being produced? Is it for use or for consumption? – but *how* it is done. Where the emphasis is on the negation, that is, where an action is in essence dialectical and amounts to the negation of man by himself, Nietzsche speaks of work, *Arbeit*. And where the emphasis lies on the affirmation, where an action is in essence conducive to or indicative of life, Nietzsche speaks of *Werk* – or, indeed, of giving birth and of *Niederkunft*. In the sense that he distinguishes, thus, between work and labour according to the tenor of the activity as negation or affirmation, his approach implies that what appears to be the same activity can either be work or labour, depending on the circumstances. In fact, if the difference between work and labour is the difference between an action carried out as negation, and one carried out as affirmation, it is only the smallest gap that separates work and labour – so small that it is usually not even acknowledged, and yet so fundamental that it determines our whole understanding of man and of the world. Arendt, on the other hand, seeks the grounds for a distinction in the activities themselves; she looks at the mode of production, the product, its use and the circumstances of its consumption. She presumes, thus, that some human activities are by nature work and others labour; yet, she grants that the quality of an activity is not always straightforward or indeed inherent.<sup>136</sup> In this sense, her own conclusions already expose the flaws in her approach and show her reasoning to fall prey to dialectical illusions. Ultimately, hers is the position of one beguiled by the dialectical notion of productivity, and by a twist of dialectical logic it reveals, thus, the price that the dialectical age pays for the *illusion* of productivity.

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<sup>136</sup> In pointing out that present-day society has 'almost succeeded in leveling all human activities to the common denominator of securing the necessities of life' (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 126), she suggests that nearly all contemporary human activity is labour – and undermines, thus, her attempt to ground the distinction between work and labour in the activity itself.

The clearest illustration of the difference between Nietzsche's and Arendt's thinking on work and labour is perhaps their respective take on art. In Arendt's view, the artist is, 'strictly speaking ... the only "worker" left in a laboring society',<sup>137</sup> for she interprets art above all as freedom from the necessity that characterizes labour. According to Nietzsche, on the other hand, art is the truly metaphysical activity of man and as such necessary and essential to the human; in this sense, it is the epitome of labour even by Arendt's definition. In this instance, the discrepancy is indeed not simply one of the terminology; it stems from the fact that Arendt, in line with the Western tradition, still understands freedom and necessity as opposites. Accordingly, she notes that contemporary labour theories 'almost unanimously define labor as the opposite of play' and that,

[a]s a result, all serious activities, irrespective of their fruits, are called labor, and every activity which is not necessary either for the life of the individual or for the life process of society is subsumed under playfulness.<sup>138</sup>

Eventually, she predicts, 'not even the "work" of the artist is left; it is dissolved into play and has lost its worldly meaning'.<sup>139</sup> Play, for Arendt, denotes what is *not* necessary to sustain man's life, as is labour, and does not even have a lasting effect on the world like work. Nietzsche, on the other hand, has recognized chance *as* a necessity of life;<sup>140</sup> he has seen through the deception of dialectical reason and knows that the freedom promised in the dialectic is only ever an illusion. He realizes that play is not, as Arendt suggests, devoid of 'worldly meaning', but defines in fact man's being in the world, for play is the embracing of *every* outcome and in this sense the affirmation of both chance and necessity. Hence, it is not a contradiction that Nietzsche sees in art labour *and* play, for in his understanding, labour

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<sup>137</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 127.

<sup>138</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 127.

<sup>139</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 128.

<sup>140</sup> Cf. Deleuze, 'The Dice-Throw' in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, pp. 25-27.

and play are not opposites but share, in fact, the same structure. Labour and play, *alea et parturio*, are the pursuits which determine man as woman.



In woman, Nietzsche recognizes a human existence which cannot be reduced to negation and which is, in this respect, essentially different from the slave. The ancients were aware of this distinction; they knew that

nature has distinguished between the female and the slave. For she is not niggardly,<sup>141</sup>

and realized, thus, that she whose essence is bringing forth is categorically different from the slave, who is lack, absence and negation – and in short, niggardly. The dialectical age, however, overlooks this essential difference and on account of her social situation often compares woman's existence to that of the slave. De Beauvoir argues that

'[c]ertain passages in the argument employed by Hegel in defining the relation of master to slave apply much better to the relation of man to woman'.<sup>142</sup>

On the other hand, however, she acknowledges that

woman cannot in good faith be regarded simply as a worker; for her reproductive function is as important as her productive capacity, no less in the social economy than in the individual life.<sup>143</sup>

In the sense that she realizes that woman cannot be reduced to her work, de Beauvoir is clearly aware that woman is precisely *not* a slave; yet she falls prey to the dialectical imagery

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<sup>141</sup> Aristotle, 'Politics' in: Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, volume II, pp. 1986-2129 (p. 1987).

<sup>142</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 96.

<sup>143</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 89.



of woman as slave. At the heart of the dialectical worldview is the illusion that work frees man from necessity; and correspondingly, the dialectical age entertains the image of woman as slave, shackled by the necessity of life which she is forced to perpetuate. The image of woman as a slave is, thus, deeply engrained in the tradition of Western thought. Even Nietzsche, it seems, does not steer clear of it as he remarks:

It is 'the slave' in the vain man's blood, a remnant of the craftiness of the slave – and how much 'slave' still remains [*ist rückständig*] in woman, for example! – which seeks to *seduce* him to good opinions about himself; it is likewise the slave who immediately afterwards falls down before these opinions as if he himself had not called them forth. – And to say it again: vanity is an atavism.<sup>144</sup>

But even though it seems that in keeping with the dialectical tradition, Nietzsche likens woman to the slave here, his remark in fact transcends rather than perpetuates this image. He is actually discussing *man* and only mentions woman as a point of comparison. And indeed, he discerns 'the slave' in the vain man's *blood* and in this sense at the very core of his being, whereas in woman, 'the slave' is residual, '*rückständig*'. In this sense, Nietzsche's remark actually shows that the vanity of the slave is much more of an atavism in woman than it is in man.

Woman is essentially different from the slave precisely because she is *not* simply the negation of the slave and of man in general; she differs from him, but she does not negate him. In labour, in bringing forth man, she is ultimately always his affirmation. The relationship of man and woman is, thus, indicative of the asymmetrical relationship between negation and affirmation; for negation, as Deleuze explains,

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<sup>144</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 199, and 'Jenseits von Gut und Böse' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke, VI/2: Jenseits von Gut und Böse / Zur Genealogie der Moral*, pp. 1-255 (p. 224).

is *opposed* to affirmation but affirmation *differs* from negation. We cannot think of affirmation as 'being opposed' to negation: this would be to place the negative within it.<sup>145</sup>

The act of giving birth, of *Niederkunft*, is the utmost affirmation of man; ultimately, however, *all* human labour is an affirmation of man, in that it serves to sustain and perpetuate human life. The affirmation of man in labour is, thus, not peculiar to the biologically female. In metaphysical terms, *Niederkunft* simply describes the creation of the human as the epitome of labour, understood as all human activity that serves to sustain man's life. And correspondingly, woman denotes in metaphysical terms a human consciousness which has, quite independently of biological factors, been shaped by labour, as opposed to the human consciousness that arises in work. In the dialectic of master and slave, Hegel describes how man proves himself to be human by risking his life for the recognition by another,<sup>146</sup> and in fighting with the other becomes either master or slave – unless he dies or kills the other, in which case he remains as he is and 'cannot realize and reveal his humanity'.<sup>147</sup> Consequently, man

in his nascent state, ... is never simply man. He is always, necessarily, and essentially, either Master or Slave;<sup>148</sup>

and in this sense, man is always determined by work – whether he works or not. Ultimately, however, the master has not attained the recognition for which he staked his life, for he is recognized not by a fellow man but by a slave, and as he does not work, he cannot change the fact that his slave will eventually kill him. The slave, on the other hand, works to attain the recognition as human that he initially forewent, but he will never be recognized by his master, however much he changes the world in his work, which finally kills him. A human

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<sup>145</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 188.

<sup>146</sup> Cf. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 7.

<sup>147</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 8.

<sup>148</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 8.

existence is, thus, in either case one that can be fulfilled only in death. It is in this sense that man 'is that which is in relation to his end';<sup>149</sup> he is only in this own death and he is his own end. His human existence is being-towards a future project, and as being-towards-the-end, as being-towards-death,<sup>150</sup> it is becoming-dead: it is dying. Ultimately, work determines man's existence such that it is either slowly accomplished murder or prolonged suicide.

Woman, on the other hand, is conspicuously absent from this account of the human consciousness. Indeed, Hegel takes woman to lead an ahistoric, universal life not dissimilar to an animal's, as feminist thinkers have criticized.<sup>151</sup> He did not see that woman incorporates not only the animal existence of man, which is necessary for the propagation of the species, but that her existence, too, is an expression of a *human* self-consciousness, although she is, by way of her labour, neither master nor slave. In labour, woman puts her life at stake,<sup>152</sup> but she does not do so for prestige alone, as the master does, who proves thus that he is 'not ... bound to life'.<sup>153</sup> When woman risks her life in labour, she is bound to life, for she already values her life and that of the other, *as human*. She is aware that her 'life is as essential ... as pure self-consciousness'<sup>154</sup> to her. Unlike the master, who realizes his human existence in staking his life *unnecessarily*, as no animal would, she realizes her human essence in staking a life she values *for the other*. And thus, she too realizes herself over and above an animal existence, for an animal could not consciously put its life at stake for the other. In

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<sup>149</sup> Derrida, 'The Ends of Man' in: *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (London: Prentice Hall, 1982), pp. 109-136 (p. 123).

<sup>150</sup> Cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 236-237.

<sup>151</sup> Patricia Jagentowicz Mills notes in 'Hegel's Antigone' that '[w]hile Hegel's system is meant to be a historical account of the development of humanity, woman is presented as outside history'. Patricia Jagentowicz Mills, 'Hegel's Antigone' in: Mills (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of G. W. F. Hegel* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), pp. 59-88 (p. 81).

<sup>152</sup> Medea would indeed rather 'stand / Three times in the front of battle than bear one child'. Euripides, 'The Medea', translated by Rex Warner in: *Alcestis / The Medea / The Heracleidae / Hippolytus*, edited by David Greene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), pp. 55-108 (p. 67).

<sup>153</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 12.

<sup>154</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 115.

labour, however, woman does not only risk her biological existence; she also puts her *human* life at stake, for she risks propagating the species merely as all living beings do. It is the fact that she *consciously* puts her biological life at risk that distinguishes her as human; and it is in this realization that she grasps that she has a human existence which she is equally putting at stake. In labour, she recognizes, thus, her human life in all its precariousness. And in recognizing herself as human, she also recognizes the child, the other, as human, for 'in the mother-to-be the antithesis of subject and object ceases to exist'.<sup>155</sup> In labour, woman's consciousness is shaped such that she recognizes *in the other* her human essence and attains, thus, the recognition that man fights and works and kills and dies for – in vain. The dialectical man *is* only in becoming, but his goal, his *telos* is always also his death. In this sense, he who *is* only future does not have a future. It is woman who, as Nietzsche was well aware, is the future – and the *only* future – of man. Her labour is the bringing forth and the beginning of man, but it is also the affirmation of man *as he is* and heralds, in this sense, the *end* of man understood as the negation of himself. And precisely in spelling his end, woman is also the *future* of man, for she does not effect the teleological end that the dialectical man brings on himself, but his *avenir* in the Derridean sense:<sup>156</sup> She is the man-to-come.



In the dialectical era, woman is the barely human other and yet, as such, she embodies the *truth* of man; it is she – not man – who reveals the nature of being to an age that would rather fabricate its own truths and therefore persistently shies away from her. In comparing truth to a woman, Nietzsche shows that behind the dialectical truth of man, he sees the tragic truth that woman incorporates. He muses:

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<sup>155</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 512.

<sup>156</sup> Cf. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 65 and *passim*.

Supposing truth to be a woman – what? is the suspicion not well founded that all philosophers, when they have been dogmatists, have had little understanding of women? that the gruesome earnestness, the clumsy importunity with which they have hitherto been in the habit of approaching truth have been inept and improper means for winning a wench? Certainly she has not let herself be won ...<sup>157</sup>

Nietzsche illustrates, thus, not only that woman incorporates the truth of being but that this has, to date, escaped the philosophers. The philosophers of the West, who have hitherto all been dialecticians, have not as yet seen into the truth of being and indeed, Nietzsche suggests, they never will as long as they approach the truth as they do – as long, that is, as they remain dialecticians. And precisely because it cannot grasp the truth of woman, the dialectical age suspects her to be secretive and flighty. Men, Nietzsche notes

have hitherto treated women like birds which have strayed down to them from the heights: as something more delicate, more fragile, more savage, stranger, sweeter, soulful – but as something which has to be caged up so that it shall not fly away.<sup>158</sup>

Woman, as Nietzsche describes her here, is essentially alien to man, not least because she has *come down* to him, whereas the dialectical man can only ever aspire *upwards*. Thus, she is the other that the dialectical man requires and therefore seeks to cage and to preserve; but precisely in keeping her, he robs her of her essence in all the movements of *Aufhebung*: he makes of her a bird which cannot fly. In Nietzsche's imagery, woman is actually the freer existence; and indeed, the dialectical man is never, for all his efforts, as successful at restraining woman as he is at restraining *himself*. Correspondingly, Nietzsche observes that

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<sup>157</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 31.

<sup>158</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 166.

[i]t is difficult to say something wrong about woman: with women, nothing is impossible...<sup>159</sup>

As opposed to the dialectical man, who cannot be anything but negation, woman is not essentially restricted in her potential. Nietzsche does not deny that she is much more than man tied to the necessity of life, but in contrast to the Western tradition, which has interpreted this as her 'enslavement' to nature and as restraint of her human freedom, he realizes that it is precisely in her standing *vis-à-vis* life that woman incorporates *all* the possibilities of man. Man is not free as long as he attempts to escape the necessity of life by changing the world in his work; he is not free until he can see beyond the 'enslavement' of woman and recognizes in the dialectical deceptions his *own* enslavement.



