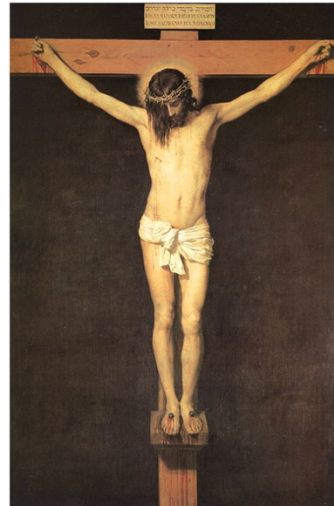




Dionysos Kylix, Exekias, ca. 530 B.C.E.



Christ on the Cross, Velázquez, 1632

Dionysus vs ‘The Crucified’: On the Redemption of Nature in Nietzsche’s Thought

Timothy J. Freeman

Living Dangerously on the Edge of a Volcano

Having lived near the edge of the crater at the summit of Kīlauea for almost a quarter of a century now, I have had ample opportunity to reflect on the famous quote where Nietzsche recommends living dangerously and living on “the slopes of Vesuvius” (*The Gay Science* [GS] 283).¹ Kīlauea is not quite as dangerous as Vesuvius, but living here is not without danger. Over the years I have witnessed many eruptions of the volcano,

¹ I suggest living on the edge of a volcano, drawing from the closing line of a book of poems, *OUTSPEAKS: A RHAPSODY*, by the beat poet Albert Saijo: “ANOTHER EDGE—LIKE THEY SAY IF YER NOT LIVIN ON THE EDGE YER TAKIN UP TOO MUCH SPACE” (Saijo 1997: 1999). See Freeman (2023: 40). I also draw upon this experience of living on the slopes of a volcano and Nietzsche’s recommendation to live dangerously in examining Gianni Vattimo’s reading of Nietzsche in (Freeman 2025).

experienced times when there were frequent earthquakes, and have ventured, I must admit, too close to flowing lava on several occasions. As I write this, there is an ongoing eruption in the summit caldera that has been the most spectacular I have seen, with episodes of fountaining lava, sometimes rising to a height of well over a thousand feet. I can often hear the roar these fountains from where I live. We are all living in dangerous times, however, as humanity faces the prospect of rendering the earth uninhabitable, if not through global conflict and nuclear war, then through the assault on nature that has led to the perfect storm of climate change and other environmental problems.² We really don't have time to waste as we are running out of time to change course. In his late writings Nietzsche warns of an unprecedented crisis facing humanity, "*the advent of nihilism*" in which "our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe."³ In a recent paper on the "the coming planetary apocalypse," Andrew Johnson presents Nietzsche as "the philosopher *par excellence* who determined the politics of catastrophic climate change."⁴

This is why Nietzsche was recommending living dangerously as he thought it was necessary to take up the dangerous task of overcoming the values which have led to the

² In the opening sentence of *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*, David Wallace-Wells sounds the alarm: "It is worse, much worse, than you think"; but then, after brilliantly reviewing the evidence and reflecting on the consequences, he tries in the *Afterward* to end on a hopeful note, suggesting that a "happier future—relatively livable, relatively fulfilling, relatively prosperous, and perhaps more than only relatively just" is still possible (Wallace-Wells 2019: 3; 265). This was, however, written as the climate movement seemed to be progressing, and the reign of the climate-change denier was ending. Now, five years later, after the collapse of American democracy we've taken a huge step backwards.

³ KSA 13: 11 [411].

⁴ Johnson describes this coming planetary apocalypse: "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!" (Johnson 2019: 7).

crisis. In the same passage where he recommends living dangerously Nietzsche writes of the need for “many preparatory brave human beings,” those “who know how to be silent, lonely, determined, and satisfied and steadfast in invisible activities; human beings profoundly predisposed to look, in all things, for what must be overcome [*überwinden*]” (GS 283).⁵ This suggests a connection between the recommendation to live dangerously and the central task of overcoming, which is the main theme of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [Z]. This central theme is first expressed in the Prologue where Zarathustra presents humanity at a crossroads: we can either evolve toward the “Overhuman” [*der Übermensch*] overcoming the longing for another world, remaining loyal to the earth or face the prospect of the “last human” [*letzen Menschen*] (Z P 3-5).⁶ Nietzsche thought that the longing to free the soul from the prison of the body and earthly existence, which begins with Socrates and Plato, and is then absorbed into Christianity, influenced the development of our whole European culture, turning the earth into a place that is not our home, but a place to be used up and left behind. The problem with human beings that leads to this longing for another world, Nietzsche emphasizes, lies in the inability to deal with the pain of existence, leading to a vengefulness that strikes out against whatever is perceived as causing that pain, whether this is other human beings, the natural world, or the earth itself. One might say Nietzsche’s Zarathustra clearly expresses the key to remaining loyal to the earth and the redemption of nature when he exclaims: “For *that humanity be redeemed from revenge*: that is for me the bridge to the highest hope and a rainbow after long storms” (Z II Tarantulas).

