

Nietzsche and the Anthropocene: Reflections from the Slopes of a Volcano

Nietzsche e l'Antropocene: riflessioni dalle pendici di un vulcano

Timothy Freeman

*For believe me—the secret to harvesting the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment from existence is to live dangerously! Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius!*¹

1. Living on the Edge

Living near the summit of Kīlauea on the island of Hawai‘i for almost twenty-five years has provided ample opportunity for reflection on Nietzsche’s recommendation for living dangerously on the slopes of a volcano. Kīlauea does not have quite the fearsome reputation as Vesuvius; and yet it still allows for a close experience of one of nature’s most powerful forces. I’ve experienced many dramatic events over the years on the slopes of this volcano, and yet nothing quite so spectacular at the summit as the towering fountains of lava that have occurred on an almost weekly basis this year. The proximity to such a force makes one intimately aware of one’s mortality, especially those moments when one realizes the next moment could be one’s last. I have come to appreciate the profound reverence many Hawaiians have for Pele, the goddess of the volcano. I have come to understand that she is not some transcendent deity but is rather the fiery force within the Earth. Despite her destructive power, Hawaiians have long

¹ F. Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science*, Penguin, New York 2018, p.182.

understood that this force brings forth the *'āina*, the land and its biotic community that makes possible their island home. Now we understand from science that this force is one of the things that makes the Earth a living place, as the movement of magma around the iron core creates the magnetic field that enables the Earth to have an atmosphere. Yet, we are now all living on the edge one might say as the world turns further into the darkness of the Anthropocene as the human imprint upon the Earth, through the “perfect storm” of climate change and other environmental problems, and the continuing threat of global conflict in the nuclear age threatens to make the planet uninhabitable. This all happens at a time when it is even dangerous to speak of climate change, at least in my country, which was once thought of as the leader of the free world; but now, due to the failure of democracy, has been taken over by those who think freedom is simply the license to get as rich as possible, and are also, confident of their eternal reward, looking forward to the end of this life on Earth.

In the year 2000, the term the *Anthropocene* was coined to refer to a new geological epoch to suggest the dramatic transformation of the Earth due to human activity.² Since that proposal there has been considerable academic debate concerning the scientific validity of the term, and in March 2024, the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) voted to reject the proposal. However, the rejection of this designation should not be taken as a denial of anthropogenic climate change or the human influence on the planet. As summed up in a recent online article:

Ultimately, the formal rejection of the Anthropocene term does not mean that anthropogenic climate change is less-real of a

² P.J. Crutzen-E.F. Stoermer, *The 'Anthropocene'* in *IGBP Newsletter* 41 (May 2000), pp. 17-18.

global reality. What the verdict does suggest, however, is that we need to adopt a deeper and more nuanced view of this reality – one that embraces the sweeping historical complexity of our human relationship to the environment, rather than one that distorts this history in the attempt to define it through neat scientific labels³.

One could say that Nietzsche is a philosopher of the Anthropocene insofar as he anticipates the poststructuralist deconstruction of the notion of *nature as origin*, acknowledging that the world, as we know it, is inescapably the product of human artifice. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche uses an analogy drawn from painting to suggest the philosopher as artist:

Is it not sufficient to assume degrees of apparentness and, as it were, lighter and darker shadows and shades of appearance – different “values,” to use the language of painters? Why couldn’t the world *that concerns us* – be a fiction?⁴

Much of Nietzsche’s thought can be understood as an attempt to confront the Anthropocene, the extent of the human imprint on the world that concerns us, and the looming catastrophe, the advent of nihilism that he foresaw coming in our time. In late 1888, Nietzsche warned of an approaching catastrophe facing humanity, the advent of nihilism:

‘What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the *advent of nihilism*. This history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here. This future speaks even now in a

³ L. Sherry, *Not Yet Anthropocene: What the Official Rejection of Earth’s New Epoch Means for the Climate Discourse* in *Earth.Org*, May 6, 2024.

⁴ F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Random House, New York 1966, pp. 46-47.

hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; for this music of the future all ears are cocked even now. For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect⁵.

In a recent paper titled *Twilight of the Humans: Nietzsche, Dismal Politics, and the Coming Planetary Apocalypse*, Andrew Johnson presents Nietzsche as «the philosopher *par excellence* who determined the politics of catastrophic climate change»⁶. In describing the coming planetary apocalypse Johnson writes:

The death of all future generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. Human civilization has charted a one-way, irreversible course toward the end of history, planetary destruction, civilizational collapse, and the extinction of the human species. We (a general, amorphous, and problematic “we”) live in doomed days. The horizon of possibilities has grown dark and midnight approaches. A capitalistic death-drive prepares to “immanentize the eschaton”. Shrouded in darkness, the human herd scatters and scurries, screaming that “now, finally now, is the time to act”, before neoliberal global capitalism makes all that is solid melt into air!⁷

I really like that Johnson chose a quote from *Gravity’s Rainbow*, long one of my favorite books, for one of the epigrams. The riveting opening section begins with one of the greatest opening lines in literature, *A screaming comes across the sky*. The story begins in London during the Blitz and

⁵ F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Vintage, New York 1968, p. 3.