In woman, Nietzsche discerns a human existence that is not enslaved by the nihilism inherent in dialectical work, but neither is hers simply an existence in affirmation where the existence of man is one of negation. Woman, too, negates the given and she does so essentially, for 'one can truly create only by *negating* the given real'.<sup>160</sup> And yet, her negation of the world is different from man's in that it does not rest on the presumption that the negation of the negation equals positivity.<sup>161</sup> This is the premise that Adorno identified as the basic error of the dialectic, for

[t]o negate a negation does not bring about its reversal; it proves, rather, that the negation was not negative enough.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> 'Es ist schwer, über das Weib etwas Falsches zu sagen: bei den Weibern ist kein Ding unmöglich...'. Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente' in: Colli / Montinari (eds): *Nietzsche: Werke*, VII/1: *Nachgelassene Fragmente: Juli 1882-Winter 1883/84*, p. 162.

<sup>160</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 223.

<sup>161</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 158.

<sup>162</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 159-160.

Dialectical reasoning always stipulates that its initial negation was not good enough as negation – or that it was plainly *wrong*. Hence, the dialectical principle renders the initial negation – that is, its very premise and foundation – worthless in one sense or another and therefore steepens itself ever deeper into nihilism: for even though it records the negation of the negation as positive, it always exposes the first negation as meaningless by the same logic. Nietzsche's criticism of work is, indeed, not aimed at the negation *per se*; on the contrary: he harbours a deep suspicion of the yes-sayers.<sup>163</sup> And in fact, he criticizes the dialectic not because of the negation it entails, but because it renders every negation meaningless, inconsequential and ultimately impossible – which the dialectical age interprets as positive: as reasonable and peaceful. He saw the problems in the initial premise of the dialectic surface in the dilemmas of the dialectical man, but he also saw in woman a human existence that is by way of her labour determined in the non-negotiable negation of the given, which is implied in all creation, and the unreserved *affirmation* of this negation in the embracing of every possible outcome. Labour is, thus, essentially the affirmation of negation and pertains in this sense to the same structure as fighting, which also consists of the unreserved embracing of the negation and all its potential outcomes. Thus it is that Nietzsche, who thinks being as creation and as *Niederkunft*, can without contradiction advocate war and declare:

I advise not work, but fighting, I advise not peace but victory. May your work be a fight, and your peace a victory.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Cf. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 321-322.

<sup>164</sup> 'Ich rathe nicht zur Arbeit, sondern zum Kampfe, ich rathe nicht zum Frieden sondern zum Siege. Eure Arbeit sei ein Kampf, euer Friede ein Sieg'. Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VII/1: *Nachgelassene Fragmente: Juli 1882-Winter 1883/84*, p. 199.

In suggesting that work *could* be a fight, Nietzsche grants that the traditional Western understanding of man as the worker who *is* only as negation could be succeeded by a definition of man in fighting and as such in the affirmation of negation. The fighting that Nietzsche recommends is, however, essentially different from dialectical warfare, which is geared towards a specific outcome and *one* goal and therefore does *not* entail the embracing of every outcome. Nor does warfare in the dialectical age ever amount to man putting his life at stake in the true, *human* sense; it operates, rather, on the calculated risk of the life of the other and in this sense on the purest contempt for the human. In this sense, it is precisely the sort of negation that renders man as the initial premise worthless. Nietzsche's thinking of the human shows, thus, that much more than actual fighting, it is the pointless, meaningless negation of man in the dialectic that kills him – and kills him not just physically, but long before then kills him *as human*.



Today, it is something of a commonplace that modern man is no longer truly human and lives in alienation from a world which negates him as man. Concerns about the dynamics of the dialectic – expressed, mostly, as worries about the ever increasing rate of change – comprise the tenor of much of nineteenth and much more even of twentieth century thought.<sup>165</sup> In Nietzsche's understanding, however, this estrangement of the modern man is indicative not only of the conditions of his life, but of his *essence*. In the alienation of the

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<sup>165</sup> Max Horkheimer notes, thus, that '[i]f the dream of machines doing men's work has now come true, it is also true that men are acting more and more like machines. Georges Duhamel writes: "Let us not forget that if the machine is making its way up to an ever greater likeness to man, the stresses of modern civilization tend to make man sink down to an ever greater likeness to the machine"'. Max Horkheimer, 'The Concept of Man' in: *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, translated by Matthew J. O'Connell and others (New York: Continuum, 1994), pp. 1-33 (p. 26).



modern man who is controlled by the machine, he sees the truth of man and indeed a way to the truth of man, as he notes:

The machine controls terribly that everything happens at the right time and correctly. The worker obeys this blind despot, who is more than his slave. The machine *does not train* the will to self-control. It awakens the desire to react against despotism – in excess, nonsense, rapture. The machine causes saturnalia.<sup>166</sup>

The essence of the machine is, to all appearances, its rigorous and relentless order, which it also imposes on the worker who operates it. And yet, even the proudest achievement of the dialectical man cannot conceal the truth of being for long. Ultimately, Nietzsche points out, the machine serves not man's negation of the given by imposing order on it; rather, it leads him to abandon himself at the forces of life in excess, nonsense and rapture. And in leading him to saturnalia, the machine actually points him to the truth of being, which the dialectical age so vehemently denies. Even in the direst alienation of man, Nietzsche conceives, thus, a way for man to grasp the tragic truth of life and to lead a human life *on earth*, which the West is not actually taking for granted any more. Most poignantly, Heidegger concludes that what man inhabits today is, indeed, no longer an earth,<sup>167</sup> illustrating with this incredible image that the dialectical man has removed himself from the earth which grounds his world to such an extent that he cannot even be said to inhabit this earth any more.<sup>168</sup> Such, indeed, are the dilemmas of the dialectical man that ultimately he can only lead a life on earth that is no

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<sup>166</sup> 'Die Maschine controlirt furchtbar, daß alles zur rechten Zeit und recht geschieht. Der Arbeiter gehorcht dem blinden Despoten, er ist mehr als sein Sklave. Die Maschine erzieht nicht den Willen zur Selbstbeherrschung. Sie weckt Reaktionsgelüste gegen den Despotismus – die Ausschweifung, den Unsinn, den Rausch. Die Maschine ruft Saturnalien hervor'. Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke, IV/3: Menschliches, Allzumenschliches (Zweiter Band) / Nachgelassene Fragmente*, pp. 343-479 (p. 436).

<sup>167</sup> 'Das ist keine Erde mehr, auf der der Mensch heute lebt'. Heidegger, 'Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten', *Der Spiegel*, 23/1976 (31 May 1976), 193-219 (p. 206).

<sup>168</sup> Cf. Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art' in: *Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 139-212 (p. 174).

longer human – or a life that is no longer on earth. In thinking man as woman and being as *Niederkunft*, Nietzsche, however, conceives of a future for human life on earth.

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## Nietzsche Today: Explosions - Implosions

One day there will be associated with my name the recollection of something frightful – of a crisis like no other before on earth, of the profoundest collision of conscience, of a decision evoked *against* everything that until then had been believed in, demanded, sanctified. I am not a man, I am dynamite. –

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*

In the light of its impact on Western philosophy, dynamite seems only too fitting an image for Nietzsche's thinking and it is indeed an image that Nietzsche uses himself. The fact that the metaphor of the explosive has featured in many a commentary on his work, from one of the earliest reviews of his writing in the Bernese *Bund* newspaper in 1886,<sup>1</sup> to Sarah Kofman's reading of it in the 1990s, is therefore hardly surprising. Nietzsche's thinking does in fact not just exceed the framework of traditional philosophy but, particularly in his later works, actually bursts out of it. *Ecce Homo*, 'the strangest autobiographical text ever written',<sup>2</sup> is no doubt also the strangest *philosophical* text ever written, transgressing the conventions of philosophical writing to the extent that its very standing as a philosophical work could be drawn into question. If *Ecce Homo* is not dismissed – and all the more easily dismissed, given that it has only ever been read in retrospect<sup>3</sup> – as a symptom of Nietzsche's impending collapse and the ramblings of a madman-to-be, it is read as the final explosion of Nietzsche's

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<sup>1</sup> *Der Bund*, 16/17 September 1886; cf. Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/3: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1885-Dezember 1886* (1982), pp. 249-258.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Kofman, 'Explosion I: Of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*', translated by Duncan Large in collaboration with the author, *Diacritics* 24/4 (winter 1994), 51-70 (p. 57).

<sup>3</sup> *Ecce Homo* was published in 1908, after Nietzsche's collapse into madness and after his death.

reason and, indeed, of meaning on the whole. However, even if Nietzsche's thinking spells the *end* of the Western tradition in philosophy, it does not describe it unambiguously as explosion; and in this light, it is certainly curious that this image is so prevalent in the scholarship on Nietzsche's work. Of the most prominent commentators, only Heidegger discerns in Nietzsche's thinking the manifestations of one, and only one, stringent philosophical thought and ultimately the *implosion* of the Western tradition in philosophy. And against the background of Heidegger's interpretation, it is all the more curious that the tradition of reading Nietzsche's thinking as explosion, which followed in its wake, has not been questioned to date.

### **Nietzsche's Self-Consciousness on the Verge of Reason**

Nietzsche's writing often gives the impression that he is concerned with *himself* more than with philosophy proper, and indeed to such an extent that the self-consciousness of his thinking could be used as charge against his standing as a philosopher. Chapter headings like 'Why I am so Wise', 'Why I am so Clever' and 'Why I write Such Good Books' not only flout the academic conventions but clearly lend themselves to accusations of narcissism and egomania. Nietzsche's self-consciousness in thinking is, however, not simply a stylistic feature or a foretaste of his impending madness. In fact, Heidegger cautions against trivializing 'Nietzsche's habit – exercised since his youth – of having an explicit and dogged self-reflection accompany his labors in thought',<sup>4</sup> because he recognizes that this self-reflection is essential to Nietzsche's thinking. 'If Nietzsche always and again mediates on himself', he argues,

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<sup>4</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, II: *The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 9.

it is nonetheless the very opposite of a vain self-mirroring. It is in fact Nietzsche's perpetually renewed readiness for the sacrifice that his task demanded of him; it is a necessity that Nietzsche had sensed ever since the days of his wakeful youth.<sup>5</sup>

Nietzsche's self-consciousness is, thus, not the 'vain self-mirroring' for which it is often mistaken; nor is it the self-mirroring of the dialectic, which 'tolerates nothing that is not like itself'<sup>6</sup> and ultimately nothing that *is* not itself. The dialectic only ever refers to itself; yet it remains blind to its own essence and unaware of its inherent self-reflectivity, professing instead an interest in the other. Although it is essentially self-referential, Western thought has therefore never given the impression of being particularly introspective. Nietzsche, however, transcends the philosophical tradition not only in the sense that his thinking is *overtly* self-conscious where thought had hitherto been tacitly so; his self-consciousness is *essentially* different from that of the dialectic. Dialectical thought is self-referential because it appropriates and annihilates every other; it directs all its efforts *outwards* – hence, the hollow at its centre – and it is in this sense explosive. The self-consciousness of Nietzsche's philosophy, on the other hand, reflects the fact that in his thinking, thought concentrates upon *itself* for the first time in the history of the West. In this sense, Nietzsche's thinking describes the very opposite of an explosion, for what may look like the explosion of the philosophical conventions by a madman describes, in fact, the collapse and the *implosion* of the dialectical system of thought. Indeed, Nietzsche 'explodes' the philosophical tradition only in the less customary sense of the term: he makes a mockery of it.<sup>7</sup>



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<sup>5</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 142-143.

<sup>7</sup> Among the meanings of the term 'explode', the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites 'To mock at, deride', 'To reject with scorn' and 'To cause to be rejected; to bring into disrepute; to expose the hollowness of; to discredit'.. Murray / Bradley *et al* (eds), *Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition, v: *dvandva-follis*, p. 573.

In Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche's thinking as the completion as well as the end of Western metaphysics, its essence as the moment between the explosive success of the dialectical age and its implosion is much more perspicuous than it is in Nietzsche's own writing. Nonetheless, Nietzsche is all too well aware of the implosive nature of his thinking and of the fate it therefore harbours for the whole of Western civilization. In his later works in particular, his writing shows that he not only thinks the implosion of philosophy, but that he *is* this implosion, in the sense that his faculties literally implode at the end of his creative life. And long before then, he reveals a particular sensitivity for the signs of implosion, which reaches into every aspect of his existence. Thus, it may seem odd that Nietzsche, the philosopher of *life* as opposed to the theoreticians of old, should feel wary of the explosive force of life in the springtime, to the extent that he remarks repeatedly that this season is not at all suited to his disposition and on one occasion even admits that it frightens him.<sup>8</sup> It is not life as such, however, which perturbs Nietzsche, but the explosive nature of its manifestation in springtime, which runs counter to his essence as a thinker. He prefers the calm of autumn, when nature withdraws into itself, and the intensity of winter,<sup>9</sup> for he perceives in these seasons of implosive character the kind of promise and anticipation that corresponds to the nature of his thinking. And even more poignantly, Nietzsche's sensitivity to the symptoms of implosion manifests itself in his constant fears for his health. All throughout his creative life, he worries about an imminent collapse and about his health *giving in*; in this sense, his fear for his health is essentially the fear of implosion. In his concerns for his health, Nietzsche

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<sup>8</sup> 'Das Frühjahr macht mir Furcht; es ist mir an jedem Orte bisher mißrathen'. Nietzsche to Franz Overbeck (3 March 1888) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/5: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889*, p. 266. Similarly, Nietzsche had written to Heinrich Köselitz: '...inzwischen gieng es nicht besser: und fast bilde ich mir ein, daß der Frühling, meine verhängnisvolle Jahreszeit, mir überall gleich zusetzt'. Nietzsche to Heinrich Köselitz (20 May 1887) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/5: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889*, p. 78.

