

Nietzsche as Prophet, Artist, and Genealogist of the *Agon*: Locating the Transcendental Event in His Narrative Historiography

Nathan P. Carson
Baylor University, 2008

Introduction

Totalizing metaphysical claims were an abhorrent spectacle, for Friedrich Nietzsche, no less than the siren call of systematization. Combine these impulses with his self-identification as a disciple of Dionysus, the god of perpetual flux between splintered chaos and reconstitution, and it is no surprise that his writings are aphoristic, self-contradictory, and exceedingly hyperbolic.¹ This of course has produced myriad interpretations of each of his works and his corpus as a whole.² Many view Nietzsche as a psychologist, a master of the subconscious depths,³ while others see Nietzsche primarily as a philosopher, but here divergences abound. Some hold that Nietzsche's thought can be organized around a central idea. Among these are

¹ One of the ironies regarding this situation is that Nietzsche is extraordinarily readable, owing to his lucid prose, exacting passion, and compelling imagery. Few however have noted Nietzsche's own caution regarding his writings: He says that he is "a teacher of slow reading... Nowadays it is not only my habit, it is also to my taste... No longer to write anything which does not reduce to despair every sort of man who is 'in a hurry.'... it is more necessary than ever today... in the midst of an age of 'work', that is to say of hurry... which wants to 'get everything done' at once... learn to read me well!" Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) preface, 5.

² Karl Jaspers writes, "For nearly every single one of Nietzsche's judgments, one can find an opposite. He gives the impression of having two opinions about everything. Consequently it is possible to quote Nietzsche at will in support of anything one happens to have in mind." Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1965), 10.

³ Freud himself said that Nietzsche "had a more penetrating knowledge of himself than any man who ever lived or was likely to live." However, recognizing that his own ideas were anticipated by Nietzsche, Freud stopped reading him. Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 2 (New York: Basic Books, 1955), 344.

arguments for Nietzsche as a radical relativist (MacIntyre), an ironist of reality's contingency (Rorty), a nostalgic romantic (Habermas), the forefather of postmodernity (Nehamas), and the consummator of metaphysics, the end of the Western philosophical tradition (Heidegger).⁴

What is more, numerous interpreters like Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault ardently *oppose* the attempt to organize Nietzsche under *any* meta-rubric.⁵

This multiplicity is no less evident in the reception of Nietzsche in social theory.

Though himself ardently opposed to anti-Semitism, nationalism and power-driven politics, Nietzsche has been commandeered by many, most notably by his anti-Semitic sister Elizabeth, but also by Fascist regimes and the Nazi party.⁶ Beyond these, Nietzsche has been appropriated and advocated by “progressive democratic leftists, feminists, socialists, romantics, anarchists, American neoconservatives [and] social Darwinists.”⁷ Over two decades ago, Eugen Biser commented on the “pressing need for a Nietzschean hermeneutics,” and at present scholars are no closer to any consensus.

⁴ Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins, “Introduction to the Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 reprint), 12-13.

⁵ Typically these commentators include “The French Nietzscheans,” e.g., Foucault, Derrida, Kofman, Deleuze, and their schools of thought. These interpreters resist this effort to unify Nietzsche's thought, arguing that his fluid meanings and contradictions resist unification, or any reading of him through traditional philosophical rubrics like epistemology, ontology, ethics, etc... Much of this work is a refutation of Heidegger's influential metaphysical reading of Nietzsche in which he argues that “will to power” is an encompassing metaphysical principle. The French refutation focuses on the metaphorical character of Nietzsche's prose, voice, style, and use of irony. *How* Nietzsche writes and the literary devices he employs are seen as hermeneutical keys for his content. Steven Taubeneck, “Nietzsche in North America: Walter Kaufmann and After,” in Ernst Behler, *Confrontations: Derrida, Heidegger, Nietzsche*, Steven Taubeneck, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 159-77.

⁶ Magnus and Higgins, “Introduction to Cambridge Companion,” 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

However, Nietzsche's continued influence on and importance for social theory compels a continued interpretation and assessment of his thought. In his *Theology and Social Theory*, John Milbank has attempted just such an engagement and true to his general style, his reading of Nietzsche is philosophically rigorous, rhetorically powerful and unflinchingly opinionated.⁸ Milbank's reading has a great deal of merit right from the start, since he approaches Nietzsche's thought through his genealogical method, rather than taking a neo-Heideggerian approach which dubiously attempts to uncover and critique Nietzsche as a metaphysician of Will-to-Power.⁹ Indeed, Milbank's reading is provocative, as he identifies Nietzsche with the French postmodernists, who in Milbank's view, espouse "an ahistorical and transcendental identity of reason with power," interpreting every possible human event as a "particular

⁸ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990 [2nd ed. 2006]).

⁹ Michael Gillespie's approach is one example here, as he argues that Nietzsche can indeed be read as a metaphysician, seeing the Dionysian will-to-power as a primordial will, an equivalent to Fichte's "absolute-I." Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996 [paperback ed.]), 249-251. Gillespie's argument rests, on the one hand, upon Nietzsche's early deification of Schopenhauer's "will" as a Dionysian metaphysical ground in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and Nietzsche's late elevation of the will-to-power to a metaphysical principle in his *Will to Power* on the other.