⁵ KSA 3: 526.

⁶ KSA 4: 14-19.

When this vengeance is turned inward it leads to what Nietzsche, in *On the Genealogy of Morality* [GM], refers to as *ressentiment* and the ascetic ideal where, he explains, “a particular kind of *ressentiment* rules there, that of an unsatisfied instinct and will to power” (GM III 11). In a note from the summer GM was written, Nietzsche traces the hidden psychology of the metaphysics which devalues the apparent, conditional, contradictory world of becoming in opposition to the true, unconditional, consistent world of being to the problem of suffering and the *ressentiment* of metaphysicians:

It is suffering that inspires these conclusions: fundamentally, they are desires that such a world should exist; in the same way, to imagine another, more valuable world is an expression of hatred for a world that makes one suffer: the *ressentiment* of metaphysicians against actuality is here creative.⁷

It is this sickness that leads Nietzsche to claim, in *The Anti-Christ* [A], that far from being the crown of creation, the human being is “the most unsuccessful animal, the sickliest, the one most dangerously strayed from its instincts” (A 14). Paul Loeb explains that this *ressentiment* leads the human animal “to inflict constant suffering upon itself and therefore involves a self-destructive and degenerating life, an unsatisfied instinct and will to power, and a depression, lethargy, and fatigue that longs for the end.”⁸ Loeb

⁷ KSA 12:8[2]. Richard Schacht calls attention to this note and explains how this *ressentiment* of metaphysicians leads to ‘slave morality’: “The morality prevailing in a society thus may continue to be of the type Nietzsche calls ‘slave morality’ even though it is no longer the morality of one segment of the population that is ruled by another. Indeed, he considers something like this situation presently to obtain in much of the Western world [...] But to the extent that it perpetuates the modes of valuation and judgment shaped under the conditions he describes, it remains a morality fitting only for ‘slaves.’ Moreover, and more seriously, it works to instill in those induced to adopt it the slave’s ‘evil eye’ for human nature and the conditions of human life generally, and in particular for the qualities of those who held sway when it was fashioned, along with all they stood for. In it the old *ressentiment* lingers on, casting a pall over human life and poisoning the wellsprings of human growth and development” (Schacht 1985: 165, 438).

⁸ Loeb (2008: 171).

draws our attention to this passage from Nietzsche's psychological analysis in which this homesickness in the human animal leads to 'bad conscience':

The man who, from lack of external enemies and resistances and forcibly confined to the oppressive narrowness and punctiliousness of custom, [it] impatiently lacerated, persecuted, gnawed at, assaulted, and maltreated himself; this animal that rubbed itself raw against the bars of its cage as one tried to 'tame' it; this deprived creature, racked with homesickness for the wild [*Heimweh der Wüste*], who had to turn itself into an adventure, a torture chamber, an uncertain and dangerous wilderness—this fool, this yearning and desperate prisoner became the inventor of the 'bad conscience.' But thus began the gravest and uncanniest illness, from which humanity has not yet recovered, man's suffering *of man, of himself*—the result of a forcible sundering from his animal past, as it were a leap and plunge into new surrounding and conditions of existence, a declaration of war against the old instincts upon which his strength, joy, and terribleness had rested hitherto. (GM II 16)⁹

This homesickness within humanity leads Nietzsche to declare his antithesis in what he calls the theologian instinct: "the theologians and all that has theologian blood in its veins" (A 8). He acknowledges the theologian blood in his own veins when he suggests that in order to be capable of diagnosing and understanding the theologian instinct: "One must have seen the fatality from close up, better still one must have experienced it in oneself, one must have almost perished by it" (A 8). Having survived the fatality inherited from the line of his fathers, Nietzsche further clarifies his antithesis in a declaration of war against the theological instinct:

I make war on this theologian instinct: I have found traces of it everywhere. Whoever has theologian blood in his veins has a wrong and dishonest attitude toward all things from the very first. [. . .] Out of this erroneous perspective on all things one makes a morality, a virtue, a holiness for oneself, one unites the good conscience with seeing *falsely*—one demands that no *other* kind of perspective shall be accorded any value after one has rendered one's own sacrosanct with the names 'God', 'redemption', 'eternity'. I have dug out the theologian instinct everywhere: it is the most widespread, peculiarly *subterranean* form of falsity that exists on earth. What a theologian feels to be true *must* be false: this provides almost a criterion of truth. [. . .] Wherever the influence of the theologian extends *value judgement* is stood on its head, the concepts 'true' and

⁹ KSA 5: 323.