<sup>9</sup> 'Whom I love I love better in winter than in summer; I now mock my enemies better and more heartily'. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 193.

anticipates, thus, the implications of this thinking, for ultimately they always reflect an issue in his thinking much more than a concern with his person. Indeed, as he contemplates the self-centredness of his health worries in a letter to Heinrich Köselitz, he also reflects on the essential paradox of his philosophical position. He writes:

The stupid egotism weighs on my conscience with which I wrote my last letter to you, without telling you of anything other than my *incurata* and *incurabilia*. Strange! Not in the worst times of my health did life appear to me as much of a *difficulty* as it does now. There are nights when I cannot stand myself any more in an absolutely humiliating manner.<sup>10</sup>

Accusing himself of egotism, Nietzsche acknowledges that his is still the self-centred viewpoint inherent in dialectical thought, even though he has extricated himself from the dialectical tradition to the extent that he actually *recognizes* its self-centredness. And in admitting that he cannot stand himself any longer, he grants that the cause for his suffering is not an extraneous one. Whatever causes his suffering is within himself and causes him suffering not least *because* it is within himself. Indeed, Nietzsche's pains originate in himself because he can no longer stand the system of thought that still informs his thinking. He cannot endure his own fundamental thought, for the thought that defines him as a thinker is the thought that brings about the end of thinking as it had been hitherto. Nietzsche's suffering as a thinker stems, thus, not simply from personal circumstances; for his historical position is such that the only truly philosophical thought he *can* think is the one that spells in the implosion of the Western tradition on the whole also his own demise. Accordingly, Nietzsche often experiences his illness as the kind of loneliness that amounts, in fact, to self-absorption; thus he laments:

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<sup>10</sup> 'Mir fällt der stupide Egoismus aufs Gewissen mit dem ich meinen letzten Brief an Sie geschrieben habe, ohne Ihnen etwas Andres zu erzählen als meine *incurata* und *incurabilia*. Sonderbar! Nicht in der schlechtesten Zeit meiner Gesundheit ist mir das Leben so sehr als Schwierigkeit erschienen wie jetzt. Es giebt Nächte, wo ich mich auf eine vollkommen demüthigende Weise nicht mehr aushalte'. Nietzsche to Heinrich Köselitz (15 January 1888) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), Nietzsche: Briefwechsel, III/5: Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889, p. 231.

... *everything* about me is ill, and I do not want to see or speak to anybody. My old strict self-regime shall be attempted once again: for my experience is that if I myself [*selber*] alone [*allein*] do not help myself, I will not find help.<sup>11</sup>

The pleonastic use of the words '*selber*' and '*allein*' really emphasizes Nietzsche's sense of loneliness in this instance. His feeling of abandonment is indeed such that he believes that there is nothing beyond himself that is of any use or relevance to him and that he can only fall back on himself. Nietzsche is by all accounts referring to his health here, but again, his fear for his health is indicative of his thinking. Being alone – without another, without other – is the ultimate catastrophe of the dialectic; in feeling reduced to himself, Nietzsche anticipates the impending implosion of Western thinking. In this sense, his self-consciousness is integral to his thinking, which marks the point in history at which the Western system of thought comes to recognize in its self-referentiality also its imminent end. And because Nietzsche's habit of speaking of himself has its roots in the historical situation of his thought, some of his sharpest insights into the doomed dialectical age emerge in what seem to be accounts of his personal life. When he writes:

It remains to be said that it is looking bad with my eyes, *incredibly* [*unheimlich*] bad; in my whole life I have never experienced so strange and rapidly increasing an obscurity...<sup>12</sup>

he is no doubt reporting on his health, but again, his account of his suffering also reflects on his standing in the dialectical tradition of thought. Written in the spring of 1885, the letter

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<sup>11</sup> '... es ist Alles krank an mir, und ich will und mag keinen Menschen sehn und sprechen. Es soll mein altes strenges Selbst-Régime noch einmal versucht werden: denn mein Erfahrungssatz ist wenn ich mir selber nicht allein helfe, werde ich keine Hülfe finden'. Nietzsche to Malwida von Meysenbug (21 February 1883) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/1: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1880-Dezember 1884*, p. 335.

<sup>12</sup> 'Es bleibt zu sagen übrig, daß mit meinen Augen es schlimm steht, *unheimlich-schlimm*; mein ganzes Leben habe ich niemals eine so seltsame und schnell zunehmende Verdunkelung erlebt...'. Nietzsche to Franziska Nietzsche (late April 1885) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/3: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1885-Dezember 1886*, pp. 42-43.



dates from the period when Nietzsche was coming into his own as a thinker and coming to terms with his position in the history of philosophy. In this sense, he was doubtlessly concerned with the 'rapidly increasing obscuration' of dialectical thought, which he saw veering towards its own implosion. He describes his situation at the time as uncannily bad and emphasizes, curiously, not the term 'bad', but the word 'uncanny', *unheimlich*. And in the sense that he seems perturbed by the uncanny character of his situation, he points to the dialectic as the cause of his suffering, for the uncanny is in essence a dialectical phenomenon. Freud defines it as 'that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar';<sup>13</sup> in this sense, it originates in the essentially dialectical return to the 'father'.<sup>14</sup> And it is no wonder that the dialectic has an air of the uncanny if, as Freud specifies,

an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced;<sup>15</sup>

for in its manufacture of synthetic – and in this sense imaginary – truths, the dialectic inevitably blurs this distinction. Ultimately, Freud concludes, the uncanny always describes the returning to life and to reality of things that had been laid to rest; and it is in this sense that it is *essentially* a dialectical phenomenon, for what is dialectics if not the dealing in the living dead casualties of the *Aufhebung* principle? Indeed, dialectics is not just dealing in the living dead; it is itself a spectre, an uncanny apparition: a method or, at best, a mode of thought which has come to life such that it now lays claim to thinking – and to being – itself. Nietzsche, however, recognizes the uncanny nature of dialectical thought and discerns in it the predicament of his philosophical position. If he sees in dialectical thinking the uncanny,

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<sup>13</sup> Freud, 'The Uncanny' in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XVII: (1917-19): *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, translated by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955), pp. 217-256 (p. 220).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Derrida, *Dissemination*, pp. 75-94, and *Glas*, pp. 75a-79a.

<sup>15</sup> Freud, 'The Uncanny', pp. 217-256 (p. 244).

he sees it as something of the past that has returned to haunt him; in this sense, he has recognized the dialectic for what it is and has laid it to rest, transcending thus the boundaries of what the West has hitherto defined as thought. And nonetheless he is aware that the dialectic cannot be laid to rest; he is in fact working on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* at the time, and in the prophet who climbs he explores Hegel's return.

Although Nietzsche's concern with his position *vis-à-vis* the dialectic emerges all throughout his writing, he is seldom as explicit as in *Ecce Homo*, where he explains:

I am by nature warlike. To attack is among my instincts. *To be able* to be an enemy, to be an enemy – that perhaps presupposes a strong nature, it is in any event a condition of every strong nature. It needs resistances, consequently it *seeks* resistances...<sup>16</sup>

Nietzsche has no doubt seen through the illusion that the *modus operandi* of the dialectic is reconciliation, and recognizes it for what it is: a war. In this sense, he certainly transcends the dialectical tradition; and yet, as he professes that the warfare at the heart of the dialectic is 'natural' to him and prides himself on the fact that he depends on 'resistances', that is to say, on the interaction with the other, he acknowledges how much his thinking is steeped in dialectics. In the preamble, on the other hand, he seems to paint a different picture of his relationship to the dialectic, as he introduces his work with the words: 'And so I tell myself my life'.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, however, he describes thus only the same paradoxical situation. Nietzsche's announcement of a work written by himself, about himself and for himself - a work, in other words, which does not stipulate the other, except for the fact that it was designed for publication - highlights the extent of his self-absorption. And it is precisely this self-absorption which places Nietzsche's thinking still *within* the dialectical system - at a

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<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 7.

point, however, when this system is actually no longer possible. The self-referentiality that Nietzsche displays here is indeed not only the worst obstacle of the dialectic but also its ultimate consequence, for the dialectic strives forever to annul the other. If self-referentiality is, thus, the *final* result of the dialectic, its actual occurrence in a philosophical work is indicative of the imminent implosion of the dialectical system of thought. In this sense, the unconventional style of *Ecce Homo* is not a symptom of Nietzsche's egomania and looming madness, on the contrary; *Ecce Homo* is an 'insane' work of philosophy only because it remains faithful to reason right up to its logical conclusion. And accordingly, Nietzsche's own collapse into madness, which anticipates the collapse of dialectical reason at large, does not mark his *departure* from reason; it proves, rather, his fundamental entanglement in dialectical reasoning even at the point of its implosion.

Nietzsche is the first thinker of the West to transcend the dialectical tradition because he is the first who thinks the dialectic to its logical conclusion. And precisely in this sense he thinks the end of the dialectic ultimately still on dialectical terms. His predicament in the intricacies of dialectical thinking is, indeed, such that he admits that he prefers the dashes in his writing to the thoughts he actually communicates.<sup>18</sup> It is in the silences marked by these dashes that his thinking transcends the dialectic; and yet, Nietzsche ultimately remains *within* the realm of dialectical thought for he cannot represent what goes beyond dialectical thought other than in absences and silences. And it is precisely because his thinking occurs in the realm of dialectics that Nietzsche experiences the implosion of this system of thought as his *own* collapse. He has, indeed, long been aware of the fate that would await him in the realization of his thought. In 1883, he already knows himself to be in great danger from his

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<sup>18</sup> 'Ob ich gleich recht gut weiß, daß mir meine Gedankenstriche lieber sind als meine mitgetheilten Gedanken'. Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente' in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, VII/3: *Nachgelassene Fragmente: Herbst 1884-Herbst 1885*, p. 189.

'all too concentrated nature', which directs everything towards his very core;<sup>19</sup> in this sense, he already knows at the time that the 'concentration' of his nature is such that he is threatening to implode.

A more detailed picture of Nietzsche's view of his situation in the history of philosophy emerges as he notes:

A sick animal retires to its lair [*Höhle*]; so does *la bête philosophe*. [...] I am alone now, absurdly alone; and in the course of my relentless and underground struggle against everything that human beings till now have revered and loved ... I have imperceptibly become something like a lair [*Höhle*] myself – something hidden away, which people do not find, even if they go out and look for it.<sup>20</sup>

In this instance, Nietzsche actually admits that his thinking makes him suffer to the extent that he feels like retreating into a lair or a cave like a sick animal.<sup>21</sup> The German word *Höhle* could also connote a hollow;<sup>22</sup> and it may be that Nietzsche betrays, thus, his hiding-place in the hollow at the centre of the dialectical system. It is, indeed, at the very heart of the dialectical system that he finds the place that offers him at least the possibility of respite from the dialectic. This position, however, is also the most perilous, for it spells certain death when the cave falls in. The imagery of the cave might suggest – particularly in the German, where the word *Höhle* is much more evocative of Plato's *Höhlengleichnis* than in the English translation – that Nietzsche describes his position in the history of philosophy as a

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<sup>19</sup> 'Aber die Gefahr ist groß. Ich bin eine allzu concentrirte Natur, und was mich auch trifft, bewegt sich nach meinem Mittelpunkte'. Nietzsche to Franz Overbeck (14 August 1883) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/1: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1880-Dezember 1884*, p. 428.

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche to Reinhart von Seydlitz (12 February 1888) in: Middleton (ed.), *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, p. 283, and in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/5: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889*, p. 248.

<sup>21</sup> The German word *Höhle* could also be translated as 'cave'. Scholze-Stubenrecht / Sykes et al (eds), *The Oxford-Duden German Dictionary*, p. 395.

<sup>22</sup> Scholze-Stubenrecht / Sykes et al (eds), *The Oxford-Duden German Dictionary*, p. 395.

conclusion to Plato's *Simile of the Cave*,<sup>23</sup> albeit a very different one to Plato's version. In the terms of Plato's simile, Nietzsche is the prisoner who has at long last realized that the prisoners in the cave cannot simply 'be released from their bonds'<sup>24</sup> and wander out; he knows that they will only see the light at the moment of their death, as the cave falls in. Thus, if Nietzsche heads furthest into the cave at the very point when it is about to collapse, he is in fact driven to his death by the very same quest for light and understanding that has spurred on all philosophers for the last two thousand years. What distinguishes Nietzsche from the other captives is only the fact that he has realized the full extent of their predicament in the cave and therefore knows how much his thinking is intertwined with his fate. As he grants that he has become something of a cave himself, he acknowledges that in thinking the implosion of the Western system of thought, he presupposes the implosion of his own thinking – and thus, his own collapse. It is in this sense that Nietzsche not only understands but *incorporates* the predicament of dialectical thought like no other thinker of the West. And nonetheless, he *has* to think the end of the dialectic at the very heart of the dialectical system, for it is only at the centre of the dialectic that thinking is safe from dialectical reasoning, which cannot leave anything *be* except for the hollow at its core. In essence, Nietzsche's thinking constitutes, thus, the anti-dialectical principle taking hold at the heart of the dialectic,<sup>25</sup> under the guise of madness and safe in the knowledge that it will not be found – or found out – for a very long time.



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<sup>23</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, p. 255-264.

<sup>24</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, p. 257.

<sup>25</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 158.