Approaches like Gillespie's are thoroughly misguided, however, in their uncritical and heavy dependence on Nietzsche's literary estate, the *Nachlass* (e.g. Gillespie, 217-225). This collection of letters, aphoristic writings and other prose pieces was posthumously collected, edited, and published by his sister Elizabeth Forster Nietzsche under the title, *The Will to Power*. The significance of this collection is that in it, Nietzsche appears to construct a metaphysics of his famous "will to power," which has huge interpretive implications for his whole philosophy. It led, for instance, to Heidegger's influential view that Nietzsche is the last metaphysician in the Western philosophic tradition. However since the 1979 publication of the new critical Colli and Montinari edition of his works, scholars have discovered that Nietzsche never intended to publish what two generations of commentators regarded as the major centerpiece of his philosophy (*The Will to Power*). What is more, of those entries that his sister selected for publication, Nietzsche had given over two-thirds to a friend for disposal. Among these discarded entries is the famous 1067, which outlines his attempt to make the will to power into the fundamental principle of all being. His published writings, however, limit the will to power to an animating principle of *living* things, and focus particularly on human individual and societal expressions of this power. For an exhaustive treatment of all relevant historical materials and implications for interpreting Nietzsche, see Bernd Magnus, "Nietzsche's Philosophy in 1888: *The Will to Power* and the *Übermensch*," in Richard White, ed., *Nietzsche* (Aldershot, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate; Dartmouth, 2002), 99-118.

strategy or ruse of power.”¹⁰ Milbank asserts that Nietzsche forwards yet another “discourse of universal reason,” locking onto a universal, “transcendental event” of agonistic difference.¹¹

Milbank argues that the “key” to deconstructing this transcendental discourse is to question the genealogical method of Nietzsche and these postmodernist thinkers. Their genealogical efforts exhibit, in Milbank’s view, an “absolute historicism” which dispenses with the Kantian subject, “placing freedom and causality in a *single* series.”¹² But can their genealogies be anything more than a narrative conjecture, a biased story meant to unsettle present constellations of power?

Milbank says that “neither Nietzsche nor Foucault understand genealogy in this fashion. When they suggest that there are no facts, only interpretations, they are not thinking of genealogical history, but of the relationship of any human culture to its inheritance.” Their claim, says Milbank, is that “genealogical accounts are objective,” and this funds Milbank’s labeling of Nietzsche’s work as a “new positivism.”¹³

In this paper we intend to show that Milbank is wrong about Nietzsche’s views on the historicist character of genealogy. With few exceptions, Nietzsche does indeed see his historical efforts as just another interpretation, a narrative fiction that cannot possibly aspire to *either* full “objectivity” or “absolute historicism.” However even if Milbank is mistaken here, do his charges of a “universal discourse of reason” resting on a “transcendental event” of power still hold? In what follows we will show, against Milbank, that Nietzsche’s historiography is rooted in both contemporary cultural concerns and aesthetic form, producing a genealogical

¹⁰ Milbank, 288; 282.

¹¹ Ibid., 282.

¹² Ibid., 280.

¹³ Ibid., 281; 284.

method that is self-consciously perspectival and artistic in nature. However, we will also argue, though for somewhat different reasons, that Milbank is right to label Nietzsche's genealogical work as a "discourse of universal reason" resting on a "transcendental event" of agonistic power. After examining elements of Nietzsche's historiography and his view of the ideal historian, we will offer a close reading of his genealogical work, and conclude with reflections on interpretive implications for social theory.

Nietzsche's Historiography

As a philologist of antiquity, what does Nietzsche see as the proper posture and task of the historian or genealogist? The most revealing document regarding these matters is Nietzsche's often neglected work, *On The Use and Abuse (Disadvantage) of History for Life*, published early in his career in 1874.¹⁴ Tracy Strong summarizes the three approaches that Nietzsche sees as either helpful or detrimental to the historical *present*. The first two, "monumental" and "antiquarian," are largely excavative or preservative of the past, while the final "critical" approach is deconstructive of the past in light of a contemporary problem.¹⁵ Commenting on the critical approach, Nietzsche says that "Man must have, and from time to time use, the strength to break up and dissolve a past, in order to be able to live: he does this by bringing it before the bar of judgment, interrogating it remorselessly, and finally condemning it."¹⁶ For Nietzsche, the "judgment" here is applied to the moral systems of the past, an

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* (1873). Translated by Ian Johnston. Accessed online at <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/Nietzsche/history.htm>. Subsequent citations will be abbreviated as *HL*, followed by section number.

¹⁵ Tracy B. Strong, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration*, Illini Books expanded ed. (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 32.

¹⁶ Nietzsche, *HL* III.

interrogation of the unitive element lying *beneath* these moral systems which funds and legitimates them.¹⁷ This is in fact the most prevalent genealogical approach employed by Nietzsche who, as Strong notes, affirms that “the questions one asks of history must correspond to the historical position of the questioner.... Nietzsche asks questions about the Greeks because he sees such an understanding as essential to the crisis of contemporary Europe.”¹⁸

That Nietzsche is most concerned to do genealogy in the service of contemporary problems is evident in his emphasis on the use of history “for life;” indeed, from his very earliest work to his late polemics, the problem of cultural decline through the passive nihilism of Christianity and metaphysics is Nietzsche’s main concern. In the 1886 preface to his early and much-criticized historical work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche repeatedly refers to what he “had to emphasize” in light of present concerns over decadent nihilism.¹⁹ In one of his later works, *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche sees the “history” of certain Christian and metaphysical

¹⁷ Strong, 33.

¹⁸ Ibid., 38.