‘false’ are necessarily reversed: that which is most harmful to life is here called ‘true,’ that which enhances, intensifies, affirms, justifies it and causes it to triumph is called ‘false’ If it happens that, by way of the ‘conscience of princes (or of nations –), theologians stretch out their hand after *power*, let us be in no doubt *what* at bottom is taking place every time: the will to the end, the *nihilistic* will wants power . . . (A 9)

Nietzsche declares his antithesis again in the closing line of the autobiography, which might be considered his last words as they were the last words submitted for publication: “Have I been understood?—*Dionysus versus the Crucified*—” (*Ecce Homo* [EH] Destiny 9). In the image of ‘*the Crucified*’, one can see Nietzsche’s antithesis in the theologian instinct. It is not hard to see how this sickness has led to our current planetary crisis in which those most afflicted with this illness remain in complete denial of the problem of climate change and look forward to their salvation in another world.

If his antithesis is the theologian instinct in the image of ‘*the Crucified*’, Nietzsche’s last words suggest that if he is to be understood, one must understand what he meant by ‘*Dionysus*’. One could say that Nietzsche was obsessed with Dionysus from his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* [BT] to the late writings and those last words where he identifies with the god of wine. Even though Nietzsche opens his autobiography with the bold declaration that he must explain who he is, screaming a warning to the reader not to mistake him for someone else (EH Foreword, 1), this will be very difficult, however, as Dionysus in Greek myth and tragedy is the masked god, both Greek and foreigner, male and female, the one whose identity subverts identity.¹⁰ Nietzsche was, of

¹⁰ In Euripides’s *The Bacchae*, the only extant tragedy in which Dionysus appears, he enters the palace at Thebes announcing his identity: “I am Dionysus, the son of Zeus, come back to Thebes, the land where I was born” (Euripides 1958: 543). However, in a remarkable text, Jean-Pierre Vernant explains that even though Dionysus “wants to make himself known, to reveal himself, to be known, recognized, understood” he “reveals himself by concealing himself” (Vernant 1990: 391). He is like wine, Vernant continues, “most terrible yet infinitely sweet” (Vernant 1990: 400). John Sallis draws attention to Vernant’s text and explains: “On both sides of the Dionysian—whether Dionysus be most terrible or most gentle, whether

course, very fond of playing with masks, so much so that one might understand him as ‘the masked philosopher’. In just one example among many Nietzsche explains in *Beyond Good and Evil* [BGE]: “Every philosophy is a foreground philosophy—that is a hermit’s judgment: ‘There is something arbitrary in his stopping *here* to look back and look around, in his not digging deeper *here* but laying his spade aside: there is also something suspicious about it,’ Every philosophy also *conceals* a philosophy; every opinion is also a hideout, every word also a mask” (BGE 289).

The identification with Dionysus and frequent play with masks complicates any attempt to understand Nietzsche’s thought, but it also provides significant hints by which one might avoid mistaking him for someone else. The redemption of nature in Nietzsche’s thought involves overcoming the theologian instinct with its conception of a god who promises eternal life in another world. The longing to free the soul from the prison of the body and earthly existence leads to a misunderstanding of both human beings and the natural world. In GS, Nietzsche thus asks: “When will all these shadows of god no longer darken us? When will we have completely de-deified nature? When may we begin to *naturalize* humanity with a pure [*reinen*], newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?” (GS 109).¹¹ What might Nietzsche mean by this naturalized humanity and newly redeemed nature and how does his identification with Dionysus help us in answering these questions?

what arises in his revelers be terror or rapture—the effect is to disrupt the limit that would delimit the individual subject, to violate the *principium individuationis*” (Sallis 1991: 52).

¹¹ KSA 3: 468-469.