⁶ A. Johnson, *Twilight of the Humans: Nietzsche, Dismal Politics, and the Coming Planetary Collapse* in *The Agonist* 2 Vol. XII, 2019 (pp. 7-27), p. 8.

⁷ A. Johnson, *cit.* p. 7.

masses of people are evacuating, fleeing the burning city into underground shelters after the latest bombing by the Luftwaffe.

Is this the way out? Faces turn to the windows, but no one dares ask, not out loud. Rain comes down. No, this is not a disentanglement from but a *progressive knotting* into [...] ⁸.

Gravity's Rainbow has long been considered a masterpiece of postmodern literature, and this question might be raised regarding postmodern thought. From the rooftop Pirate Prentice watches the vapor trail of the latest V2 rocket wondering if it will land right on his head. It turns out the global crisis brought on by climate change has the same parabola, gravity's rainbow, as a rocket bomb. Once the rocket reaches *Brennschluss*, fuel cut-off, the rocket's trajectory is fixed; and once climate change passes the tipping point, there will be nothing we can do to stop the rise in average global temperature. The earth is heating up dramatically as a result of our burning of fossil fuels, and the latest IPCC report emphasizes that we must cut carbon emissions in half by 2030. And yet carbon emissions are still climbing.

For Nietzsche, this crisis of nihilism is not a modern problem, simply the result of the development of modern technology and the burning of fossil fuels that powers modern civilization but is rather the culmination of a long history of thought, the "history of metaphysics" as he put it, that has shaped modern civilization. Nietzsche's response, *avant la lettre*, to the coming darkness of the Anthropocene, was not to deny the human hand in shaping the world that concerns us, but rather in suggesting an overcoming of the values that have so far shaped the Anthropocene. The problem with the values

⁸ T. Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, Viking Penguin, New York 1973, p. 3.

which have shaped the Anthropocene is that the Earth has not been recognized as our home. With the longing for eternal life in another world, the Earth becomes a place that is to be used up and left behind. Against this, the protagonist of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* exhorts us to overcome these values and remain loyal to the Earth. Nietzsche understood the dangerousness of this task of the revaluation of values, and this is why he recommended living dangerously on the slopes of Vesuvius⁹.

In this paper, I will reflect on this in the context of Gianni Vattimo's defense of Nietzsche's "weak thought" (*il pensiero debole*). For Vattimo, Nietzsche's weak thought involves an acceptance of «"nihilism" in the sense first given it by Nietzsche: the dissolution of any ultimate foundation, the understanding that in the history of philosophy, and of western culture in general, "God is dead;" and "the real world has become a fable"»¹⁰. Vattimo is here drawing attention to the famous passage in *Twilight of the Idols* where Nietzsche summarizes the history of metaphysics in which the "real world" finally becomes a "fable" or a "dream"¹¹. Vattimo defends Nietzsche's weak thought as emancipatory, as a prelude to a profound transformation of humanity:

That the real world becomes a dream can also be expressed in terms of Nietzsche's nihilism. As the objective world consumes itself, it gives way to a growing subjective transformation not of

⁹ The beat poet Albert Saijo suggested something perhaps like Nietzsche when he recommended living on the edge of a volcano. See my article: T. Freeman, *Living on the Edge of a Volcano: Reflections on Nietzsche's Philosophy and Albert Saijo's Zensational Rhapsody* in *Journal of World Philosophies*, 8 (Summer 2023), pp. 40-59.

¹⁰ G. Vattimo, *Nihilism & Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, & Law*, Columbia University Press, New York 2004, p. xxv.

¹¹ F. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, p. 20.

individuals but of communities, cultures, sciences, and languages. This is what I theorized with the notion of weak thought¹².