¹⁹ Commenting in this preface, Nietzsche’s “Attempt at Self-Criticism,” he notes the need for Greek tragedy and pessimism in modern European life: “Greeks and the art form of pessimism? The best turned out, most beautiful, most envied type of humanity to date... They of all people should of *needed* tragedy?... You will guess where the big question mark concerning the value of existence has thus been raised. Is pessimism *necessarily* a sign of decline, decay, degeneration, weary and weak instincts—as it once was in India and now is, to all appearances, among us, “modern” men and Europeans? Is there pessimism of *strength*? An intellectual predilection for the hard, gruesome, evil, problematic aspect of existence, prompted by well-being, by overflowing health, by the *fullness* of existence?” Later, Nietzsche also locates the scientific malaise of modernity in Socrates’s rejection of tragedy: “...the Socratism of morality, the dialectics, frugality, and cheerfulness of the theoretical man—how now? Might not this very Socratism be a sign of decline, of weariness, of infection, of the anarchical dissolution of the instincts?... And science itself, our science... Is the resolve to be so scientific about everything perhaps a kind of fear of, an escape from, pessimism? A subtle last resort against—*truth*?... O Socrates, Socrates, was that perhaps your secret?” Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy Or: Hellenism and Pessimism*, 3rd ed. (1886), preface. Compiled from translations by Francis Golffing and Walter Kaufmann. Text amended in part by The Nietzsche Channel. Accessed online at <http://www.geocities.com/thenietzschechannel/bt.htm>. Subsequent citations will be abbreviated as *BT*, followed by section number.

ideals as the source of nihilistic decadence and depravity. This contextualizes his critical historical method that aims to use its “strength” to “dissolve a past.”²⁰

These suggestions reveal that Nietzsche’s contemporary concerns were very much determinative of his “critical” historiography. However, this is not to say that he aimed at an “absolute historicism,” as Milbank puts it. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche opposes the view that nature and human society are fundamentally harmonious, as an *interpretation* in the service of degenerate democracy. Against this, he simply asserts his own counter-interpretation:

...somebody might come along who, with opposite intentions and modes of interpretation, could read out of the same “nature” and with regard to the same phenomena rather the tyrannically inconsiderate and relentless enforcement of claims of power—an interpreter who would picture the unexceptional and unconditional aspects of all “will to power” so vividly that almost every word, even the word “tyranny” itself, would eventually sound unsuitable...but he might, nevertheless, end by asserting the same about this world as you do, namely, that it has a “necessary” and “calculable” course, not because laws obtain in it, but because they are absolutely lacking, and every power draws its ultimate consequences at every moment. Supposing that this also is only interpretation—and you will be eager enough to make this objection?—well then, so much the better. —²¹

²⁰ In *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche elaborates on this theme: “I call an animal, a species, an individual depraved when it loses its instincts, when it chooses, when it *prefers* what is harmful to it. A history of the ‘higher feelings’, of the ‘ideals’ of mankind... would almost also constitute an explanation of *why* man is so depraved. I consider life itself instinct for growth, for continuance, for accumulation of forces, for *power*: where the will to power is lacking there is decline. My assertion is that this will is *lacking* in all the supreme values of mankind – that values of decline, *nihilistic* values, hold sway under the holiest names” (6). For this work and *Twilight of the Idols*, we are using the Penguin Classics edition: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, R. J. Hollingdale, trans. (London; New York: Penguin Books, 1990).

²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, I, 22. Compiled from translations by Helen Zimmern and Walter Kaufmann. Text modified by The Nietzsche Channel. Accessed online at <http://www.geocities.com/thenietzschechannel/bge.htm>. Subsequent citations will be abbreviated as *BGE*, followed by section and paragraph number. I am indebted to James Winchester for drawing this passage to my attention. James J. Winchester, *Nietzsche’s Aesthetic Turn: Reading Nietzsche After Heidegger, Deleuze, and Derrida* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 2.

In this quotation, Nietzsche is quite self-conscious about his own historiography as a narrative, an interpretive conjecture over against others. Strangely, however, in other places Nietzsche does consider his genealogy as more “truthful” than others. He derides “naïve historians” who consider “objectivity” the process of measuring the historical past by the “public opinion” of the present, and whose work is to “adapt the past to contemporary triviality.”²² Ironically, Nietzsche seems to think that in his *own* adapting of the past to the present—an attempt to denounce triviality and produce contemporary profundity by inaugurating a new tragic age—is somehow exempt from this critique. In fact, his approach is no less anachronistic, since in both cases, the concerns or shape of the *present* moment dominates the historiographical method.

While Nietzsche continues to affirm genealogical work as narrative interpretation, his biases creep in even more when he judges other historians against his criterion of the magnanimous, *Übermensch* historian: “The stronger the roots which the innermost nature of a person has, the more he will appropriate or forcibly take from the past.”²³ Nietzsche’s ideal historian is a passionate artist, taking the “impenetrable” past by force and resurrecting it in a unitive, reconstituted mold, presenting a “harmonious totality, *which naturally is present only in its depiction*.”²⁴ Narrative representation of the past for the present moment is the goal of Nietzsche’s “critical” approach, a task falling to “only a few individuals, indeed, to the rarest people” who possess the “magnanimity,” strength and artistic prowess needed to judge the past.

²² Nietzsche, *HL* VI.

²³ *Ibid.*, I.

²⁴ Nietzsche approvingly quotes Grillparzer’s question, “‘What is history then other than the way in which the spirit of man takes in *the events which are impenetrable to him*’ ... Schiller, in fact, is completely clear concerning the essential subjectivity of this assumption, when he says of historians: ‘One phenomenon after another begins to liberate itself from blind contingency and lawless freedom and, as a coordinated link, to become joined into a harmonious totality, *which naturally is present only in its depiction*.’” *Ibid.*, VI.