The dilemmas of his philosophical position distress Nietzsche practically all throughout his creative life, but his correspondence suggests that he finally makes his peace with his lot about a year before his collapse, although it is at this time that the instances of 'madness' in his writing really proliferate. At the beginning of 1888, he starts referring to himself as 'Nichtsthuer'<sup>26</sup> and 'Nichtsnutz',<sup>27</sup> as a layabout and wastrel, which certainly seems odd given that he is actually in the most productive phase of his life. The apparent contradiction could, however, indicate that Nietzsche is as creative as never before in his life precisely because as a self-professed layabout, he has now ceased to work in the dialectical sense. Similarly, it seems strange that Nietzsche, who has complained of ill health more or less obviously induced by his thinking for most of his life, should start to praise his *good* health<sup>28</sup> at the very point when his writing suggests that he is indeed on the brink of madness. What may seem like yet more evidence of his delusional state reveals, however, that in the last few months of his creative life, Nietzsche has accepted that his thinking will only be completed by the giving-in of his sanity and of dialectical reason in general. And as he no longer perceives the impending implosion of the dialectical system as a threat, he no longer perceives his role in it as an aberration and an illness; in fact, in his new-found good health he now *celebrates* the fact that his imminent collapse is conducive to and even necessary for the realization of his thinking.

The continuing proliferation of 'madness' in Nietzsche's writing at a time when he seems to come to terms with his position in the history of philosophy is thus not a

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<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche to Georg Brandes (27 March 1888) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/5: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889*, p. 279.

<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche to Elisabeth Nietzsche (31 March 1888) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/5: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889*, p. 281.

<sup>28</sup> 'Zu aller Beruhigung will ich von mir selber soviel sagen, daß mein Befinden ausgezeichnet ist, von einer Festigkeit und Geduld, wie ich in meinem ganzen früheren Leben keine Stunde gehabt habe...'. Nietzsche to Elisabeth Nietzsche (draft; mid-November 1888) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/5: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889*, p. 474.

contradiction; it shows, rather, that he does not *reconcile* himself to the inevitable implosion of reason in a dialectical manner. In these final months, he embraces his paradoxical situation only to the extent that he embraces madness as the ultimate consequence of reason. And finally, he proclaims:

For 4 days I have lost the capacity to show a staid seriousness in my face –  
I think in this state one is ready to be the ‘world-redeemer’? ...<sup>29</sup>

It would be easy, too easy perhaps, to read this claim to world-redemption as the culmination of Nietzsche’s egomania and the decisive proof of his madness. But in suggesting that he is ready to redeem the world now that he can no longer even muster a reasonable expression, Nietzsche actually announces that he has finally transcended the dialectical life and is therefore ready to commit the last – and the ultimate – deed of the dialectical era. The dialectic seeks, for all its pretensions to the contrary, in its interactions with the other only returns; in this sense, it always aspires to redemption, which is in essence a dialectical act. It is no coincidence that the Christian god sent his son on earth as ‘the Redeemer’ – to return, that is, the stake that god had put on man. And even if the Christian belief is that he redeemed mankind by purchasing their freedom, this is in fact the *only* stake that Christ redeems – for what is freedom once it is and has to be purchased? When Nietzsche, however, announces himself as the ‘world-redeemer’, it is not to put himself on a par with Christ and especially not in his capacity as the founder of the ‘Platonism for the people’<sup>30</sup> that is Christianity – on the contrary. Nietzsche redeems not the stake that god put on man but the stake that man put on god; thus, he redeems the world not in the way Christ had done, but precisely in the opposite sense. If Christ’s redemption was the first dialectical

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<sup>29</sup> ‘Ich habe 4 Tage lang die Möglichkeit verloren, einen gesetzten Ernst in mein Gesicht zu bringen – Ich denke, mit einem solchen Zustand ist man reif zum ‘Welt-Erlöser’? ...’. Nietzsche to Heinrich Köselitz (25 November 1888) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), Nietzsche: Briefwechsel, III/5: Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889, p. 489.

<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 32.

deed, Nietzsche's redemption of the world will be the last. Man has been at god's whim ever since he was expelled from paradise, and he became only further indebted to god when god sacrificed his son to redeem him from this fate. In this sense, Christ's redemption actually made of man even more of a slave. And in order for man to truly free himself of his slavery, he will have to risk his life and redeem the stake he put on god to save him. The situation of the dialectical slave is such that his liberation cannot be achieved without him risking his life, for, Kojève explains,

... what made Man a Slave was his refusal to risk his life. Hence he will not cease to be a Slave, as long as he is not ready to risk his life in a *Fight* against the Master, as long as he does not accept the idea of his *death*. A liberation without a bloody *Fight*, therefore, is metaphysically impossible.<sup>31</sup>

In his relationship to the Christian god, man has indeed never risked his life; he always tacitly accepts his fate at the hand of god and actually counts on god to risk and to sacrifice his life *for him*. It is this stake that Nietzsche seeks to redeem; and in order to free the slavish dialectical civilization from its debt to god he has to risk his life as no dialectician and no Christian has yet done. The first man had preferred life – any life – over death; therefore, he accepted his expulsion from paradise and became god's slave on earth. Indeed, god's slaves on earth preferred life, and any life, over death until god showed them in the death of Christ a truly *human* death. Christ sacrificed his *biological* but not his *human* life. He remained human even in his death, in that he died like no animal could – he died knowingly, willingly and following his father's orders; he died for a cause. He did not simply value his life over death, but actually rated his father's reasons and his father's reasoning for his death over and above life. In a sense, Christ is putting his life at risk as a master would; and yet, in this very death, he remains in essence a slave: a slave to his father's command and to his father's cause. In order to redeem mankind from this slavery, Nietzsche also has to sacrifice his life,

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<sup>31</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 56.



but if he were to sacrifice his *biological* life, as Christ had done, he would just bow to god's supreme mastery once again. Indeed, Nietzsche sacrifices not his biological but his *human* life: that is, his life as a rational and reasonable being. Thus, he pays god back in kind; he returns the 'understanding' and the 'knowledge' that god had placed in man and redeems in turn also the stake that man has put on god when he made him the guarantor of reason and the centre of meaning. And in freeing mankind from its enslavement by reason, Nietzsche commits the last – and the ultimate – rational, reasonable and dialectical deed. Just weeks before his collapse, he concludes the most autobiographical of his works and, it seems, his life as a philosopher with the curious epitaph:

– Have I been understood? – *Dionysos against the Crucified...*<sup>32</sup>

This cryptic line at the end of *Ecce Homo* certainly seems like a sign of Nietzsche's madness, and it *is* an announcement of madness, if, for lack of a better term, his sacrifice of reason is to be called thus. Not least in its anticipation of madness, however, this phrase is also the clearest and most explicit statement Nietzsche makes about his path, his task and his position in the history of thought. In his self-description as '*Dionysos against the Crucified*', he implies that he can be properly understood only as the antidote to Christ, as the redeemer of the redeemer, who freed the world from the grasp of reason. And in this self-description, he who has already professed 'a subtler sense for signs of ascent and decline than any man has ever had', because he knows himself to be both,<sup>33</sup> testifies to his philosophical position at the turning point between ascent and decline, between *auf-* and *nieder-*, between the explosive success of the dialectical age and its tragic implosion.

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<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 104.

<sup>33</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 8.

### **Infinite Explosions: On Exploring and Exploding Nietzsche**

Nietzsche's predicament on the verges of reason is such that, in order to describe his philosophical position, he has to descend into madness; hence, he *cannot* give a rational account of his situation. His writing, however, clearly conveys the fact – if not the nature – of his dilemma. In this light it is nothing short of astonishing that Nietzsche, so obviously perturbed by the *ambiguity* of his thought, should have come to be read almost unanimously as a thinker – and as *the* thinker – of explosion. Most commentators discern in Nietzsche's thinking a sense of explosion, even if they do not affix the label explicitly; and in the works of Georges Bataille, Pierre Klossowski, Jacques Derrida and Sarah Kofman, the theme of explosion certainly pervades some of the most prominent readings of Nietzsche.

All of Bataille's writing betrays Nietzsche's influence on his thinking, but the true extent of Nietzsche's presence in his life and thought emerges in his work *On Nietzsche*. Bataille, who has been credited with disentangling Nietzsche's thinking from National Socialism and introducing it to a wider audience,<sup>34</sup> believes himself to be closer to Nietzsche than to anybody else, to the extent that he claims that his 'company on earth is mostly Nietzsche'.<sup>35</sup> And conversely, he reads Nietzsche in the conviction that he is more akin to Nietzsche than any other thinker at the time. 'Deliberately discarding Nietzsche's most well-known themes (the will to power and eternal return)',<sup>36</sup> he aims not so much for an interpretation as an experience of Nietzsche's thought; in fact, he explains his approach thus:

Nietzsche did experience some kind of ecstasy and said as much ... I wanted to arrive at an understanding of the 'Nietzschean experience'. I imagine Nietzsche

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Sylvère Lotringer, 'Furiously Nietzschean' in: Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, translated by Bruce Boon (London: Athlone, 2000), pp. vii-xv (p. vii).

<sup>35</sup> Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Lotringer, 'Furiously Nietzschean' in: Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, pp. vii-xv (p. x).

as having in mind these ... 'mystical states' in passages in which he speaks of a divine.<sup>37</sup>

In the experience of 'ecstasy' or of a 'divine', Bataille perceives the possibility of transcending dialectical reason and returning to the 'general economy' of life.<sup>38</sup> But whilst he clearly discerns in Nietzsche's thinking the propensity for bursting out of the constrictions of dialectical reason, Bataille does not read Nietzsche's thinking as the explosion of the dialectical system on the whole. In Nietzsche's transgressions of the boundaries of reason, Bataille sees, rather, temporary movements between the restricted human economy and the general economy of life. In this concern with transgression, excess and hence with *economy*, Bataille's reading of Nietzsche remains in essence grounded in dialectics and indeed, as Derrida argues, in a form of Hegelianism.<sup>39</sup> And it is precisely *because* his reading leaves Nietzsche in the realm of the dialectic that Bataille sees in Nietzsche's thinking an explosive force, for ultimately he reads in it still the explosive principle of the dialectic – epitomized and enforced, however, to its very limits and often beyond recognition. In Bataille's interpretation, Nietzsche's thinking is, thus, essentially explosive and unreservedly explosive, but nonetheless never explosive enough to break with the dialectical tradition.

In Klossowski's work on *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, Nietzsche is depicted as much more methodical a thinker than he appears in Bataille's reading, but he is also more explicitly presented as a thinker of explosion. In the sense that Klossowski believes that Nietzsche's

collapse would never have occurred if the seduction exerted by Chaos – that is, by incoherence – had not still and always been present in Nietzsche,<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, p. 174.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, I: *Consumption*, pp. 19-41.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Derrida, 'From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve' in: *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 317-350.

<sup>40</sup> Pierre Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, translated by Daniel W. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 220.

he grants that the dissolution of Western philosophy had always been imminent in Nietzsche's thinking. And if, as Klossowski points out, this drive towards chaos is *still* present in Nietzsche's thinking at the time of his collapse, it would seem that his thinking is not completed until the final dissolution of Western thought. With the laughter in Nietzsche's thinking, Klossowski argues,

... all identities explode, including Nietzsche's. What also exploded was the meaning that things can have or lose for other things.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, Klossowski claims that in the 'Euphoria of Turin' which marked the last days before his collapse, Nietzsche adopted 'two perspectives that stemmed from the confrontation established in *Ecce Homo: Dionysos versus the Crucified*',<sup>42</sup> and that he 'chose the physiognomy of Christ to mask the loss of his own identity'.<sup>43</sup> And in the sense that Klossowski reads in Nietzsche's thinking the shattering not only of Nietzsche's own identity but of the concept of identity at large, he presents Nietzsche as an unambiguously explosive thinker, who effaces the premises of Western philosophy.

Derrida's article 'Interpreting Signatures (Nietzsche / Heidegger): Two Questions' makes of the explosive character of Nietzsche's thinking much more central a theme than it is in Bataille's or in Klossowski's reading, where it actually remains implicit. Aiming to extricate Nietzsche's thinking from Heidegger's, Derrida asks whether 'it is correct to say, as Heidegger so positively claims, that this thinking is one' and 'that Nietzsche ... has only one

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<sup>41</sup> Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, p. 252.

<sup>42</sup> Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, p. 234.

<sup>43</sup> Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, p. 233.

name'.<sup>44</sup> And against Heidegger, who saw 'a unity in Nietzschean thought even if it is not that of a system in the classical sense' and argued that this 'unity is also its uniqueness, its singularity',<sup>45</sup> Derrida suggests reading Nietzsche as 'one of the few great thinkers who multiplied his names and played with signatures, identities, and masks', and 'named himself more than once, with several names'.<sup>46</sup> Heidegger, Derrida argues, 'wants to save Nietzsche at any cost ... from ambiguity', but for Derrida it is precisely 'this rescue, which must be called into question in the name or names of Nietzsche'.<sup>47</sup> This, he argues, is

the *Streitfall* or the *Auseinandersetzung* between the Nietzsches and Martin Heidegger, between the Nietzsches and so-called ... Western metaphysics. Since Aristotle, and at least up to Bergson, 'it' (metaphysics) has constantly repeated and assumed that to think and to say must mean to think and say something that would be a *one*, one *matter*. And that not thinking-saying some one matter or principle is not thinking-saying at all, but a loss of the *logos*. Here is perhaps what the Nietzsches have put in question: the *legein* of this *logos*, the *gathering* of this logic.<sup>48</sup>

If Nietzsche's thinking disperses the *logos*, as Derrida suggests, it sparks no doubt the explosion of Western philosophy. At the same time, however, Derrida's argument implies that in order for Nietzsche to be recognized - and recognizable - as the thinker of explosion, instead of being taken for yet another philosopher with only one thought, his thinking has yet to explode Heidegger's mould. And to this effect, he sets about defending Nietzsche against Heidegger's reading, arguing that the 'idea of the eternal recurrence ... is not a

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<sup>44</sup> Derrida, 'Interpreting Signatures (Nietzsche / Heidegger): Two Questions', translated by Diane Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer, in: Daniel W. Conway (ed.), *Nietzsche: Critical Assessments* (London: Routledge, 1998), 1: Incipit Zarathustra / Incipit Tragoedia: *Art, Music, Representation, and Style*, pp. 109-123 (p. 118).