2. Vattimo's *Il Pensiero Debole*

What Vattimo finds liberating in Nietzsche's weak thought is its modesty. In the 'Preface to the Second Edition' of *The Joyous Science*, Nietzsche makes a bit of a risqué joke at the expense of the aim of traditional philosophers to reveal the naked truth:

We no longer believe that truth remains truth when her veil is withdrawn; we have lived too long to believe this. Nowadays we regard it as a matter of common decency not to be eager to see everything naked, or be present at everything, or understand and 'know' everything. [. . .] One should cherish the *modesty* with which nature has concealed herself behind enigmas and iridescent uncertainties. Perhaps truth is a woman who has reasons for not showing her reasons?¹³

In the 'Preface' to *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche continues this play with the woman-truth making fun of dogmatic philosophers who have ended up like love-sick suitors disappointed in their attempt to possess this truth:

Supposing truth is a woman—what then? Are there not grounds for the suspicion that all philosophers, insofar as they were dogmatists, have been very inexpert about women? That the gruesome seriousness, the clumsy obtrusiveness with which they have usually approached truth so far have been awkward and very improper methods for winning a woman's heart? What is certain is

¹² G. Vattimo, 2007. *Toward a Nonreligious Christianity* in *After the Death of God*, ed. J. Robbins, Columbia University Press, New York 2007, p. 40.

¹³ F. Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science*, cit., p. 13.

that she has not allowed herself to be won—and today every kind of dogmatism is left standing dispirited and discouraged¹⁴.

Nietzsche goes on to say that the “dogmatist’s error”, which he concedes is «the worst, most durable, and most dangerous of all errors so far», and which began with «Plato’s invention of the pure spirit and the good as such», amounts to «standing truth on her head and denying *perspective*, the basic condition of all life»¹⁵. What Vattimo praises as Nietzsche’s weak thought is the modesty of accepting that we only know from limited human perspectives, and thus the overcoming of dogmatism, this lovesickness in the lovers of wisdom. Perhaps the most radical formulation of Nietzsche’s perspectivism is this passage from the notebooks:

Against positivism, which halts at the phenomena – “There are only facts” – I would say: No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact “in itself”: perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing. [. . .] In so far as the word “knowledge” has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is *interpretable otherwise*, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings. – “Perspectivism”¹⁶.

In the ‘Foreward’ to *Nihilism & Emancipation*, Richard Rorty explains that while critics think Nietzsche’s perspectivism

will lead to “relativism’ and moral flabbiness, Vattimo thinks that it will produce a desirable humility about our own moral intuitions and about the social institutions to which we have become accustomed. This humility will encourage tolerance for other

¹⁴ F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, cit., p. 2.

¹⁵ F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, cit., p. 3.

¹⁶ F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, cit., p. 267.

intuitions and a willingness to experiment with ways of refashioning or replacing institutions. Vattimo sees this humility as an antidote to the prideful characteristics of those who claim to be obeying unconditional, ahistorical, transcultural, categorical imperatives¹⁷.

Vattimo's defense of Nietzsche's weak thought has been described as «the most striking current of thought in Italian philosophy in the post-WWII period' and as a movement 'that goes to the very heart of the great problems in continental philosophy»¹⁸. In the seminal essay in which Vattimo introduced this notion of weak thought, it is proposed as a "third way" related to but distinct from the two dominant trends in continental thought, dialectics and difference. There Vattimo explains that this notion

is not to be understood mainly or solely as an "overcoming" but, rather, it is to be defined primarily in terms of the Heideggerian notion of *Verwindung*, a term whose sense also must be understood within the horizon of a "weak" notion of what it means to think¹⁹.

This term, *Verwindung*, translated as "distortion," "torsion," or "twisting," is used by Heidegger in place of *Überwindung*, the "overcoming" that is proper to dialectics. As Vattimo puts it:

¹⁷ R. Rorty, *Foreward in Nihilism & Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, Law*, Columbia University Press, New York 2004), pp. xviii-xix.

¹⁸ P. Carravetta, *Introduction* in G. Vattimo, *Weak Thought*, State University of New York Press, New York 2012, pp. 1-2.

¹⁹ G. Vattimo, *Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought* in *Weak Thought*, State University of New York Press, New York 2012, p. 39.

Heidegger's overcoming of metaphysics seems to involve a dialectical overcoming, yet it is different precisely insofar as it is a *Verwindung*²⁰.

Understood as a "twisting torsion" the term connects to the "twisting free" of the history of metaphysics Heidegger suggested in his *Nietzsche* lectures. As Heidegger puts it there in discussing the overturning of Plato's valuation of the supersensuous over the sensuous:

The new hierarchy does not simply wish to reverse matters within the old structural order, now reverencing the sensuous and scorning the supersensuous. It does not wish to put what was at the very bottom on the very top. A new hierarchy and new valuation mean that the ordering *structure* must be changed. To that extent, overturning Platonism must become a twisting free of it²¹.

Vattimo explains that this *Verwindung*, the twisting free of metaphysics,

is already exemplified in Nietzsche's announcement that God is dead, which is *not* a metaphysical utterance on the nonexistence of God. The statement is intended as the true realization of an "event," since the death of God means mainly the end of the stable structure of Being, hence also the end of the possibility of stating God's existence or nonexistence²².