Seeing Things as They Are

The misunderstanding of human beings and nature deepens the sickness within humanity, making the human animal the one that threatens to make the earth uninhabitable in its rapacious assault on nature. Graham Parkes draws our attention to a passage in GM in which Nietzsche calls out this sickness in our modern civilization built on the technological mastery of nature: “Our whole attitude toward nature today is hubris, our raping of nature [*Natur-Vergewaltigung*] by means of machines and the unthinking resourcefulness of technicians and engineers” (GM III 9).¹³ When Nietzsche looks forward to a time when the shadows of god no longer darken us and we have deified nature and naturalized humanity with a “pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature,” just what does he mean? Laurence Lampert calls attention to a passage from the notebooks from the time Nietzsche was writing GS, when he suggests the task of his new Zarathustra project: “the *de-humanization* of nature and then the *naturalization* of man after he has achieved the new concept of ‘nature.’”¹⁴ Lampert translated *reinen* here as “new,” but it is clear that this “new concept of ‘nature’” is one that has been cleansed or purified in some sense. The crucial question here concerns just what this “pure concept of ‘nature’” is. In attempting to defend Nietzsche as an ecological thinker, Parkes explains that this task of re-naturalizing the human being requires a new understanding of nature, involving a twofold process: “to strip away the fantastic metaphysical interpretations of human origins that have obscured human nature, and to confront human beings with nature itself, similarly stripped of human

¹³ KSA 5: 357. Parkes (2005: 85-86.)

¹⁴ KSA 9: 11 [211]. Lampert (1986: 177).

projections.”¹⁵ In support of this view, Parkes calls attention to other passages from the notebooks from the same period, beginning with the one where Nietzsche again suggests the task of his project: “to see things as they are!”¹⁶

What could Nietzsche mean by “seeing things as they are”? Does he really mean to suggest we could see nature as it is in itself, cleansed and purified of all human perspectives and interpretation?¹⁷ At times, Parkes seems to suggest so. In introducing the note about seeing things as they are, Parkes suggests that Nietzsche is elaborating on “the idea of knowing things as they are in themselves, rather than as human awareness construes them.”¹⁸ The key passage in *Zarathustra* where Parkes thinks such an experience of “seeing things as they are” is suggested is this line: “But this is my blessing: to stand over each and every thing as its own Heaven, as its round roof, its azure bell and eternal security: and blessed is he who blesses thus” (Z III, “Before the Sunrise”). This passage is of crucial importance, as Parkes explains elsewhere: “since it seems to go beyond Nietzsche’s customary perspectivism and allows for an experience of the world that is not merely ‘from our little corner’ but from a horizon that transcends anthropocentric views.”¹⁹ Does this overcoming of anthropocentrism involve seeing things as they are in the sense of revealing nature stripped of all human projections? Parkes has emphasized Zarathustra’s blessing in suggesting some resonances with

¹⁵ Parkes (1999: 179).

¹⁶ KSA 9:11[65]. Parkes (2020: 70).

¹⁷ This conception of nature stripped of all human projects suggests the notion of *nature as origin*, the target of the post-structuralist critique of the Romanticist notion of nature. This is the view, as Steven Vogel explains, of “nature” as “a stable world that precedes humans, ontologically prior to human activity and to the social structures (and the language) within which that activity takes place” (Vogel 1998: 170). As Vogel also explains, the poststructuralist project of deconstruction that begins with Derrida “is a project of taking that which appears to be original, foundational—in a word: natural—and revealing the complex processes of linguistic and social construction required to produce that appearance” (Ibid).

¹⁸ Parkes (2020: 70).

¹⁹ Parkes (2000: 192).

Daoism and Zen: “Just as the Daoist sage and the Zen master are able to experience events in the ‘self-so-ing’ of their spontaneous unfolding, so Zarathustra’s blessing lets each particular thing generate its own horizons, arising and perishing just as it does. In terms of environmental ethics, to experience in this way allows one to appreciate the intrinsic value of the natural world absolutely.”²⁰

Parkes contends that Zarathustra’s blessing suggests an experience in which human beings can become “more accepting of what is *given*” and capable of “letting nature hold sway.”²¹ In support of this view, Parkes points to a passage in Lampert’s account of Zarathustra’s blessing: “Zarathustra’s blessing on things is a sheltering vault of blue sky, a letting be, an allowing, a sparing. Because the heavens do not speak, because they are absolutely silent, man is free to speak the blessing on things that they be just as they are. His blessing does not do violence to things but allows them to become themselves, luminous and intense in their evanescence.”²² The Heideggerian language in Lampert’s account of Zarathustra’s blessing stands out here, and also a little earlier when he suggests the problem this blessing addresses is the way of being in the world in which human beings “undertake to render all beings into standing reserve for our employment and assume a practical mastery of manipulable nature.”²³

There is something to this account of Zarathustra’s blessing. If human beings are to become capable of remaining loyal to the earth, surely we have to overcome the

²⁰ Parkes (2005: 89). The notion of “seeing things as they are” sometimes shows up in Daoist and Zen texts. Zen master Shunryu Suzuki put it this way: “All we want to do is know things just as they are” (Suzuki 1970: 120). I don’t think Parkes really means to suggest seeing things as they are “in themselves” since the central teaching of Buddhism, the doctrine of dependent origination, holds that nothing exists on its own, arising in interdependence with everything else, the Buddhist notion of seeing things as they are would not imply seeing things as they are in themselves. I discuss this issue in greater depth in Freeman (2024).