<sup>45</sup> Derrida, 'Interpreting Signatures' in: Conway (ed), *Nietzsche: Critical Assessments*, 1: Incipit Zarathustra / Incipit Tragoedia, pp. 109-123 (p. 110).

<sup>46</sup> Derrida, 'Interpreting Signatures' in: Conway (ed), *Nietzsche: Critical Assessments*, 1: Incipit Zarathustra / Incipit Tragoedia, pp. 109-123 (p. 118).

<sup>47</sup> Derrida, 'Interpreting Signatures' in: Conway (ed), *Nietzsche: Critical Assessments*, 1: Incipit Zarathustra / Incipit Tragoedia, pp. 109-123 (p. 118).

<sup>48</sup> Derrida, 'Interpreting Signatures' in: Conway (ed), *Nietzsche: Critical Assessments*, 1: Incipit Zarathustra / Incipit Tragoedia, pp. 109-123 (pp. 118-119).

thought about totality', although Heidegger presents it as such,<sup>49</sup> and that Nietzsche is 'not at all a thinker of beings, if ... an essential connection exists between beings as such and totality'.<sup>50</sup> Having accused Heidegger of not entirely legitimately trying to rescue Nietzsche from himself, Derrida embarks thus on rescuing Nietzsche from Heidegger in a similarly ambiguous gesture. This attempt at freeing Nietzsche from Heidegger's mould, however, only reduces Nietzsche's thinking further; for ultimately Derrida implies, thus, that even as *the* thinker of explosion, Nietzsche requires his – Derrida's – assistance just to rid himself of Heidegger's grasp. In this sense, Derrida's reading depicts Nietzsche as an essentially explosive thinker, who has, however, thus far been contained by the Western tradition in philosophy. The 'explosive' aspect of Nietzsche's thinking is, in Derrida's eyes, that Nietzsche is not a thinker of totality and 'by no means trusts any thought of totality',<sup>51</sup> but it is, he adds, 'also worth noting that it is life-death which deprives the value of totality of any privileged status'.<sup>52</sup> And precisely in this sense, Derrida's argument reveals that it is the dialectic *itself* that threatens the totality it aspires to – for is not life-death *the* mode of dialectical existence and the only form of life that the dialectic tolerates? The dispersion of totality that Derrida discerns in Nietzsche's thinking is indeed still a dialectical phenomenon; it is the dialectic eroding its own premises and falling back upon itself: in short, it is the implosion of the dialectic. And thus it seems that Nietzsche cannot escape his fate even with Derrida's assistance. For all Derrida's efforts at defending the 'explosive' quality of Nietzsche's thinking and at actually helping Nietzsche explode, even Derrida's own

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<sup>49</sup> Derrida, 'Interpreting Signatures' in: Conway (ed), *Nietzsche: Critical Assessments*, I: Incipit Zarathustra / Incipit Tragoedia, pp. 109-123 (p. 120).

<sup>50</sup> Derrida, 'Interpreting Signatures' in: Conway (ed), *Nietzsche: Critical Assessments*, I: Incipit Zarathustra / Incipit Tragoedia, pp. 109-123 (p. 121).

<sup>51</sup> Derrida, 'Interpreting Signatures' in: Conway (ed), *Nietzsche: Critical Assessments*, I: Incipit Zarathustra / Incipit Tragoedia, pp. 109-123 (p. 120).

<sup>52</sup> Derrida, 'Interpreting Signatures' in: Conway (ed), *Nietzsche: Critical Assessments*, I: Incipit Zarathustra / Incipit Tragoedia, pp. 109-123 (pp. 121-122).

interpretation of Nietzsche evokes a sense that Nietzsche's thinking describes the *implosion* of the dialectical system.

Of the renowned commentators on Nietzsche, it is Sarah Kofman who most explicitly labels the impact of Nietzsche's thinking as explosion – and indeed, as a series of explosions.<sup>53</sup> In the sense that she states explicitly what her predecessors had implied, her work actually transcends the critique of Nietzsche's thought and highlights the fact that Nietzsche scholarship has hitherto been dominated by one particular interpretation. The picture that Kofman draws of Nietzsche himself is, in fact, not even that of a thinker as insanely explosive as he is for Bataille or as essentially explosive as he is for Derrida. She ascribes the explosive nature of Nietzsche's writing to the myriad of themes and topics that she sees in it; and indeed, whilst most readers discover many facets to Nietzsche's thought, few discern as many as she does. In the sense that her reading diversifies the significance of Nietzsche's thinking, it seems that she, too, challenges the status of totality in Western philosophy after Nietzsche and infers that traditional concepts of identity and meaning have been shattered. Although she speaks of Nietzsche's books as his 'children'<sup>54</sup> and in this sense points to the nature of his writing as bringing forth, she ultimately reads his thinking as the anticipation of the explosion in which it finally culminates. Nietzsche, she suggests, explodes in many different ways; most significantly, however, his explosion is a question of sanity or madness. In *Ecce Homo*, she argues, he is

... recounting to himself that he is not mad and that at the very moment he is planning to blow up the entire earth he is not himself in the process of exploding – of shattering into a thousand figures with no link or unity.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> The two volumes of Kofman's work on Nietzsche are entitled *Explosion I* and *Explosion II*.

<sup>54</sup> The second volume of Kofman's work on Nietzsche is entitled *Explosion II: Les enfants de Nietzsche* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

<sup>55</sup> Kofman, 'Explosion I: Of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*', p. 59.

She concludes, however, that whilst

... in a certain defensive gesture, Nietzsche still attempts to save himself from what the serious and reasonable man calls a 'mad' dispersal, by emphasizing what properly belongs to him and by still dividing up the 'central' from the 'eccentric', on the other hand he takes no care at all to avoid exploding all the time.<sup>56</sup>

In this light, it seems that Kofman presumes as the *modus operandi* of Nietzsche's thinking the essentially dialectical principle of the controlled explosion, in which the centre and the unity of the centre is always restored. And no wonder that Nietzsche takes no care to avoid exploding all the time, if the *premise* of his explosions is that his identity is always restored. It is, indeed, not only in this respect that Kofman's reading grounds Nietzsche in the tradition of dialectical thought. She observes that '[b]efore reaching his height', Nietzsche

... had to take numerous byroads and multiple masks: for example, that of a philologist,<sup>57</sup>

and emphasizes, thus, that it was on the dialectical path via the other that Nietzsche came into his own as a thinker. On the other hand, however, she also recognizes Nietzsche's distrust of the other and his attempts at protecting himself from it, as she argues that Nietzsche's

first rule ... during periods of creation and intense work is to disallow [him]self all manner of reading. This is a protective measure similar to the one pregnant [enceintes] women take in order to prevent all harmful contact to the child they carry in their womb, a truly protective *enclosure* [enceinte].<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Kofman, 'Explosion I: Of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*', p. 61.

<sup>57</sup> Kofman, 'Explosion I: Of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*', p. 57.

<sup>58</sup> 'La première règle à suivre est, durant les périodes de création et de travail intense, de s'interdire toute lecture. C'est là une mesure de protection analogue à celle que prennent les femmes enceintes pour éviter tout contact nocif à l'enfant qu'elles portent dans leur ventre, véritable enceinte protectrice'. Kofman, *Explosion I: De l'Ecce Homo de Nietzsche* (Paris: Galilée, 1992), p. 302.



In the sense that Kofman compares Nietzsche's situation to the state of pregnancy, she certainly seems to be aware of the nature of Nietzsche's thought – and yet she immediately evokes another image: for, playing on the homonym 'enceinte', she speaks also of an enclosure, a protective wall.<sup>59</sup> At this point, the emphasis in her imagery shifts significantly; for the metaphor of a safe enclosure conjures up connotations of dialectical safe-keeping much more than of bringing forth. And ultimately, Kofman's interpretation implies that by denying himself all reading and thus guarding himself against the other, Nietzsche ensures only that he will eventually explode all the more powerfully.<sup>60</sup> In this sense, too, she reads in Nietzsche's thinking moments of guarding, protecting and preserving which pertain to the essence of dialectical *Aufhebung*. Ultimately, it is the fact that she reads Nietzsche in *economic* terms that gives her interpretation of his work a decidedly dialectical tenor. She actually suggests that Nietzsche himself describes his thinking in economic terms, as she argues that in Nietzsche's thinking genius is, not least in relation to himself,

... given an economic definition; it is characterized by the explosion of an enormous quantity of retained forces. The genius is not a particularly brilliant spirit, he is dynamite.<sup>61</sup>

If genius was an economic phenomenon, as Kofman suggests, it would be found in the self-destructive nihilism of dialectics; indeed, the barter principle at the heart of the dialectic would be its epitome. This is an inherently absurd definition and it certainly is not one that Nietzsche actually subscribes to. Whenever he speaks of distinction, he speaks – often very controversially – of type, of breed and of race; he is, in short, concerned with distinctions not of degree, but of *kind*. And by the very fact that he makes categorical and *not* economical

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<sup>59</sup> Georges Pilard et al (eds), *Harrap's Shorter Dictionary* (Chambers Harrap: Edinburgh, 2000), p. 338.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Kofman, *Explosion I: De l'Ecce Homo' de Nietzsche*, p. 365.

<sup>61</sup> '... le génie reçoit chez Nietzsche une définition économique; il est caractérisé par l'explosion d'une énorme quantité de forces retenue. Le génie n'est pas un esprit particulièrement génial, il est de la dynamite'. Kofman, *Explosion I: De l'Ecce Homo' de Nietzsche*, p. 297.

distinctions, his thinking differs from dialectical thought, which does not tolerate the other as such and in this sense does not allow for distinctions of kind. In this respect, Nietzsche's thinking certainly transcends the dialectical tradition, even if Kofman's interpretation of it does not give this impression. Her reading evokes, no doubt, a sense that Nietzsche's thinking approaches the limits of thinking itself, but she does not imply that Nietzsche transcends what has hitherto been defined as thinking – at least not until his final explosion. She acknowledges that thinking in the West has reached the stage where it can only refer to itself as she points out that in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche 'addresses only himself' and 'recounts "himself" to "himself";<sup>62</sup> but in her eyes, Nietzsche's thinking does not transcend this ultimate impasse of the dialectic. In fact, she describes Nietzsche's thinking even at its most poignantly decisive as a 'recounting' and in this sense still in dialectical terms. Accordingly, she sees in *Ecce Homo*

... first of all a work of mourning – and in this sense a thanatography – in which Nietzsche buries himself several times over so as to be able to be reborn to himself and reappropriate himself: ... he attempts to divide up what in him properly belongs to 'him' and what were just borrowed masks, hiding places, more or less demeaning figureheads, occasionally aberrant detours, in order to achieve his unity and his center and to transform himself into a destiny.<sup>63</sup>

Since Kofman reveals in the introduction to *Explosion I* that she reads Nietzsche's autobiography as 'a work of mourning', it seems almost as if the *premise* of her analysis is that Nietzsche's thinking, insofar as it is mourning, is – and remains – in essence dialectical. To be sure, she also recognizes anti-dialectical moments in his thought as she describes him being born and reborn in his thinking, but she does not dwell on the image of birth, *Niederkunft*, returning instead to the essentially dialectical terminology of 'reappropriation'. In Kofman's eyes, Nietzsche's thinking may indeed have anti-dialectical moments, but it

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<sup>62</sup> Kofman, 'Explosion I: Of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*', p. 56.

<sup>63</sup> Kofman, 'Explosion I: Of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*', p. 58.

always returns to the dialectical order – at least until his final explosion. And ultimately, she questions the extent of his madness even then; for she

... cannot avoid thinking that Nietzsche's 'madness' is also, like Hamlet's, the last mask he wears so as not to die of the 'truth': '*for we are all afraid of the truth*'.<sup>64</sup>

Unlike the dialecticians, however, Nietzsche is *not* afraid of the truth; hence, he is the first thinker who sees the dialectic for what it is and recognizes that dialectical truths are always manufactured and therefore fictional. This is the truth of which he dies: he dies of the realization that thinking – dialectical thinking – can never grasp and certainly not produce the truth. Strictly speaking, however, Nietzsche dies only as human being, for he loses not his life but his senses – collapsing, thus, into the essentially dialectical state of the living-dead. In this sense, his fate simply describes the implosion of dialectical reason. As Nietzsche clearly reveals this to be *madness*, however, he actually transcends the limits of dialectical thought, which is blind to its own essence, and from *within* the crumbling system of dialectics illustrates that dialectical reason, taken to its conclusion, is madness. In this light, Kofman's reading certainly trivializes Nietzsche's thinking and indeed highlights that reading his thinking as explosion *always* trivializes it; for this approach implies that he does not transcend the dialectic in his thinking itself but escapes the order of the dialectic only in his death. Thus it is that the prevailing interpretation of Nietzsche's thought makes of his death the dispersion rather than the bringing-forth, the *Niederkunft*, of meaning. In the light of these implications, it is all the more remarkable that the tradition of portraying Nietzsche as the thinker of explosion has not been seriously questioned to date. In fact, it is questionable even on its own terms, for if Nietzsche's thinking were such that it could *only* be read as explosion and if it would therefore allow for only *one* interpretation, there would

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<sup>64</sup> 'On ne peut donc éviter de penser que la 'folie' de Nietzsche serait, elle aussi, comme celle d'Hamlet, le dernier masque qu'il revêt pour ne pas mourir de la "vérité": "car nous avons tous peur de la vérité"'. Kofman, *Explosion I: De l'Ecce Homo de Nietzsche*, p. 330.

be nothing 'explosive' about it at all. Hence, reading Nietzsche's thinking as explosion clearly cannot do it justice; in fact, this approach explodes him first and foremost in the less common sense of the term: it derides his life and thought.