²⁰ G. Vattimo, *Weak Thought*, cit. p. 46.

²¹ M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volume I: The Will to Power as Art*, Harper and Row, San Francisco 1979, pp. 209-210. The word Krell translates as 'twisting free' is *Herausdrehung*. See J. Sallis, *Twisting Free: Being to an Extent Sensible in Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. 17, 1987, pp. 1-22.

²² G. Vattimo, *Weak Thought*, cit., p. 46.

It is interesting that Nietzsche uses *Überwindung* and not *Verwindung* in introducing the “overcoming” that is the central theme of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

“I teach to you the Overhuman. The human is something that shall be overcome (*überwunden*). What have you done to overcome (*überwinden*) it?”²³

This task of overcoming is also the reason why Nietzsche recommends living dangerously on the slopes of Vesuvius. Earlier in the same passage Nietzsche sees a need for preparatory human beings, those «with the ability to remain silent, solitary, resolute, contended with and persistent in invisible activity,’ human beings, he continues, ‘who have an inner inclination to seek in all things that which is to be overcome (*überwinden*) in them»²⁴. Vattimo explains that Heidegger uses *Verwindung* because it contains no notion of dialectical sublimation (*Aufhebung*) in *Überwindung*. Whereas *Überwindung* is connected with dialectics, *Verwindung* is the term suggesting the twisting free from the history of metaphysics which marks the beginning of postmodern thought. Nevertheless, in another essay Vattimo explains:

The first philosopher who writes in terms of *Verwindung* – without actually using the word – is not Heidegger but Nietzsche. One might indeed claim that philosophical postmodernism originates in Nietzsche’s work²⁵.

²³ F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, p. 11. F. Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra: Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen*, Walter de Gruyter 1968, p. 8.

²⁴ F. Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science*, cit., p. 181. F. Nietzsche, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1982, p. 176.

²⁵ G. Vattimo, “*Verwindung*”: *Nihilism and the Postmodern in Philosophy* in *Substance*, Vol 16, No. 2. Issue 53, 1987, (pp. 7-17), p. 7.

How is Nietzsche's weak thought a third way, related to but distinct from dialectics and difference? For Vattimo, dialectical thought assumes a progressive unfolding of time. The very idea that history is this march of progress "belongs to a culture of masters", those who think they understand this process and justify forms of domination as the inevitable unfolding of this history²⁶. Vattimo sees a "dissolutive" tendency in the materialistic overturning of Hegelian dialectics, and this tendency towards dissolution "inserts itself" in the thought of difference. While Heidegger expressed this thought of difference in its most radical form, for Vattimo it begins with Nietzsche:

The idea of totality and reappropriation, the very pillars of dialectical thought, remain metaphysical notions to be critiqued. Nietzsche helped bring this awareness to light by analyzing metaphysical subjectivity in terms of mastery and by announcing that God is dead²⁷.

Again, for Nietzsche, the notion of the death of God is not a metaphysical thought, a claim about the existence of God, but is rather a metaphor for the end of metaphysics, where the very idea of claiming to know whether God exists or not is surrendered.

Difference is thus «the heir to and radicalization of the dissolutive tendencies of dialectics», while the movement of *Verwindung*, according to Vattimo, is the «declination of difference into weak thought», and this involves a new ontology:

²⁶ G. Vattimo, *Weak Thought*, cit., p. 41.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

Reappropriation is not possible without liberating Being from the idea of stable presence, of *ousia*. But what would be entailed by such a reappropriation that no longer deals with Being as stability? The enfeeblement of (the notion of) Being, the explicit occurrence of its temporal essence (which is also and especially ephemerality, birth and death, faded trans-mission, antiquarian accumulation) has serious repercussions for the way we conceive of thinking and of the *Dasein* that is its “subject.” Weak thought aims at articulating such repercussions and thereby preparing a new ontology.²⁸

This weak ontology, Vattimo emphasizes,

will have important consequences, and of which thought has only begun to become aware of. These are the derangements that substantiate the announcement of the death of God, and which, according to Nietzsche are fated to play a major role in the coming centuries of our history²⁹.

What are the consequences of this weak thought which proceeds from the recognition of this enfeeblement of the notion of Being no longer understood as a stable presence, an unchanging substance, outside of the flow of time and ephemeral existence? What then is truth in this weak ontology? Vattimo suggests a weakening in the conception of truth. If truth can no longer be thought in terms of a correspondence to a stable presence, and can thus no longer serve as a stable foundation, then truth becomes something that takes place in the continual process of interpretation. Playing on the word *Versucher* in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche allows that the philosophers of the future may still love their truths, but such truths are only attempts and temptations:

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 47.