Nietzsche compares this posture to the “historical virtuoso” who “lulls us to sleep” with his feigned “objectivity”:

What is appropriate, however, in this process, before everything else, is a great artistic potential, a creative hovering above and a loving immersion in the empirical data, a further poetical composing on the given types—to this process objectivity certainly belongs, but as a positive quality. However, too often objectivity is only a phrase. Instead of that innerly flashing, externally unmoving and mysterious composure in the artist’s eyes, the affectation of composure emerges.... everything which generally does not rouse emotion is sought out, and the driest expression is immediately the right one. Indeed, people go as far as to assume that the person whom a moment in the past *does not affect in the slightest* is competent to present it. Philologists and Greeks frequently behave towards each other in this way. They do not concern themselves with each other in the least. People call this real “objectivity,” as well.²⁵

For Nietzsche, any “objectivity” belonging to the historical task is part and parcel of the strength and creative potential of the historian. Only such an *Übermensch* historian can rightly discern and revivify the past, in part because portions of the past comprise an irrecoverable “dark remainder,” requiring an artistic prowess of narrative supplementation on the part of the historian, who must recognize when to “perceive historically and when unhistorically.” Such a historian knows, says Nietzsche,

...that there is a line which divides the observable brightness from the unilluminated darkness, that we know how to forget at the right time just as well as we remember at the right time, that we feel with powerful instinct the time when we must perceive historically and when unhistorically. This is the specific principle which the reader is invited to consider: *that for the health of a single individual, a people, and a culture the unhistorical and the historical are equally essential.*²⁶

Notably, again, the selection of the historical and unhistorical are essential not simply for the writing of history, but for “the health” of the *present* person or culture, requiring a fundamentally *prophetic* posture on the part of the historian. Thus is Nietzsche’s favored genealogist a cultural prophet as well as a magnanimous artist marked by strength and passion.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., I (emphasis original).

As we have seen, this favoring of an *Übermensch* historian, and the tying of this historian's strength and artistic prowess to a redefined "objectivity," already shows that Nietzsche is asserting, *a priori*, his narrative truths claims over other historical accounts. However, this is no "absolute historicism," but rather a self-consciously *aesthetic* and *rhetorical* strategy.

The Aesthetic Form of Genealogy

This is all the more evident when we realize that Nietzsche's historiography—the pinnacle being his genealogical analysis of "master" and "slave" moralities in *The Genealogy of Morals*—is not an isolated discipline, but rather springs from his *aesthetic* representations of the origins of morality. In the opening pages of his *Genealogy of Morals* (*GM*), Nietzsche comments that he inscribed his initial insight—that power is the generative substratum of moral values—in his 1878 *Human, All Too Human* (*HAH*), nearly nine years before the publication of *GM*.²⁷ *HAH* marks a profound anti-Romantic shift in Nietzsche's aesthetics, and both this work and his mature aesthetics in *The Gay Science* (*GS*; 1882) were published years before *GM* (1887).²⁸ Rampley rightly notes that in both works, Nietzsche "uses the discussion of art and

²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, Nietzsche. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecco Homo*, translated by Walter Kauffman and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1989 [Vintage Books Edition]), Preface, 2. Subsequent citations will be abbreviated as *GM*, followed by essay number, paragraph number, and translator.

²⁸ In his mature aesthetics of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche distinguishes between the classical and romantic aesthetic impulses, the former acting out of the *strength* of its age, the latter out of weakness. Nietzsche's positing of a fundamental connection between art and philosophy is instructive here: "Every art, every philosophy may be viewed as a remedy and an aid in the service of growing and struggling life: they always presuppose suffering and sufferers. But there are two kinds of sufferers, on the one hand, those who suffer from an *overfullness* of life...and then those who suffer from the *impoverishment of life*, and seek rest, stillness, calm seas, redemption from themselves through art and knowledge, or intoxication, convulsions, anaesthesia and madness. All romanticism in art and knowledge corresponds to the dual needs of the latter type, and that included (and includes) Schopenhauer as well as Richard Wagner." *GS*, 370, cited in Matthew Rampley, *Nietzsche, Aesthetics, and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 126.

artist as the basis for a counter-metaphysical, and hence anti-modern, set of normative values,” since art and artist are capable of combining both the “negation and affirmation” so crucial to Nietzsche’s anti-metaphysical program.²⁹ Reflecting on his anti-romantic turn in “An Attempt at Self-Criticism,” Nietzsche refutes his former supposition that his ideal tragic man would “*necessarily*” need an “art of metaphysical comfort.”³⁰ Nietzsche vehemently responds to his own former view and his current readership in this way:

No, thrice no! you young romantics: it would not be necessary!.... You ought to learn the art of *this-worldly* comfort first—you ought to learn *to laugh*, my young friends, if you are hell-bent on remaining pessimists; then perhaps, as laughers, you may some day dispatch all metaphysical comforts to the devil—metaphysics in front! Or, to say in the language of that Dionysian monster who bears the name of *Zarathustra*:

“Raise up your hearts, my brothers, high, higher! And don't forget your legs! Raise up your legs too, good dancers; and still better: stand on your heads!”³¹

Here we see the type of art Nietzsche is looking for, an art of “this-worldly comfort” that in its very practice “dispatches all metaphysical comforts.” The point here is that for Nietzsche, the discipline of the artist and that of the historian or genealogist, are of a single whole, a suggestion already indicated in his discussion of the ideal historiographer.

In this way, *Zarathustra* provides the crucial link; he is both the artist of this-worldly comfort who teaches men to dance, *and* a genealogist of morals *before* Nietzsche’s formal genealogical work. *Zarathustra*, as both artist and genealogist, prefigures and frames the fundamentally *aesthetic* and *rhetorical* character of Nietzsche’s later genealogical work, the core themes of which are already expounded by *Zarathustra* in fictional narrative:

That is your entire will, ye wisest ones, as a Will to Power; and even when ye speak of

²⁹ Rampley, 11-12.