### **Implosion and Return: The Peculiar Topography of Nietzsche's Influence**

The tradition of reading Nietzsche's thinking as explosion, which prevails in Nietzsche scholarship today, certainly says less about Nietzsche's thinking than it does about the situation of his commentators *in* the dialectical age. It may seem strange that this tradition could have established itself at all, given that some of the earliest reactions to Nietzsche depict his thinking *not* solely as explosion, but ultimately the fact that it flourished precisely by containing any other approach only testifies to its dialectical nature. Even today, it is in contradistinction to some of the earliest readings that the essentially reductive quality of reading Nietzsche's thinking as explosion emerges at its most perspicuous. Deleuze, for one, draws a more complex and ambiguous picture of Nietzsche's thinking, although he, too, discerns in it a certain dispersion of meaning. 'Nietzsche's philosophy', he argues,

cannot be understood without taking its essential pluralism into account. [...] The Gods are dead but they have died from laughing, on hearing one God claim to be the only one... And the death of this God, who claimed to be the only one, is itself plural; the death of God is an event with a multiple sense. [...] There is no event, no phenomenon, word or thought which does not have a multiple sense. A thing is sometimes this, sometimes that, sometimes something more complicated – depending on the forces (the gods) which take possession of it.<sup>65</sup>

In this description of the dispersal of meaning in Nietzsche's thought, Deleuze does actually come close to evoking the image of an 'explosion' of reason. He certainly reads Nietzsche

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<sup>65</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 4.

against Hegel and against the dialectic, and indeed more so than many of those who explicitly portray Nietzsche's thought as the explosion of the dialectical system. Although he maintains that 'Anti-Hegelianism runs through Nietzsche's work as its cutting edge',<sup>66</sup> Deleuze, however, does not present Nietzsche's thinking as the explosion of the dialectical system, but as its antidote. He concludes that

Nietzsche's 'yes' is opposed to the dialectical 'no'; affirmation to dialectical negation; difference to dialectical contradiction; joy, enjoyment, to dialectical labour; lightness, dance, to dialectical responsibilities,<sup>67</sup>

and emphasizes, thus, that Nietzsche's thinking is profoundly anti-dialectical – without, however, implying that it therefore seeks to annihilate the dialectical system. Indeed, if Nietzsche's thinking *were* aimed at annihilating the dialectic, it would not be dissimilar to the dialectic, which forever strives to annihilate the other. In this sense, Nietzsche's position *vis-à-vis* the dialectic is essentially asymmetric; he is the thinker of the anti-dialectical principle precisely because his thought does not *oppose* the dialectic, but *differs* from it in the same way that '[n]egation is *opposed* to affirmation but affirmation *differs* from negation'.<sup>68</sup> As Nietzsche's thinking maintains, thus, a perspective other than that of the dialectic, it can indeed give new meaning to the world. To this effect, it exposes the truth of the dialectic, which the dialectical age had never been able or even willing to see and reevaluates the dialectical system of thought accordingly. What had been taken for the key to absolute knowledge and 'immaculate perception', as Nietzsche satirizes, is revealed as a dogmatic and totalitarian doctrine, more jealous even than the Christian god of all other deities. And yet, Nietzsche does not annihilate it, for in his thought of eternal return the dialectic will no doubt return along with everything else. In Zarathustra, he actually describes Hegel's

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<sup>66</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 8.

<sup>67</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 9.

<sup>68</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 188.

reincarnation and illustrates, thus, the nature of the asymmetrical relationship between his thinking and Hegel's dialectics. In fact, in thinking Hegel's reincarnation as Zarathustra, Nietzsche shows that he has not obliterated Hegel, but that he gave him an altogether new meaning. On the whole, Deleuze's reading emphasizes, indeed, not so much what Nietzsche's thinking destroys as the meanings it creates; thus, he presents it in a very different light to those who read it as the explosion of the Western tradition. And consequently, he grants it far broader an impact on the history of thought than it could have if it was simply the explosion of this tradition. Indeed, Deleuze reveals how Nietzsche's thinking creates a new human relationship with god and how he who always laid claim to the 'revaluation of all values' arrives at an entirely new definition of the human.



It is Heidegger's reading, however, which to date provides the most perspicuous account of Nietzsche's situation on the verge of the dialectical age. Dialectics has characterized philosophy since Socrates and Plato, and even though it professes an interest in the other and in every other and claims that all its energy is directed outwards, it ultimately never amounts to anything but acquisition. For all its interest in the other, it never considers the other *as such*; and all its expenditure is only a bargaining for a greater return. In truth, the dialectic proceeds as the concentration upon itself and towards its own implosion. Heidegger, who reads in Nietzsche's work the culmination and the end of Western thought,<sup>69</sup> locates his thinking at the point at which the dialectical age has exhausted itself and in the return to its commencement<sup>70</sup> entails also the possibility of 'another beginning'.<sup>71</sup> Although he does not

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<sup>69</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, III: *The Will to Power as Knowledge and as Metaphysics*, p. 8.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, II: *The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, pp. 198-206.

<sup>71</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, III: *The Will to Power as Knowledge and as Metaphysics*, p. 8.

use the term *per se*, his interpretation of Nietzsche's position as the last one that is possible in the history of Western metaphysics<sup>72</sup> certainly evokes a sense that this system of thought is proceeding towards its implosion. And Heidegger does not only read the implosion of Western philosophy in and perhaps even into Nietzsche's thinking; he actually approaches Nietzsche's thinking such that it implodes and reduces to just one fundamental thought. The fact that he actively *effects* the implosion of Nietzsche's body of thought has, indeed, been criticized, particularly by those who read Nietzsche's thinking as explosion. Derrida and Kofman both suspect in Heidegger's reduction of Nietzsche's thinking an attempt to protect Nietzsche<sup>73</sup> – with all the dialectical connotations that this 'safekeeping' entails. Heidegger, however, readily explains that he seeks not the protection of but the *confrontation* with Nietzsche, as this is 'the supreme way, the only way, to a true estimation of a thinker'.<sup>74</sup> And as he *overtly* seeks confrontation, he already differentiates his approach from a dialectical one, which would lay claim to reconciliation. Indeed, in the sense that Heidegger describes what his confrontation with Nietzsche brings forth, the tenor of his reading is one of *Niederkunft* much more than one of *Aufhebung*. In the very act of reducing Nietzsche to the last metaphysician, he accentuates the meaning, the implications and the consequences of Nietzsche's thought – and did not Nietzsche himself suggest that in order to grasp his thinking, one would have to *create* something from it?<sup>75</sup>

The fact that Heidegger's interpretation reduces Nietzsche's thinking has been the main criticism levelled against it; indeed, it seems that other differences notwithstanding, the various critiques of his work hinge practically unanimously on this point. It certainly

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<sup>72</sup> Cf. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, II: *The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, p. 205.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Derrida, 'Interpreting Signatures', p. 118, and Kofman, 'Explosion I: Of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*', p. 66.

<sup>74</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, I: *The Will to Power as Art*, p. 4.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, p. 9.

provides the grounds for both Derrida's and Kofman's criticism – as well as of Bataille's, although Bataille seems to reproach Heidegger not for trying to protect Nietzsche as Derrida and Kofman do but, on the contrary, for sacrificing the truth of his thinking in the name of an analytic dissection. And yet, despite their obvious differences, they all agree on the charge that Heidegger reduces Nietzsche's thinking almost beyond recognition. Kofman asks, thus:

If [Heidegger] dreams of effacing from the 'thought' of 'Nietzsche' all traces of desire, laughter, 'eccentricity', buffoonery, carnivalesque multiplicity, is it not because all this can have no place in a *logos* which is supposed to be a gathering together and a unifying – because all this is too explosive and dazzling? Is it not because Nietzsche, if one understands him other than as an 'essential thinker', precisely blows up – along with the subject and Being, which are reduced by him to mere names or metaphysical fictions ...?<sup>76</sup>

The argument that Heidegger deprives Nietzsche's thinking of all its unconventionality is no doubt a valid criticism, but Heidegger never actually denies that his reading is reductive; he introduces it as a lecture course on only one book, *The Will to Power*,<sup>77</sup> and acknowledges that he is interested only in Nietzsche's 'conventional' metaphysical thought. And conversely, reading Nietzsche's thinking as explosion, as Kofman herself does, is also a reduction of it, and ultimately more categorical a reduction, for however reductive Heidegger may be in his approach to Nietzsche, the implications that his reading evokes are enormous. Somewhat paradoxically, it seems indeed that read as one fundamental thought, Nietzsche's thinking generates a multitude of meanings, whereas read as explosion in one way or another, it always remains just that: the explosion of all meaning. In this light, the prevalent view that a reductive approach to reading Nietzsche does not do his thinking justice certainly seems problematic. And more specifically, Kofman's criticism of Heidegger is actually questionable even on her own terms; for if, as she points out, 'being faithful to Nietzsche does not mean

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<sup>76</sup> Kofman, 'Explosion I: Of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*', p. 68.

<sup>77</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, I: The Will to Power as Art*, p. 3.



doing as he does, writing as he does',<sup>78</sup> there is no reason why the fact that Heidegger reads Nietzsche against the grain would impair his loyalty to Nietzsche's thinking. Those who read Nietzsche's thinking as explosion, on the other hand, always seem to imply that their interpretation is faithful to Nietzsche precisely because they are doing as he does; and thus, they are in fact implying that Nietzsche himself saw his thinking as explosion. There are indeed instances in his writing which seem to lend themselves to this view, but ultimately the image of explosion is always ambiguous in Nietzsche's work. On one occasion, he describes this much-loathed brother-in-law as an explosive,<sup>79</sup> which, given that he always emphasizes their essential differences, seems to indicate that he does *not* think of himself in these terms. Yet, elsewhere he does not object to his thinking being compared to explosives; indeed, he proudly quotes from an article in the *Bund* newspaper, which concludes that his thinking constitutes 'dynamite'. The wording of the statement that 'here *lies* dynamite',<sup>80</sup> however, highlights that the image points to a concentration – and *not* to a dispersion – of forces in Nietzsche's thinking. And similarly, when Nietzsche declares in *Ecce Homo*: 'I am dynamite',<sup>81</sup> he draws attention to an immense *concentration* in his thinking and illustrates that although it has the *potential* to explode, his thinking is actually aimed to counteract the essentially dialectical goal of explosion. Nietzsche's own understanding of the momentum of his thinking emerges most clearly, perhaps, as he explains:

By the way, the *whole* Zarathustra is an explosion of forces, which have accumulated for decades: in such explosions, the instigator can easily be blown

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<sup>78</sup> Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, translated by Duncan Large (London: Athlone, 1993), p. 2.

<sup>79</sup> 'Im Übrigen thut es mir wohl, noch einmal mit meinen Angehörigen zusammen zu sein: der 'Sprengstoff', in Gestalt des Dr. Förster, wird uns ja in Kurzem recht hübsch über die ganze Erde hin auseinander treiben'. Nietzsche to Heinrich Köselitz (22 September 1885) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/3: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1885-Dezember 1886*, p. 93.

<sup>80</sup> 'Hier liegt Dynamit!' Nietzsche to Malwida von Meysenbug (24 September 1886) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/3: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1885-Dezember 1886*, p. 258 (my italics).

<sup>81</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 96.

up himself [*in die Luft gehen*]. [...] You have an *extremely dangerous* friend; and the worst about him is the extent to which he can restrain himself.<sup>82</sup>

It is not himself but Zarathustra that Nietzsche describes here as an explosion of forces, although he grants that as Zarathustra's creator, he may well be blown up in this explosion, too. In this sense, Nietzsche acknowledges that he is not striving to explode but that he is actually trying to *avoid* being blown up alongside the prophet he created. And in the other sense of '*in die Luft gehen*', he is also trying to avoid going up into the air in the manner of all dialectics; he is trying to avoid vanishing into thin air as Hegel did, when he wanted to become god, and as Zarathustra, the prophet who forever *climbs*, is already threatening to do, too. In Zarathustra, Nietzsche portrays not a faithful son, but an antidote to himself; and conversely, he thus depicts himself as the antidote to all dialectics: as one who descends, where the dialecticians climb, and who implodes, where they explode. He admits to his friend Overbeck that he is dangerous – *not* because he is explosive but, on the contrary, because of the extent to which he can hold back and *concentrate* his forces. In Nietzsche's own view, the dangerous aspect of his thinking is, thus, not its 'explosive' character, but the fact that it anticipates the end and the reversal of the explosive progress of the dialectic. In a similarly ambiguous image, Nietzsche describes his thinking as philosophizing 'with the hammer', by which he means that he aims

to tap all things with the hammer to hear whether or not they yield that familiar hollow sound, to ask whether there is still solidity and weight in things or whether every possible center of gravity has vanished from them. That is what Nietzsche's thought wants to achieve: it wants to give things weight and importance again.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> 'Übrigens ist der ganze Zarathustra eine Explosion von Kräften, die Jahrzehende lange sich aufgehäuft haben: bei solchen Explosionen kann der Urheber leicht selber mit in die Luft gehen. [...] Du hast einen äußerst gefährlichen Freund; und das Schlimmste an ihm ist, wie sehr er zurückhalten kann'. Nietzsche to Franz Overbeck (6 February 1884) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/1: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1880- Dezember 1884*, p. 475.