A new species of philosophers is coming up: I venture to baptize them with a name that is not free of danger. As I unriddle them, insofar as they allow themselves to be unriddled for it belongs to their nature to want to remain riddles at some point these philosophers of the future may have a right it might also be a wrong to be called attempters (*Versucher*). This name itself is in the end a mere attempt (*Versuch*) and, if you will, a temptation (*Versuchung*)³⁰.

Truth becomes an event that happens, as Heidegger suggested, in the work of art. Vattimo suggests the discourse of philosophy becomes something more aesthetic, or poetic: «the true does not have a metaphysical or logical nature but a rhetorical one»³¹.

One of the consequences of weak thought which Vattimo suggests here is the liberating one:

There is no doubt that once the characteristics of being and truth are rethought in weak terms, philosophical thinking, or the thinking of being, can no longer vindicate the sovereignty that metaphysics attributed to it—mainly through ideological deception—in the sphere of politics and social praxis³².

But can weak thought be anything more than the dismantling or deconstruction of the dogmatic pretensions in the history of metaphysics? Vattimo thinks that it does, and this perhaps marks the “third way” that is distinct from both dialectics and difference: «As for the constructive task of thought which seems to have lost much of its former emphasis

³⁰ F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, cit., p. 52.; F. Nietzsche, *Jenseits Von Gut und Böse*, Alfred Kröner, Leipzig 1924, pp. 52-53

³¹ G. Vattimo, *Weak Thought*, cit., p. 50.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 50.

in the postmodern experience, a philosophy of *Verwindung* in no way renounces it».³³

So, what might be the constructive task of Nietzsche's thought? In announcing the "death of God" and the "advent of nihilism," Nietzsche anticipated an unprecedented crisis in our time. In another passage announcing the death of God, curiously titled *What Our Cheerfulness Means*, Nietzsche likens the event to an eclipse of the sun:

The greatest event of recent times – the fact that "God is dead", that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable – has already begun to cast its first shadows over Europe. For the few at least whose eyes, whose *suspicious* eyes, are strong enough and subtle enough for this drama, some sun seems to have set, some ancient and profound confidence has turned into doubt; to these eyes our old world must seem to be becoming more vespertine, distrustful, strange and "old" with every passing day. In the main, however, we may say that the event itself is much too great, too remote, too far beyond most people's capacity to understand, for us to imagine that even the tidings of it could have *reached* their ears, let alone that very many people would already know *what* its actual implications were, of what things would have to collapse, now that this belief had been undermined, because they were built upon it: for example, our entire European morality. With regard to this long and abundant train of consequences which are now imminent, this demolition and destruction, this decline and fall, who nowadays has already divined enough of it to have to play the educator and prognosticator of this tremendous logic of terror, to play the prophet of a gloom and solar eclipse the like of which has probably never before existed on earth?³⁴

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

³⁴ F. Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science*, cit., p. 225.

Now we know that it is Plato's sun, the idea that there is a universal truth, a ground or foundation for our values in the "Form of the Good" that is eclipsed, it is not difficult to understand why this eclipse of the sun leads to the collapse of morality. How is Nietzsche's weak thought emancipatory and transformative, as Vattimo has suggested, in this time of the Anthropocene? What is the reason for Nietzsche's cheerfulness in facing the cataclysm that is now impending in the Anthropocene? At the end of the passage Nietzsche suggests the reason for cheerfulness:

In fact, we philosophers and "free spirits" experience the news that the "old god is dead" as if illuminated by a new dawn; our hearts are overflowing with gratitude, astonishment, presentiment, and expectation—at last the horizon seems free again, even if it is not bright; at last our ships can set sail again, ready to face any danger; every venture of the knowledge-seeker is permitted again; the sea, *our* sea, lies open again before us; perhaps there has never been such an "open sea"³⁵.

The metaphor of the philosopher as intrepid sailor venturing out into an uncharted open sea perhaps suggests what Vattimo means by weak thought. Vattimo directs our attention to some passages from early writings where Nietzsche speaks of this "morning philosophy," and a philosophy of convalescence, healing, and health, all of which become major themes in his mature work: «These metaphors suggest a sort of 'surpassing' of metaphysical (modern, decadent) thought by means of an attitude other than the critical surpassing entailed in the search for a newer, stronger, or "truer" foundation»³⁶.

³⁵ F. Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science*, cit., p. 226.

³⁶ G. Vattimo, "*Verwindung*", cit., p. 11.