³⁰ Nietzsche, *BT*, “Attempt at Self-Criticism,” 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*

good and evil, and of estimates of value. Ye would still create a world before which ye can bow the knee: such is your ultimate hope and ecstasy. The ignorant, to be sure, the people—they are like a river on which a boat floateth along: and in the boat sit the estimates of value, solemn and disguised. Your will and your valuations have ye put on the river of becoming; it betrayeth unto me an old Will to Power, what is believed by the people as good and evil.³²

Throughout the whole of *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche emplots his central themes of the will to power, the coming of a new humanity, the heroic ethic of benevolence, the eternal return, the *amor fati*, and the origins of moral valuation in the exercise of power. While all of this is fairly common knowledge, what is perhaps not emphasized enough is the importance of the aesthetic *form* in which these perspectives are communicated. Zarathustra is not only a Dionysian prophet, he is a historian, a genealogist of morals who declares his genealogy like a verity of the God-man: “Verily, I say unto you: good and evil which would be everlasting—it doth not exist!.... With your values and formulae of good and evil, ye exercise power, ye valuing ones: and that is your secret love, and the sparkling, trembling, and overflowing of your souls.”³³

Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals

What Nietzsche’s early writings on historiography, his aesthetics, and the Zarathustran narratives demonstrate is that by the time Nietzsche sets pen to paper for his genealogical work in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1887) and *On The Genealogy of Morals* (1887), the cart is miles ahead of the horse, as it were. There is little question over what he will “uncover” in his historical research; it has already been laid out in broad terms ahead of time. It should be equally evident that Nietzsche is not aspiring to an “absolute historicism,” and yet his

³² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by Thomas Common. (accessed online at <http://www.geocities.com/thenietzschechannel/zara.htm>), II.34 (“Self-Surpassing”). Subsequent citations will be abbreviated as Z, followed by book number and paragraph number (e.g. Z.II.34).

³³ Z.II.34.

prophetic, aesthetic and rhetorical *preferences* may implicate him all the more in what Milbank calls a “universal discourse of reason” resting on a “transcendental event” of power.

In the opening pages of *GM*, it is immediately apparent that Nietzsche intends to do more than merely explicating the genesis of moral values, of those things that are called “good” or “evil.” In the preface he asks the question: “*what intrinsic value do they possess in themselves?*”³⁴ This question, right from the start, begs the further question, “value with respect to *what?*,” and reveals the motivating impulse behind the work as a whole. Nietzsche elaborates:

I realised that the morality of pity which spread wider and wider, and whose grip infected even philosophers with its disease, was the most sinister symptom of our modern European civilisation; I realised that it was the route along which that civilization slid on its way to—a new Buddhism?—a European Buddhism?—*Nihilism?*³⁵

It is this concern over the blight of weak and feckless nihilism plaguing contemporary Europe—reminiscent of his early comments on “critical” historiography—that provides the fundamental problem for which Nietzsche’s genealogical work will be the answer.

While heretofore all moral philosophers had “wanted to furnish the *rational ground* of morality,”³⁶ Nietzsche instead takes up the task of interrogating the *a priori* foundations of

³⁴ *GM*, Preface, 3. This citation, and all subsequent ones unless otherwise noted, are taken from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic and Peoples and Countries*, Thomas Common, trans., in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Oscar Levy ed., vol. 13 (NY: Russell & Russell, 1964). Unless otherwise noted, emphasis is always original, as it is here.

³⁵ *GM*, Preface, 5.

³⁶ *BGE*, 186. Cf. also *GM*, Preface, 9. Nietzsche saw in the Enlightenment’s “faith” in secular rationality a covert complicity in nihilism. Thus, Nietzsche belongs to what Charles Taylor calls the “immanent counter-Enlightenment,” since in many ways he exemplifies and anticipates the postmodern critique of modernity. Charles Talyor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 372. Merold Westphal’s comments here are helpful: “While Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche share a deep hostility to biblical religion, Freud and Marx, as sons of the Enlightenment, retain a faith in its essentially secular Reason, whereas Nietzsche sees Reason as an ersatz god through whom modern secularism seeks to salvage as much of God as possible.... If Christianity is Platonism for the masses, scientific objectivity is Platonism for the enlightened elites of modernity.” Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (NY: Fordham University Press, 1998), 226 and 227.

morality as such: “Let us speak out this *new demand*: we need a *critique* of moral values, *the value of these values* is for the first time to be called into question.”³⁷

As he moves into his genealogy proper, Nietzsche focuses on Greek antiquity and argues that the aristocratic or noble classes characterized themselves and their actions as “good” in the sense of “noble” or “high,” contrastingly the working classes, the ordinary and plebian people, were seen as “low” or “mean,” and thus came to be identified with the expression “bad.” Nietzsche contends that eventually these class distinctions gave rise to a “master morality” and a “slave morality.”³⁸ In other words, through the absolutization of perspectival difference, moral distinctions emerged between the rulers and the ruled. What is crucial to note, is that for Nietzsche, it is precisely the *tension* between the two that gives rise to the valuations “good” and “evil,” and the responsibility for this evaluative move lies with the weak. Given the passage of time under extended disadvantaged conditions, explains Nietzsche, the *ressentiment* [resentment] of the lower classes caused them to characterize the “good” traits of those in power as “bad,” while reconfiguring their own weak characteristics as virtue.³⁹ Consequently, a “revolt” of “slave morality” springing from resentment would bring about a demonizing of such attributes as ambition, power, pride, idleness, or self-sufficiency on the one

³⁷ *GM*, Preface, 6. Of course the querying of the “value” of values, itself implies a value-system against which the original moral structures are to be measured. Thus in the background of his examination of morality lies Nietzsche’s own Dionysian, life-embracing will to power.

³⁸ *BGE*, 260.