<sup>83</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, I: *The Will to Power as Art*, p. 66.

In this sense, Nietzsche clearly does *not* aim for the explosion of the Western tradition; on the contrary: his thinking actually counteracts the dispersion of meaning inherent in the dialectic and aims to *give* things meaning again. It effects, thus, a new concentration of meaning in some things and the implosion of others. The fact that it constitutes the very opposite of an explosion, however, does not make it benign. The danger of Nietzsche's thinking – the danger of which he warned his friend – is that it gives a new importance to everything and that *everything* will have meaning again.



In the light of Nietzsche's own insight into the nature of his thinking, it is certainly curious that the tradition of reading his thought as explosion remains virtually unquestioned to date. If anything, this approach was consolidated in what could, without undue exaggeration, be called a series of explosions in Nietzsche scholarship: in 1960s France and later in the Anglophone countries of the West. By contrast, it is remarkable how quiet it has been around Nietzsche in the German speaking world, even if the French tradition in Nietzsche scholarship has long maintained that Germany is essentially resistant to Nietzsche. Of Nietzsche's standing in his homeland, Bataille writes:

I know of no better example of the wall of incomprehension existing between one person and his or her country: for fifteen years a whole nation remaining deaf to that voice – isn't this a serious matter? As witnesses to that destruction, we ought to look in admiration at the fact that while Germany took the path leading to the worst developments, one of the best and most passionate Germans turned away from his country with feelings of horror and uncontrollable disgust.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, p. xxiii.

In Kofman's reading, Nietzsche's alienation from Germany actually becomes a central theme.

By and large, she discerns in Nietzsche a Frenchman in spirit,<sup>85</sup> who is indifferent to the Germans' ignorance of him. In fact, she argues that

... no German was capable of recognizing him; they all buried his name in an absurd silence. But he did not suffer from this, for whatever has the character of necessity does not harm him: '*Amor fati*: such is the basis of my nature'.<sup>86</sup>

To be sure, Nietzsche himself makes no secret of his contempt for Germany and the Germans as he declares:

The 'German spirit' is *my* bad air: I find it hard to breathe in the proximity of this uncleanness *in psychologicis* become instinct which every word, every gesture of a German betrays.<sup>87</sup>

In the last days before his collapse, his aversion to all things German only increases and he does, indeed, seem to embrace the idea of himself as a Frenchman, remarking proudly that he has been said to write in French.<sup>88</sup> At the time, it may well seem that he regards himself as a Frenchman in spirit. On the other hand, however, even Kofman herself grants that Nietzsche's dislike of all things German could also be the sign of an essential bond. In the specific case of his mother and sister, she certainly suggests that his 'attack is all the fiercer as it is the reverse of a profound attachment'.<sup>89</sup> And indeed, a contempt that roots in profound attachment seems to be a defining feature not only of Nietzsche's relationship to his family, but of his position *vis-à-vis* Germany and the Germans on the whole. His aversion to all

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<sup>85</sup> Cf. Kofman, *Explosion 1: Of Nietzsche's 'Ecce Homo'*, p. 308.

<sup>86</sup> 'D'ailleurs aucun Allemand n'a su le reconnaître: tous ont enseveli son nom dans un absurde silence. Mais il n'en souffrirait pas, car ce qui a le caractère de la nécessité ne le blesse pas: "*Amor fati*: tel est le fond de ma nature". Kofman, *Explosion 1: De l' 'Ecce Homo' de Nietzsche*, p. 259.

<sup>87</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 92.

<sup>88</sup> 'Ich wünsche, in Frankreich gelesen zu werden; mehr noch, ich habe es nötig. [...] Es ist mir nichts fremd, was sich in der geistigen Welt Frankreichs biegt: man sagt mir, ich schreibe im Grunde französisch, obschon ich vielleicht mit der deutschen Sprache besonders in meinem Zarathustra, etwas in Deutschland selbst Unerreichtes erreicht habe'. Nietzsche to Jean Bourdeau (draft; around 17 December 1888) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/5: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889*, pp. 532-533.

<sup>89</sup> '... l'attaque est d'autant plus forte qu'elle est l'envers d'un profond attachement'. Kofman, *Explosion 1: De l' 'Ecce Homo' de Nietzsche*, p. 259.

things German stems from the fact that he knows the German spirit like nobody else, for he has seen German philosophy – not least, Hegelian dialectics – for what it is. The silence that still surrounds Nietzsche in Germany, on the other hand, suggests that the Germans have not yet realized that Nietzsche speaks from their very heart. In fact, Germany was, and perhaps still is, so unaware of its spirit, moulded like no other by the dialectical abstraction of *Aufhebung*, that when Nietzsche described it to the Germans, they thought that he spoke a different language or that he must be mad. And today, even if Heidegger is not the only German who ever really recognized Nietzsche, the lack of German commentaries on a par with his still stands in stark contrast to the explosion of Nietzsche scholarship elsewhere. It is by this very fact, however, that Germany also remains true to Nietzsche, who already knew that his thinking would first manifest itself *'on the periphery* and will thence drift back to the "fatherland"'.<sup>90</sup> In this sense, Nietzsche anticipates the current proliferation of his thinking in the West and predicts that it will be superseded by a new concentration of Nietzsche scholarship in the German speaking world. It seems, indeed, that only the return to Nietzsche's originals could finally diminish the much-disputed and yet undisputed authority of Heidegger's reading, which is in fact consolidated in every attempt at saving Nietzsche from Heidegger's influence. The tradition of reading Nietzsche against Heidegger as the explosion of the Western tradition has, thus, only aggravated the 'power of Heidegger's reading', such that today, 'reading Nietzsche ... is inseparable from reading Heidegger'.<sup>91</sup> The authority of Heidegger's interpretation will therefore yield only when Nietzsche's work is no longer read as Heidegger's critics read it, but when we return to Nietzsche's beginnings

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<sup>90</sup> *'Principiell weisen alle meine Erfahrungen darauf hin, daß meine Wirksamkeit peripherisch beginnt und erst von da aus auf das 'Vaterland' zurückströmen wird'*. Nietzsche to Ernst Wilhelm Fritzsche (shortly after 14 April 1888) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/5: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889*, p. 296.

<sup>91</sup> Howard Caygill, 'Affirmation and Eternal Return in the Free Spirit Trilogy' in: Keith Ansell-Pearson (ed.), *Nietzsche and Modern German Thought* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 216-239 (p. 238).

and read Nietzsche as Heidegger himself reads him: in German and *in* the philosophical tradition of the West.

### **Nietzsche Today: Reading the Madness at the Heart of Reason**

Nietzsche's predictions for the future, outlandish though they seem, show the extent to which he is aware not only of the nature of his thought but of the course by which it will change the history of the West. He knows that his own time is not ready for his thinking and he resigns himself to waiting,<sup>92</sup> but he also knows that the poor reception of his work during his lifetime is not only due to his contemporaries' ignorance but to the fact that his thinking itself is such that it will 'come to life' only after his death. Indeed, he realizes very early on that his thinking will manifest itself only belatedly; thus, he explains:

*A very slow and long course will be the fate of my thought – indeed I believe ... in my life only after death and in my death during life. And thus it is proper and natural! –<sup>93</sup>*

If Nietzsche speaks of his life after death, it is certainly not in the Christian sense, for he knows that what the Christians call the 'eternal life' is only the existence of the living dead in search of the god they have already murdered. Nietzsche has, indeed, seen through the dialectical illusion; he knows that the dialectic only aims to negate life and actually stipulates another, a 'true' realm of life beyond this world. In this sense, the dialectical age refers to life as death and believes in a true life only after death. Nietzsche, however, uses the terms

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<sup>92</sup> 'Man hat keine Zeit für mich? Gut, so werde ich warten. Was liegt an einer Zeit, die "keine Zeit hat"!' Nietzsche, 'Nachgelassene Fragmente' in Colli / Montinari (eds.), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VII/1: *Nachgelassene Fragmente: Juli 1882-Winter 1883/84*, p. 539.

<sup>93</sup> 'Eine sehr langsame und lange Bahn wird das Loos meiner Gedanken sein – ja ich glaube, um mich etwas blasphemisch auszudrücken, an mein Leben erst nach dem Tode und an meinen Tod während des Lebens. Und so ist es billig und natürlich!' – Nietzsche to Ida Overbeck (19 January 1882) in: Colli / Montinari (eds.), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/1: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1880-Dezember 1884*, p. 156.

differently; he infers that his life *on earth* will start only after his death. He died during his lifetime because he took the dialectical negation to its logical conclusion; and his life on earth begins only after his death for it is only then that his thinking, which originates in the transcendental heights of the dialectical system, will manifest itself in the world. In this sense, Nietzsche's posthumous life is the very reversal of the Christian notion of a life after death; and as such, it marks the end of the dialectical age. The coming-to-earth, the *Niederkunft*, of Nietzsche's thinking describes in essence the implosion of the dialectical system. And in the sense that Nietzsche will be 'reborn' in the collapse of the dialectic, his thinking also spells the beginning of a new age. Indeed, on several occasions, Nietzsche announces that his thought will 'break the history of the world into two halves'; thus, as he writes:

I am preparing an event, which will in all probability break history into two halves, to the extent that we will have a new calendar: with 1888 as the year One. ...we will have wars unlike any today, but *not* between nations, *not* between classes: Everything is blown apart, - I am the most terrible dynamite that there is.<sup>94</sup>

Once again, Nietzsche compares himself to dynamite, but again it seems that he employs the metaphor to illustrate not so much a moment of explosion as one of concentration. He is certainly not threatening to blow up everything - on the contrary: he notes that 'everything is blown up' and therefore suggests, in fact, that the explosion has *already* happened. In the image of the explosion, Nietzsche comments thus not on the future impact of his thought but on the devastation wreaked by the dialectical age. Indeed, Nietzsche's thinking is not *aiming*

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<sup>94</sup> 'Ich bereite ein Ereigniß vor, welches höchst wahrscheinlich die Geschichte in zwei Hälften spaltet, bis zu dem Punkte, daß wir eine neue Zeitrechnung haben werden: von 1888 als Jahr Eins an. ... wir werden Kriege haben, wie es keine giebt, aber *n i c h t* zwischen Nationen, *n i c h t* zwischen Ständen: Alles ist auseinander gesprengt, - ich bin das furchtbarste Dynamit, das es giebt'. Nietzsche to Georg Brandes (early December 1888) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/5: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889*, p. 500; cf. also Nietzsche to Constantin Georg Naumann (early October 1888) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/5: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889*, p. 447.

for destruction at all; even if it stipulates the collapse of the philosophical tradition of the West, it ultimately strives to create the possibility of a new age of human civilization on earth. It is in the sense that Nietzsche's thought concludes the explosive age of dialectics and introduces an era which will define being as *Niederkunft* that it separates the history of the world into two epochs. On the whole, Nietzsche's predictions of the future seem vague at best and mostly even downright fantastic, but ultimately they are always incredibly precise.

The fact that he describes *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as

– the most profound and decisive event – of the *soul*, with respect! – between two millennia, the second and the third –<sup>95</sup>

would, thus, indicate that ours will be the age to witness the realization of Nietzsche's thinking for the first time. And indeed, the recent proliferation of Nietzsche scholarship would suggest that we are not only thoroughly prepared for the impact of Nietzsche's thinking but that we are, in fact, eagerly anticipating it. Ultimately, however, our age is still grounded in dialectical reason, and in dialectics, 'the familiar, just because it is familiar is not cognitively understood'.<sup>96</sup> In fact, its dialectical roots blind our age not only to what it regards as familiar, but also to its own essence; thus, it does not know that it is blind to the familiar, because it does not know itself.<sup>97</sup> And in this sense, it certainly seems that although and precisely *because* our age preoccupies itself with Nietzsche in the way and to the extent that it does, it is *not* at all ready for the real impact of his thought.

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<sup>95</sup> – *das tiefste und entscheidendste Ereigniß – der Seele, mit Erlaubniß! – zwischen zwei Jahrtausenden, dem zweiten und dem dritten –*. Nietzsche to Carl Spitteler (10 February 1888) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/5: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889*, p. 247.

<sup>96</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 18; cf. 'Das Bekannte überhaupt ist darum, weil es bekannt ist, nicht erkannt'. Hegel, *Werke*, III: *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 35.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Heidegger's argument that 'Being itself necessarily remains unthought in metaphysics'. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, IV: *Nihilism*, p. 211.