The notion of a “morning philosophy”, and this experience of being “illuminated by a new dawn”, point to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as the narrative begins and closes with Zarathustra’s addressing the rising sun, and at the end the narrator closes book: «Thus Spoke Zarathustra, and [he] left his cave, glowing and strong, like a morning sun out of dark mountains»³⁷. The story that unfolds in between these two mornings, leading to Zarathustra “illuminated by a new dawn,” involves the teachings Zarathustra brings down from his mountain solitude as gifts for human beings: the teaching concerning the Overhuman, the will to power, and the eternal recurrence. The notion of the Overhuman, the further overcoming or transformation of human beings, involves overcoming the longing for another world and thus becoming capable of remaining loyal or true to the earth: «I beseech you, my brothers, *stay true to the earth* and do not believe those who talk of over-earthly hopes!»³⁸. Understanding will to power and affirming the strange idea of the eternal recurrence are crucial in the overcoming of the values that have led to the darkness of the Anthropocene.

3. Nietzsche’s *Canto della Terra*

Thus Spoke Zarathustra is a series of speeches given by the protagonist, but the narrative also includes a few key passages that are songs rather than speeches, each closing with the line: “Thus sang Zarathustra”. In this closing section, I would like to suggest that the song *Canto della Terra* (Song of the Earth), made famous by the great Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli, might be taken as a coda, a song perhaps

³⁷ F. Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, cit., p. 287.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

accompanying Zarathustra as he makes that final descent from the dark mountains, glowing and strong like the morning sun.

The notion of will to power is introduced as Zarathustra is explaining how in his travels through many lands, he has encountered many different tablets of good and evil: «A tablet of things held to be good hangs over every people. Behold, it is the tablet of its overcomings, behold, it is the voice of its will to power»³⁹. Here Nietzsche is emphasizing the all-too-human origins of morality. Instead of coming to us on stone tablets from God, or merely discovered in the nature of things, Zarathustra explains that the values of good and evil are expressions of, the voice of, the will to power of a people. The will to power should not be thought, as it often is, as a mere drive for power upon the part of a conscious ego. It refers rather to the underlying forces within the psyche that shape one's values. Part of the point in emphasizing the will to power in our values is recognizing the human origin of values. Only in recognizing the modest origin of our values can we become capable of changing them.

This is where it may seem strangest to think of will to power in the context of Nietzsche's weak thought. Perhaps the most challenging of the passages where Nietzsche discusses will to power is the notorious one in *Beyond Good and Evil* where he describes the will to power as the underlying drive of all life:

Here we must beware of the superficiality and get to the bottom of the matter, resisting all sentimental weakness: life 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, exploitation⁴⁰.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

⁴⁰ F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, cit., p. 203.

He continues to say that this “exploitation” is not a character of primitive societies that humanity has evolved out of; nor is this true only of corrupt societies, aberrations from the refined norm of modern advanced civilization. This “exploitation,” Nietzsche explains, «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». All of life, he goes on to explain, strives «to grow, spread, seize, become predominant» precisely because «life simply is will to power»⁴¹. One might like to resist this hard truth about life, and say that Nietzsche was just wrong; but when one considers the totality of the human impact upon the earth this seems harder and harder to do. That we now even speak of the Anthropocene may be a confirmation of this hard truth that life is will to power. The most troubling aspect of this is that if this drive for domination and exploitation is not something that humanity can evolve out of, and is that which is now driving humanity to the brink of extinction, how can it be possible to become capable of remaining loyal to the earth?

It is important to consider that *Beyond Good and Evil* closes with a passage in which the author looks back over what he has written and raises a question about the status of the text:

Alas, what are you after all, my written and painted thoughts! It was not long ago that you were still so colorful, young, and malicious, full of thorns and secret spices – you made me sneeze and laugh – and now? You have already taken off your novelty, and some of you are ready, I fear, to become truths: they already look so immortal, so pathetically decent, so dull!⁴²

⁴¹ F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, cit., p. 203.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 236.

The passage recalls the connection between writing and painting Socrates makes at the end of the *Phaedrus*, an association which destabilizes Plato's discourse founded on the opposition of art and truth at the outset of the history of metaphysics⁴³. Cautioning the reader not to take his written and painted thoughts as truths is perhaps an example of the *Verwindung*, the twisting free of the history of metaphysics that Vattimo suggests marks Nietzsche's weak thought. If one ignores the warning in Nietzsche's closing address and takes what he says about the exploitative will to power at the core of all life as a metaphysical truth, a truth about the fundamental nature of life, then it doesn't seem possible for humanity to become capable of remaining loyal to the Earth. If there is no way of transforming or evolving out of this exploitative will to power that has so far shaped the Anthropocene, then how will it be possible for human beings to overcome the exploitation of the Earth that is leading to the coming planetary apocalypse?