³⁹ Many commentators use the French term, *ressentiment*, in order to emphasize the thorough difference between Nietzsche’s intended meaning in using this word, and current definitions of mere “resentment.” Burston’s definition of *ressentiment* here is helpful: It is “the presence of malice, vindictiveness, and a thirst for revenge, not as transient states or impulses, but as abiding traits of character that warp our judgment and rob our life of companionable pleasure.” Daniel Burston, “Scheler, Nietzsche, and Social Psychology,” in *Existential Analysis* 14:1 (January 2003), 4. For further study on the difference between these two, see Bernard N. Meltzer and Gil Richard Musolf, “Resentment and Ressentiment,” in *Sociological Inquiry*, 72:2 (Spring 2002), 240-255.

hand, while beatifying the characteristics of the lower classes, such as pity, meekness, diligence, humility on the other.⁴⁰

Eventually, Nietzsche argues, “The revolt of the slaves in morality begins in the very principle of resentment becoming creative and giving birth to values—a resentment experienced by creatures who, deprived as they are of the proper outlet of action, are forced to find their compensation in an imaginary revenge.”⁴¹ Such vengeful resentment means no less for these lower classes, than seeing their powerful counterparts not only as “bad,” but as “evil.” And, for Nietzsche, once the powerful surrender ground to this “revaluation of values,” and start to assess themselves according to different moral designations, the “slave revolt” has taken root, eventually effecting a total reversal of “good” and “evil.”

It is important to note, however, that for Nietzsche the “resentment” giving rise to such a revolt *necessarily* results from the imposition of one power over another; denied a “proper outlet of action,” the will to power of the slave is “forced” into another avenue of agonistic engagement. Unlike the noble morality which triumphantly affirms itself, the “creative deed” of the slave morality is a negation; “its action is fundamentally reaction,” being utterly dependent on a “hostile external world” or “external stimuli” in order to act at all.⁴² However, it is evident that *both* self-abundant noble action and slavish reaction operate, whether healthfully or pathologically, in the mode of assertive power. Even resentful negation is not truly negation, since the energies of subversive power are merely diverted into the revaluation revolt.

⁴⁰ The clearest summary of this whole exchange is in *BGE*, 260.

⁴¹ *GM*, I.10.

⁴² *GM*, I.10.

All of this illustrates that for Nietzsche, the *will to power* is the operative reality beneath the very moral fabric upon which humanity depends. In what is perhaps his most dogmatic and *a priori* statement on the matter, Nietzsche asserts that

...life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation.... Even the body within which individuals treat each other as equals...will have to be an incarnate will to power, it will strive to grow, spread, seize, become predominant—not from any morality or immorality but because it is living and because life simply is will to power.... “Exploitation” does not belong to a corrupt or imperfect and primitive society: it belongs to the essence of what lives, as a basic organic function; it is a consequence of the will to power, which is after all the will of life...as a reality it is the original fact of all history.⁴³

Here Nietzsche finally shows his cards, moving beyond his previous suggestion that historiography is a narrative conjecture, to the claim that the will to power is indeed the “original fact of all history.” Clearly, it seems that while Nietzsche eschews the metaphysics of transcendental ideals, he nonetheless endorses and posits a transcendental *event*, that is, *every* possible event of history, as the agonistic clash of mutual exploitation or assertion. Every human transaction, whether economic, political, interpersonal or bodily is, as Milbank puts it, *necessarily* “The asymmetrical triumph of some power over another.”⁴⁴ The “true” or the “good” to which moral valuations point is thus a product of not only divergent perspectives, but the *necessary* friction and resentment arising from asymmetrical exchanges of power.⁴⁵

⁴³ *BGE*, 259.

⁴⁴ Milbank, 284.

⁴⁵ Nietzsche summarizes what has become known as his “perspectivism,” the idea that, in anticipation of postmodern epistemology, we can only know things from a certain perspective: “Henceforth, my dear philosophers, let us be on guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a ‘pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject’; let us guard against the snares of such contradictory concepts as ‘pure reason,’ ‘absolute spirituality,’ ‘knowledge in itself’: these always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense. There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective ‘knowing.’” *GM*, III.12.

It is appropriate to suggest, then, that for Nietzsche agonistic struggle is the condition for the possibility morality. But this struggle is *also*, as Milbank notes, the condition for the arbitrary establishment of logic, economic equivalents, and definitions of crime and punishment; it is no less than the agonistic establishment of the *polis*.⁴⁶ This condition rests on Nietzsche's argument that life itself as will-to-power is ever self-surpassing, revaluating and creating anew, a Dionysian impulse of infinite rending and reconstitution that is the fundament of human reality. This brings us back again to a more extended recounting of the prophetic words of that artist-genealogist, Zarathustra:

Wherever I found a living thing, there I found Will to Power; and even in the will of the servant I found the will to be a master....And this secret Life spake herself unto me. 'Behold,' said she, 'I am that *which must ever surpass itself*....Verily, I say unto you: good and evil which would be everlasting—it doth not exist! Of its own accord must it ever surpass itself anew. With your values and formulae of good and evil, ye exercise power, ye valuing ones: and that is your secret love, and the sparkling, trembling, and overflowing of your souls.'⁴⁷

Operative beneath and within all human transactions, Nietzsche suggests, is the pulsing of life as will to power. Ultimately then, Nietzsche intends his genealogy as a clarion call not for another “revaluation” revolt, but rather for an unprecedented “*transvaluation* of all values.” He seeks to move humanity “beyond good and evil” to the *embrace* of life's very essence, the

⁴⁶ Milbank, 284. Consider Nietzsche's comments in *GM* II.8: “...the feeling of guilt, of personal obligation, had its origin, as we saw, in the oldest and most primitive relationship, that between buyer and seller, creditor and debtor.... Setting prices, determining values, contriving equivalences, exchanging—these preoccupied the earliest thinking of man to so great an extent that in a certain sense they constitute thinking *as such*.” From this process arose “the great generalization...the oldest and naïvest moral canon of *justice*.... Justice on this elementary level is the good will among parties of approximately equal power to come to terms with one another, to reach an ‘understanding’ by means of settlement—and to *compel* parties of lesser power to reach a settlement among themselves—.” This quotation is taken from the Kauffman and Hollingdale translation.