The fact that Nietzsche's influence seems to be ubiquitous in contemporary thought reflects, indeed, only negatively on the readiness of the age for his thinking, for scholarship is *essentially* incapable of representing the true impact of his thought, given that the realization of his thought implies precisely the *end* of scholarship as it has been hitherto. The scholarship of our age ultimately still operates in dialectical terms; it still aspires to an abstraction from life and maintains thus precisely the otherworldly realm that will be abolished in Nietzsche's thinking. Although we engage with Nietzsche's thinking like never before, our scholarship is effectively still opposed to it; in fact, it is precisely because we embrace Nietzsche's thought *in theory* that our age still opposes it in practice. And indeed, the thinker who rejects the valuation of theory over and above life is today still read *theoretically*. There is no doubt a certain paradox in writing about Nietzsche, of which Heidegger, for one, was well aware. In the sense that his study of Nietzsche takes the form of lectures, it is actually in the less theoretical form of the word; and in general,

Heidegger sees writing as a danger which threatens thought just as much as does madness.<sup>98</sup>

In Nietzsche's case, madness is not so much a threat to thinking as an illustration of it; in fact, he shows that madness is the logical and the only possible outcome of thinking as the West defines it. Writing, however – Nietzsche's own writing, as well as writing on Nietzsche – does actually threaten his thought in that it presupposes the very abstraction that his thinking seeks to resist. It facilitates the *theoretical* appropriation of Nietzsche's thought with all the dialectical connotations that this entails and therefore allows for the dialectical age to annihilate it precisely in its appropriation. If Heidegger aims to *speak* about Nietzsche rather than write about him and even in the printed version retains the form of the lectures, apologizing in advance that 'the written and printed text lacks the advantages of oral

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<sup>98</sup> Kofman, 'Explosion I: Of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*', p. 68.

presentation',<sup>99</sup> he proves how receptive he is to the nature of Nietzsche's thinking. Indeed, Nietzsche believes that writing is, and should be, the imitation of speech.<sup>100</sup> Even if he does not attest to a priority of speech over writing in the sense that Derrida criticizes in *Of Grammatology*,<sup>101</sup> he rates writing as an imitation – an abstract, theoretical representation – of life. And accordingly, he regards reading only as recreation<sup>102</sup> and respite *from* life. In this sense, Nietzsche clearly overturns the Western belief that reading and writing pertain to a truly human life and that they are therefore worthy over and above life itself; for he actually treats them as far less pressing than what appear to us to be the simple considerations of life. No doubt Kofman speaks for many readers of Nietzsche when she asks – albeit rhetorically – whether Nietzsche, who claims to be destined to great things, does not risk the seriousness of his task by concerning himself only with what appear to be trivialities – questions of food, location, climate and leisure.<sup>103</sup> This concern with mundane matters features not only in *Ecce Homo*, where Kofman detects it, but prevails in the whole of Nietzsche's writing; and it is integral to his thought. Indeed, Nietzsche often illustrates how his concern with seemingly mundane affairs is essential to his thinking, but his imagery is such that these explanations have been read as signs of impending madness. The 'madness' of his statements, however, stems from the fact that he is trying to put into words that the old system of meaning – and hence of 'putting into words' – has collapsed and will be replaced with one that originates in this thinking. If he declares that the 'world is transfigured [*verklärt*], for god is on earth',<sup>104</sup> he states only that there is no longer a transcendent guarantor of meaning. And in saying that

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<sup>99</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, volumes I and II, p. xl.

<sup>100</sup> Nietzsche to Lou Salomé (8/24 August 1882) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/1: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1880-Dezember 1884*, p. 244.

<sup>101</sup> Cf. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (corrected edition; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 27-73.

<sup>102</sup> Kofman, *Explosion I: De l' 'Ecce Homo' de Nietzsche*, p. 366; cf. also pp. 301-320.

<sup>103</sup> Kofman, *Explosion I: De l' 'Ecce Homo' de Nietzsche*, p. 377.

<sup>104</sup> 'Die Welt ist verklärt, denn Gott ist auf der Erde'. Nietzsche to Meta von Salis (3 January 1889) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/5: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889*, p. 572.

the world is standing on its head, that the old god has abdicated and that he himself will now reign over the world,<sup>105</sup> he announces that it is his thinking which will give new meaning to the world – and *only* the world, for the transcendental realm has been abolished. And once there is no longer a transcendental world – a god, a heaven, a realm of ideas – there is no longer anything more important than the mundanities of *this* life. Thought cannot lay claim to a universal validity over and above life any more, which is not to say that there cannot be thinking and even abstract thinking, but that thinking will no longer be opposed to life, devoid of life and indifferent to life. In the sense that thinking as Nietzsche defines it refers to life and not only to itself, as dialectical thought does, it will be radically different from what our age knows as scholarly and philosophical thought. Today, thinking pertains to life only if it is literally about the trivialities of life. Nietzsche's concern with the seemingly mundane questions of life is, thus, not an adjunct to his thinking – on the contrary: it constitutes its revolutionary quality. In thinking about food, climate and location, he anticipates the redefinition of thinking that is inherent in his thought. In this sense, his remarks about seemingly trivial questions of life by no means challenge his philosophical project, as Kofman's rhetoric might suggest. Nor is Nietzsche simply advocating a philosophy of the future which will incorporate the mundane questions of life.<sup>106</sup> His thinking changes thinking *itself* such that it will relate to life as only thoughts about trivialities relate to life today. And in this sense, Nietzsche's remarks about the trivialities of life actually constitute some of his most radical philosophizing and pave the way for the realization of his thought.



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<sup>105</sup> 'Die nächsten Jahre steht die Welt auf dem Kopf: nach dem der alte Gott abgedankt ist, werde ich von nun an die Welt regieren'. Nietzsche to Carl Fuchs (11 December 1888) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/5: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1887-Januar 1889*, p. 522.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Kofman, *Explosion I: De l' 'Ecce Homo' de Nietzsche*, p. 291.

As the impact of Nietzsche's thinking is such that it spells the end of dialectical scholarship, thought as it is defined today is essentially incapable of rendering its implications. The true magnitude of Nietzsche's thinking will manifest itself not in the abstraction of thought, but in life itself. We will first recognize Nietzsche's thinking as the world we thought we had mastered starts 'standing on its head' and under the growing influence of the anti-dialectical principle becomes 'unreasonable' again. And as the anti-dialectical principle takes hold at the very heart of the dialectic,<sup>107</sup> it is precisely in those areas of life that have been most firmly in the grip of dialectical abstraction that we will first realize the impact of Nietzsche's thinking – and can, indeed, already see it today. The dialectical principle originates in the exchange, the dialogue and generally the human interaction of the ancient *polis*, particularly in the market, the parliament and the academy; and it is precisely these institutions, which incorporate the dialectical principle in its purest form, that have today been most significantly transformed by the emergence of the anti-dialectical principle. The market, once believed to regulate itself for the benefit of *all*,<sup>108</sup> has now become as capricious as life itself and governs us as chance and as necessity alike, and such that these are, as Nietzsche predicts, no longer opposites. The parliament, conceived in the belief that dialogue is the means to the truth, serves today only the consolidation of one principal worldview. And the academy, dedicated in its inception to the principle of *Bildung* and hence to shaping and literally building the world – and man himself – according to ideas,<sup>109</sup> is today so far removed from the notion that thinking should, and will, result in a change in the world that

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<sup>107</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 158.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, edited by R. H. Campbell, A. S. Skinner and W. B. Todd (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976).

<sup>109</sup> Cf. 'Work is *Bildung*, in the double meaning of the word: on the one hand, it forms, transforms, the World, humanizes it by making it more adapted to Man; on the other, it transforms, forms, educates man, it humanizes him by bringing him into greater conformity with the *idea* that he has of himself, an idea that – in the beginning – is only an *abstract* idea, an *ideal*'. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 52.

it conveys how to adjust to the world as it is. This demise of the *Bildung* principle does not mean that we can no longer change the world; it illustrates, however, that a fundamental change of the world today will not originate in the abstract realm of thought but in life itself. In this sense, it indicates in its own right that if the impact of Nietzsche's thinking is such that it changes the world fundamentally, it will *not* manifest itself in scholarship and in the institution dedicated to *Bildung*. Even Heidegger, who *studies* Nietzsche in the strictest sense of the term and thus seeks to grasp his thought in the abstract, is already aware that only the manifestation of Nietzsche's thinking in the world would show its full implications. 'What else', he asks,

is the essence of the modern power-driven machine than *one* offshoot of the eternal recurrence of the same? But the essence of such machines is neither something machine-like nor anything mechanical. Just as little can Nietzsche's thought of eternal recurrence of the same be interpreted in a mechanical sense.<sup>110</sup>

In this sense, Heidegger grants that Nietzsche's thinking already manifests itself in the world today and manifests itself, indeed, in the most calculated, most rational and most lifeless environment that the dialectical age has created. It is not the 'mechanical' quality of the machine, however, which demonstrates the eternal return of the same – on the contrary: it is the fact that the machine, the highest achievement of the dialectical negation of the world, is today no longer simply 'machine-like', for despite its mechanical regularity, it is as unreasonable as life itself in its dominance of the human. It is actually not the malfunctioning of a machine that testifies to the anti-dialectical principle at the heart of its perfectly dialectical operation. The uncanny and unexpected thing about technology is the very fact

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<sup>110</sup> Heidegger, 'Who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?' in: *Nietzsche: II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, pp. 209-233 (p. 233).

that it *works*.<sup>111</sup> And precisely because it works, it could establish as capricious a rule over us as life itself once had. The same quality that makes technology the epitome of the dialectical age is also what generates its anti-dialectical function, and it is in this sense that it incorporates the realization of Nietzsche's thinking in the world.



The fact that our scholarship is essentially incapable of rendering the implications of Nietzsche's thinking in their entirety prompts the question of what *reading* Nietzsche could achieve today. Indeed, if Nietzsche's thought is already realizing itself in the world, it may seem that this is no longer the time to read him after all. The 'right' time to read Nietzsche has always been something of a conundrum, not least for Nietzsche himself. He often expresses his fear of being misunderstood by those who read him too early, but he grants that even the years will not prevent the misinterpretation of his works. 'Who knows', he muses,

how many generations will have to pass in order to bring forth a few people who understand the whole depth of what I have done! And even then I am frightened at the thought of the unauthorized and totally unsuitable people who will refer to my authority.<sup>112</sup>

Today, we are indeed no less prone to misinterpreting Nietzsche's work than previous readers; it is only now, however, that it is possible to see the 'whole depth' of what Nietzsche

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<sup>111</sup> 'Es funktioniert alles. Das ist gerade das Unheimliche, daß es funktioniert und daß das Funktionieren immer weiter treibt zu einem weiteren Funktionieren'. Heidegger, 'Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten', *Der Spiegel*, 23/1976 (31 May 1976), 193-219 (p. 206).

<sup>112</sup> 'Wer weiß wie viele Generationen erst vorüber gehen müssen, um einige Menschen hervorzubringen, die es in seiner ganzen Tiefe nachfühlen, was ich gethan habe! Und dann selbst noch macht mir der Gedanke Schrecken, was für Unberechtigte und gänzlich Ungeeignete sich einmal auf meine Autorität berufen werden'. Nietzsche to Malwida von Meysenbug (early May 1884) in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Briefwechsel*, III/1: *Briefe von Nietzsche: Januar 1880-Dezember 1884*, p. 499.

has done, for we can see the implications of his thinking not only in the abstraction of thought but in the reality of the world. Reading Nietzsche today – reading Nietzsche as he can be read today – entails, thus, the possibility of reading Nietzsche such that ‘reading’ is not the purely abstract encounter that it has been in the dialectical age but such that it heralds a way of reading and of thought in general which does not stipulate the negation of life. It is not that the realization of Nietzsche’s thought spells the end of all abstract thinking, but it abolishes the primacy of the abstraction over life that the dialectic presupposes. After Nietzsche, thinking originates in this life and remains in this life; it can be abstract, but never transcendental and it reaches for the sky, but not the heavens. Indeed, although ‘many new gods are still possible’, Nietzsche points out that

Zarathustra himself ... is only an old atheist. Be sure to understand him rightly!  
Zarathustra may say he *would* –; but Zarathustra *will* not...<sup>113</sup>

Zarathustra, the reincarnation of the philosopher who became god, is an atheist; he might *say* that he will become god just like Hegel had, but he will not. Nietzsche knows that there would be many new ideas seeking to take the vacant chair of the old god, but he also knows that there could be a mode of thought which allows for a degree of abstraction without negating this world. His prophet Zarathustra, the climber, aims no doubt for an elevated perspective overlooking the world, but he always remains *in* the world: he strives for the perspective of a mountaineer or even of an eagle – but never for that of god. And in this sense, Nietzsche’s thinking shows not only how ‘pure’ dialectical reason inevitably leads to madness, but also heralds the promise of a new mode of thought. Indeed, if thinking, as Heidegger argues, can begin ‘only when we have come to know that reason, glorified for

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<sup>113</sup> ‘Nochmals gesagt: wie viele neue Götter sind noch möglich! – Zarathustra selbst freilich ist bloß ein alter Atheist. Man verstehe ihn recht! Zarathustra sagt zwar, er würde –; aber Zarathustra wird nicht...’. Nietzsche, ‘Nachgelassene Fragmente’ in: Colli / Montinari (eds), *Nietzsche: Werke*, VIII/3: *Nachgelassene Fragmente: Anfang 1888-Anfang Januar 1889*, p. 324.

centuries, is the most stiff-necked adversary of thought',<sup>114</sup> the realization of Nietzsche's thought will allow for thinking proper for the first time in the modern world. In this sense, Nietzsche's thinking actually shows a way out of the madness of dialectics. It creates a world where the gods live on the hills or in the mountains, like in ancient Greece; where thinking makes sense of the world without negating it and where the sages climb but never reach a truer world than this one and never find a god who gives meaning to the world only by first taking it out of the world. Today, as we are beginning to realize Nietzsche's thinking in a world that is standing on its head, even *reading* Nietzsche could, indeed, transcend the abstract realm of ideas and become the bringing-forth of a new mode of thought. Nietzsche himself certainly seems convinced that our age would be ready for his thought. In September 1886, he warns Malwida von Meysenbug against reading the latest one of his books, *Beyond Good and Evil*, suggesting that she 'assume that people will be *allowed* to read it in about the year 2000'.<sup>115</sup> And if he deems us, but not his friend, ready for his thinking, is it not because now that we are beginning to see the demise of the dialectical age in our everyday lives, we are already – consciously or unconsciously – not only thinking but *living* the prelude to a philosophy of the future?<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Heidegger, 'The Word of Nietzsche: "God is Dead"', translated by William Lovitt, in: Conway (ed.), *Nietzsche: Critical Assessments*, II: 'The World as Will to Power – and Nothing Else?': *Metaphysics and Epistemology*, pp. 91-135 (p. 129).

<sup>115</sup> Nietzsche to Malwida von Meysenbug (24 September 1886) in: Middleton (ed.), *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, p. 256.

<sup>116</sup> 'Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future' is the subtitle of *Beyond Good and Evil*.



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