Yet the overcoming of human being in Zarathustra's teaching that leads to becoming capable of remaining loyal to the Earth involves a revaluation of values and thus, it would seem, also a transformation of the will to power in human beings. This is what *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is about, and the drama turns on the thought of the eternal recurrence. Vattimo emphasizes the importance of this strange thought:

It is worth recalling that from the moment it first came to him (during the famous walk by Lake Silvaplana in the high Engadine), Nietzsche saw the idea of the eternal return as the core of his own philosophizing, the key that unlocked all problems, his

⁴³ Plato, *Phaedrus*, Hackett, Indianapolis 2003, p. 63.

message to the world: Zarathustra is “the teacher of the eternal recurrence”⁴⁴.

But how does the thought of eternal recurrence work as a catalyst for this transformation? Of course, Nietzsche introduces the thought in the penultimate section of Book IV of *The Joyous Science*:

What if one day or night a demon came to you in your most solitary solitude and said to you: “This life, as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live again, and innumerable times again, and there will be nothing new in it, but rather every pain and joy, every thought and sigh, and all the unutterably trivial or great things in your life will have to happen to you again, with everything in the same series and sequence—and likewise this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and likewise this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence will be turned over and over again, and you with it, speck of dust!”⁴⁵

In an extended reflection on the thought of eternal recurrence, Vattimo suggests how the thought developed from Nietzsche’s earlier writings concerning the relationship between time and the eternal. As a cosmological hypothesis, the thought seems most nihilistic, foreclosing on the possibility of anything new ever really happening, undermining any meaning, any purpose to existence. As Vattimo explains,

The process of the eternal return, if it has neither sense nor purpose, always entails that that which takes place is only the

⁴⁴ G. Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, Columbia University Press, New York 2000, p. 2.

⁴⁵ F. Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science*, cit., pp. 220–22.

repetition of what has already taken place and cannot differ in any way⁴⁶.

On this interpretation, the thought seems to imply a determinism in which there is no liberty either as «the actions of man are simply produced by the cyclical becoming of the cosmos»⁴⁷. On the other hand, Nietzsche seems to present the thought as a moral imperative, challenging one to act as if every moment were to eternally recur:

If that thought took hold of you as you are, it would transform you and perhaps crush you; the question with regard to each and every thing, “Do you want this again, innumerable times again?” would weigh upon your actions with the greatest weight!⁴⁸

As the cosmological and moral interpretations are incompatible there must be another way. As Vattimo explains:

Surely the doctrine of the eternal return must have yet another meaning, not reducible to these two, that would somehow reveal the possibility of a closer, more profound link between the eternity of the world and human choice⁴⁹.

In Nietzsche’s diagnosis the problem with the values which have so far shaped the Anthropocene is that they have been expressions of a craving for vengeance or *ressentiment*. Zarathustra perhaps reveals the secret to Nietzsche’s thought when, in the section titled *On the Tarantulas*, he exclaims:

⁴⁶ G. Vattimo, *Dialogue*, cit., p. 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

⁴⁸ F. Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science*, cit., p. 222.

⁴⁹ G. Vattimo, *Dialogue*, cit., p. 3.

For *that humanity might be redeemed from revenge*: that is for me the bridge to the highest hope and a rainbow after long storms.⁵⁰

Becoming loyal to the Earth requires the redemption of humanity from the spirit of revenge. The overcoming of the vengeful will to power requires confronting the problem of time and time's passing. In the crucial section titled *On Redemption*, Zarathustra explains «“This, yes this alone, is what *revenge* itself is: the will's ill-will toward time and its “It was” [*Es war*]»⁵¹. Vattimo focuses on this problem in examining the thought of eternal recurrence:

Thus, while nihilism is indeed a historical phenomenon, the development of which can be traced, it is also the universal condition *tout court* of mankind when the problem of *es war* has not been resolved. Proof of this lies in the fact that Nietzsche does not recognize any nonnihilistic historical epoch. Nihilism commences with Plato, and even before him, with Socrates. Indeed, wherever thought has arisen, there the spirit of revenge has dominated, and as we shall shortly see, it is both symptom and upshot of the incapacity to resolve the problem of *es war* and break free from the crushing weight of the past.⁵²

In what he acknowledges only a «preliminary to an interpretation of the doctrine of the eternal return», Vattimo focuses on the scene where the thought is finally introduced in *Zarathustra*⁵³. This takes place in the section titled *On the Vision and Riddle* and Vattimo turns our attention to the confrontation that takes place between Zarathustra and a

⁵⁰ F. Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, cit., p. 86.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 121.; *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, cit., p. 176.

⁵² G. Vattimo, *Dialogue*, cit., p. 14-15.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

dwarf, the Spirit of Heaviness, in the gateway of the moment where two paths meet, each stretching back to eternity, one to the past and one to the future. In contrast to a linear view of time, in the eternal return all the past and the future meet in the present moment. As Vattimo puts it

The major consequence of the doctrine of the eternal return is the function performed by the instant. Now it bears with it all of the future, and thus also all of the past. It is in a sort of immediate rapport with the totality of time, which is how Nietzsche conceives of eternity⁵⁴.