⁴⁷ *Z*, II.34. Cf. also *Z*, II.29: “Good and evil, and rich and poor, and high and low, and all names of values: weapons shall they be, and sounding signs, that life must again and again surpass itself!”

will to power.⁴⁸ Only this “yes” to life can, after the death of God and the termination of morality, offer a rampart against nihilism. Such nihilism is characterized by Nietzsche as either the philosophical flight to the metaphysical, or the world-denying “ascetic” slave morality of Christianity. Either form of nihilism produces, in Nietzsche’s view, an inferior “breed” of humanity as “a shrunken, almost ludicrous species, a herd animal, something full of good will, sickly and mediocre...the European of today.”⁴⁹

Interrogation

Taking up the matter of Nietzsche’s three historiographical approaches, including the “critical,” Strong notes that their selectivity is problematic: “Inevitably the formulation of a coherent picture of the *principe* of Greek experience, or indeed of modern experience, will imply a principle of selection” that leaves out of a great deal of significant historical data, which Arrowsmith calls Nietzsche’s “‘unified field theory’ by which to understand and judge the chaos of present-day Europe.”⁵⁰ Strong additionally suggests a comparison of Nietzsche with Levi-Strauss, who sought “a single structural scheme existing and operating in different

⁴⁸ Though Nietzsche’s explicitly stated goal was such a transvaluation of *all* values, one puzzle in *GM* is that throughout his treatment of moral origins he clearly favors the aristocratic moral valuations as somehow “better.” Their estimates of moral worth stem, in Nietzsche’s view, from their own goodness rather than on envy or resentment; “they did not have to manufacture their happiness artificially through looking at their enemies.” *GM*, I.10 (Common translation). Nietzsche’s well-known proclivity for aristocratically structured society makes good sense of his *Übermensch* who rises above “the herd” of ordinary people. And, while Nietzsche’s favoritism for aristocratic virtues appears to contradict his whole argument about morality, his favoring of these “strong” virtues is justified precisely in their alignment with a strong will that embraces life as will to power. The mistake, in Nietzsche’s view, would be to provide a *rational* basis for the favoring of this value of good over others.

⁴⁹ *BGE*, 62.

⁵⁰ Strong, 33-34. The reference to Nietzsche’s “unified field theory” is Strong’s citing of William Arrowsmith, “Nietzsche on the Classics and the Classicists,” *Arion*, II (winter 1963), 7.

temporal and spatial contexts,”⁵¹ reminding us too that Nietzsche’s historical approach heavily influenced Weber in his sociological development of “ideal types.”⁵² While Strong subsequently distances Nietzsche from these neo-Kantian and sociological approaches, the comparison is instructive. Levi-Strauss, for instance, was greatly influenced by Emile Durkheim, the latter of whom sought to “sociologize Kant” by locating the categorical imperative in the “moral facts” of society which itself imbibed a transcendental ideal.⁵³ As we will suggest, Nietzsche’s transcendental *event* does find comparative purchase here.

However we must first note that by comparison, Nietzsche eschews both the Kantian subject and Kant’s antinomy, affirming only the reality of practical reason,⁵⁴ seeing the intellect as a fundamentally “*creative force*.”⁵⁵ Here Gillespie is at least partially justified in finding a parallel between Nietzsche and Fichte, the latter for whom “all determinate reality is the

⁵¹ Here, Strong (34) is quoting Levi-Strauss’ *Structural Anthropology*, and she notes that the link between Strauss, Rousseau and Nietzsche is developed in Paul DeMan, *Blindness and Insight* (Oxford University Press 1971), 138-65, but more definitively in Derrida’s, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967), 149ff.

⁵² Strong, 33.

⁵³ Durkheim identifies this “ideal” with society itself, an ideal mediated by religion: “Religion in such societies is the source of altruistic attitudes which have the effect ‘of restraining egoism, of inclining man toward sacrifice and disinterestedness,’ thus attaching him to ‘something other than himself, making him dependent upon superior powers which symbolize the ideal.” Cited in Anthony Giddens, *Emile Durkheim* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 87. Here Giddens is quoting Durkheim’s article, “*La science positive de la morale Allemagne*,” *Revue Philosophique*, vol. 24 (1887), 116 and 120. Cf. also Giddens, 17, 91-93, and Milbank, 67-68. I would add here that Durkheim’s implanting of Kant’s transcendental ideal within social realities, and his later association of those ideals with religion, clearly shows the metaphysical presuppositions built into his whole project.

⁵⁴ Nietzsche claims that “The *origin* of these antitheses *need not necessarily* go back to a supernatural source of concepts. This derives from the practical sphere, the sphere of utility and has hence the strong faith it inspires...but this is no ‘proof’ of what it asserts.” Quoted in Strong, 42, who is citing Kroner II no. 18 p. 8.