The solution to the problem of time and time's passing lies in each present moment.

Perhaps it is crucial to recall here that Zarathustra first begins his story of the vision and the riddle by framing to whom the story is addressed: «To you, bold searchers, tempters, experimenters, and whoever has embarked with cunning sails upon terrifying seas. [. . .] to you alone I recount the riddle that I saw»⁵⁵. Here we see that same play with the word *Versucher* that Nietzsche employed when he addressed the question of whether the philosophers of the future will still love their truths. The story is not told to those who need a thread of argument to make it through the labyrinth of the thought of the eternal return. It would be too strong an interpretation to take the eternal return as a metaphysical truth about how time really works or what really happens after death. It is told only to those who have abandoned solid ground, those like Odysseus who have set sail, risking sirens' songs on terrifying seas.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

⁵⁵ F. Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, cit., p. 134.

After the confrontation with the dwarf in the gateway of the moment, the scene shifts strangely like in a dream, a lucid dream, and Zarathustra sees a young shepherd writhing on the ground with a heavy black snake hanging out of his mouth. The shepherd is choked up with the nauseating heaviness of the thought of eternal recurrence. Zarathustra tells the shepherd to bite through it, bite off the head of the snake. When the shepherd heeds Zarathustra's call and bites through, spewing out the head of the snake, he jumps up transformed, no longer shepherd, no longer human. He is radiant, illumined, and laughing. Vattimo suggests that the solution to the problem posed by temporality and our ephemeral existence «must for Nietzsche be a smile»⁵⁶. This echoes Camus' suggestion in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that we must imagine his happiness and silent joy as Sisyphus begins again rolling the rock⁵⁷.

At the end of *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche suggests «an ordering of rank among philosophers depending on the rank of their laughter—all the way up to those capable of golden laughter»⁵⁸. There is also one of the last mad letters, perhaps the last thing Nietzsche ever wrote when he explains that he has been «condemned to while away the next eternity with bad jokes»⁵⁹. That the shepherd jumps up laughing leads one to the suspicion that the thought of eternal recurrence might even be something of a joke. In any case, I think this is what Vattimo's interpretation of Nietzsche's weak thought might suggest about the thought of eternal recurrence. Nevertheless, even a joke could be transformative. When the shepherd jumps up laughing, he is radiant and illumined, like

⁵⁶ G. Vattimo, *Dialogue*, cit., p. 19.

⁵⁷ A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, Vintage, New York 1991, p. 123.

⁵⁸ F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, cit., p. 232.

⁵⁹ R. Hayman, *Nietzsche: A Critical Life*, Penguin, New York 1982, p. 335.

the golden sun. In *Zarathustra* gold is suggested as an allegory for the highest virtue, the gift-giving or bestowing virtue, and the sun is praised for giving its light without asking for a return on an investment. The golden sun is thus an image for a love that is a gift rather than an investment⁶⁰.

Now this is what I think the song *Canto Della Terra* perhaps suggests⁶¹. It is often taken as a love song where lovers find solace and joy amidst the spinning world. The opening lines, «Si lo so, amore, che io e te/Forse stiamo insieme/Solo qualche istante (Yes, I know, love, that you and I/May be together/Just some moments)», suggest a gratitude for a love even if it is ephemeral, and thus for a love that is a gift not an investment. The chorus suggests gratitude for the Earth for turning us from darkness to light, to the sun: «Guarda questa terra che,/Che gira insieme a noi,/Anche quando è buio./Guarda questa terra che,/Che gira anche per noi,/A darci un po' di sole, sole, sole. (Look at the Earth that,/That turns with us,/Even when it's dark./Look at the Earth that,/That also turns for us,/To give us a bit of sun, sun, sun.)». This is what I suggest is Nietzsche's response to the darkness of the Anthropocene: find the love that is a gift in the present moment; instead of longing for eternal reward in another world, be grateful for this Earth that turns with us toward the light, toward the sun. If only human beings could be capable of such a love, the world that concerns us would be a very different place.

⁶⁰ See T. Freeman, *Staying True to the Earth in Zarathustra, Zhuangzi, and Zen in A Wandering Dance Through the Philosophy of Graham Parkes: Comparative Perspectives on Art and Nature*, edited by David Jones, Bloomsbury Academic 2024, pp. 179-214.

⁶¹A. Bocelli, *Canto Della Terra* in *Sogno*, composed by F. Sartori, lyrics by L. Quarantotto, Dolby Atmos 1999.