⁵⁵ Nietzsche notes that “The intellect is a creative force: for it to be able to decide, to ground [*begründen*] it must first have created the thought of the unconditional--it believes that which it creates to be true.” Quoted in Strong, 40, who is citing Naumann XIV no. 55, p. 29.

product of the creative power of the imagination,” making all reason, science and philosophy “fundamentally dependent upon imaginative making...*poieis*.”⁵⁶ Both Nietzsche’s unitive impulse and his view of the intellect as creative action go a long way toward explaining the way he collapses the discourses of cultural critique, historiography, and artistic *poiesis* into a unified creative conjecture about reality. It is in this sense that Milbank’s suggestion of “absolute historicism” founders, while his charge of a “universal discourse of reason” in Nietzsche is confirmed. If reason is at bottom a creative act, for Nietzsche, such a totalizing discourse is evident not only in the content of his genealogical claims, but more preeminently in the *form* in which the claims are made. This is one reason why examination of Nietzsche’s prophetic-aesthetic-genealogical method is such a necessary exercise. What is more, however, the *content* of this narrative conjecture univocally inscribes not Kant’s or Durkheim’s transcendental ideal, but rather a transcendental *event* that exhausts every possible human interaction as agonistic conflict. Unlike his neo-Nietzschean successors whose emancipatory critique of neo-capitalism sneaks egalitarian impulses and the Kantian subject in through the back door, Nietzsche was at least honest enough to see that “for those unable to sustain the rigours of self-determination, the best that could be hoped for was the discipline of a State organized for war.”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Gillespie, 84-85

⁵⁷ Milbank, 318. Taylor notes that the anti-humanist movement following in Nietzsche’s wake—the “immanent counter-Enlightenment”—constituted a protest against mainstream secular humanism, especially against democratic leveling and a loss of the heroic or warrior ethic (372). This movement, says Taylor, “chafes at the benevolence, the universalism, the harmony, the order. It wants to rehabilitate destruction and chaos, the infliction of suffering and exploitation, as part of the life to be affirmed. Life properly understood also affirms death and destruction. To pretend otherwise is to try to restrict it, tame it, hem it in, deprive it of its highest manifestations....” Of course, Taylor notes, “one of the fruits of this counter-culture was Fascism....” Taylor, 373.

Conclusion

In the wake of all these considerations, Milbank's question is appropriate: "does one need to interpret every disturbance, every event, as an event of war?" Can we not, suggests Milbank, posit supernatural charity as the "natural" human act instead of the will-to-power?⁵⁸ The consequences of choosing one over the other are significant, especially when it comes to social theory. For instance, Romand Coles's radical democracy follows in Nietzsche's footsteps, while avoiding the latter's steely-eyed vision, by importing neo-Kantian humanist overtones into his project. Coles seeks to enact practices of listening, traveling and tabling as principles of "active negotiation of discrepant points in a constellation of agonistic concerns."⁵⁹ It is quickly apparent, however, that Coles is infatuated with the *process* of agonistic struggle itself, dissatisfied as he is with any political positioning that hints at closure.⁶⁰ But Coles is unaware, it seems, that his political vision is not only practically unsustainable on a large scale, but also imbibes the pernicious hegemony he so vehemently opposes, and which Nietzsche so aptly exemplifies. Cunningham thus rightly argues that "radical democracy is *bellicose*, and it is this agonism that guides Nietzsche," inscribing on human reality only "the homogeneity of *the* indeterminate, and this indeterminate is underwritten by a univocity of non-being."⁶¹

A more persuasive politics, by contrast, can be offered by a Christian form of life that, as Nietzsche recognized, is wholly unique in its refusal to attribute ultimate reality to *any*

⁵⁸ Milbank, 290.

⁵⁹ Romand Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 221.

⁶⁰ Matthew Porter, "Romand Coles in Conversation with Theology: An Inquiry into What Might be Found *Beyond Gated Politics*" (Baylor University: April 2008 [unpublished paper]), 20-21.

⁶¹ Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing & the Difference of Theology* (London: Routledge, 2002), 250.

conflictual phenomena; it is the singular narrative of ontological peace which denies the ultimate necessity of political, social, economic, and religious violence.⁶² In the case of Nietzsche, then, it may finally come down to a choice between the competing *narratives* of tragic necessity and charitable gratuity. Is Nietzsche's story more persuasive? Hart's evaluation provides a fitting conclusion:

The metaphysical aspects of [Nietzsche's] critique...are embarrassing if regarded as anything other than facets of an imaginative narrative, an attempt to tell a more compelling story, whose appeal is rhetorical, whose logic is figurative, whose foundation is none. Nietzsche's disdain does not follow from the force of his reasoning; it is that force.... Still, in the case of Nietzsche, it is the aesthetic side to which theology must attend, because this provides the only real challenge to the Christian *kerygma*: one gospel confronts another. Nietzsche's preferences are all.... The most potent reply a Christian can make to Nietzsche's critique is to accuse him of a defective sensibility—of bad taste.⁶³

⁶² Milbank, 262.

⁶³ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 124-25. Nietzsche himself affirms Hart's claim that he seeks to tell a better story: "Master morality affirms as instinctively as Christian morality negates ('God,' 'beyond,' 'self-denial' all of them negations). The former gives to things out of its own abundance—it transfigures, it beautifies the world and makes it more rational—the latter impoverishes, pales and makes uglier the value of things, it negates the world.... These opposite forms in the optics of value are both necessary: they are ways of seeing, immune to reasons and refutations. One cannot refute Christianity; one cannot refute a disease of the eye. That pessimism was fought like a philosophy, was the height of scholarly idiocy. The concepts 'true' and 'untrue' have, as it seems to me, no meaning in optics." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case on Wagner: A Musician's Problem* (1888), epilogue. Excerpts from translation by Walter Kaufmann. Text amended in part by The Nietzsche Channel. Accessed online at <http://www.geocities.com/thenietzschechannel/wagner.htm>.

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