²¹ Parkes (2022: 239, 242).

²² Lampert (1986: 176); Parkes (2022: 226–227).

²³ Lampert (1986: 168); also see Heidegger (1977).

rapacious way of living that reduces all of nature to a mere resource for human consumption. Nevertheless, I don't think the redemption of nature in Nietzsche's thought involves forgetting his respect for the modesty of nature. At the end of the preface to the second edition of GS Nietzsche makes that risqué joke making fun of the youthful madness of philosophers who desire to reveal a naked truth and then recommends that we "cherish the *modesty* [*Scham*] with which nature has concealed herself behind enigmas and iridescent uncertainties. Perhaps truth is a woman who has reasons for not showing her reasons?" (GS P 4).²⁴ In BGE Nietzsche draws an analogy from painting to suggest that philosophers should also be more modest in acknowledging the active interpretation involved in all knowing: "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?" (BGE 34). In GS, Nietzsche calls out the delusion of those who think that knowledge is the result of passive contemplation, calling into question the very notion of intrinsic value: "Whatever has *value* in the present world has it not in itself, according to its nature—nature is always value-less—but has rather been given, granted value, and *we* were the givers and granters! Only we have created the world *that concerns human beings*!" (GS 301).

Eric Nelson draws our attention to a poem, "The Realistic Painter," in the prelude to GS in which Nietzsche challenges painters who demand that their work be 'true to nature,' pointing out that even the smallest piece of the world is infinite [*Unendlich*]."²⁵ The poem is a prelude to the passage where Nietzsche questions the realists: "you call

²⁴ KSA 3: 352.

²⁵ KSA 3: 365. See Nelson (2013: 217).

yourself realists and insinuate that the world really is the way it appears to you: before you alone reality stands unveiled, and you yourselves are perhaps the best part of it—oh, you beloved images of Sais! [...] That mountain over there! That cloud over there! What is ‘real’ about that? Subtract just once the phantasm and the whole human *contribution* from it, you sober ones! Yes, if you could do *that!*” (GS 57).²⁶ In emphasizing the infinity in the smallest piece of the world, the poem also is a prelude to those passages where Nietzsche suggests the courage of the philosophers as seafarers venturing out into the terrible infinity [*Unendlichkeit*] of the open sea (GS 124), and also how the perspectival character of existence opens up the infinity of the world insofar as “we cannot reject the possibility that it includes infinite [*unendliche*] interpretations” (GS 374).²⁷ Even in its smallest part, the world is infinite in that it is always capable of being interpretable otherwise. Nelson also calls attention to GS 290 where “Nietzsche argues that nature is in this sense already ‘stylized nature,’ whether it is stylized as conquered, tamed, and useful nature or as an imagined wild and free.”²⁸ What is wild in Nietzsche’s conception of nature is not nature untouched by human interpretation, but rather this infinity of the world, even in the smallest part. Though it is difficult to unmask Nietzsche here, I suspect that the redemption of nature in Nietzsche’s thought is not about revealing nature stripped of her veils, but lies rather in the transformation of human beings, cleansing the human animal of the *ressentiment* that devalues nature.

²⁶ In her notes to the translation, Nauckhoff explains the reference to the “beloved images of Sais,” drawing the connection to the preface where Nietzsche calls for respect for the modesty of nature and makes fun of the desire of philosophers who, like Egyptian youths want to unveil statues at night: “Plutarch reports that in a temple in the Egyptian city of Sais, there was a veiled statue of the goddess Isis with the inscription: ‘I am everything that is, was, and that will be, and no mortal has <ever> raised my veil,]’” (Nauckhoff translation, 8).

²⁷ KSA 3: 480; KSA, 3: 627.

²⁸ Nelson (2013: 224).

Parkes and Lampert are both right, of course, in calling out the exploitation that reduces all of nature to a mere resource to be used up. The redemption of nature in Nietzsche thus involves a transformation of the exploitative will to power that has so far shaped the world that concerns us. The notion of the will to power is, of course, introduced in Zarathustra's teaching that the values of a people is "the tablet of its overcomings [Überwindungen]," and "the voice of its will to power [*Willens zur Macht*]" (Z I Goals).²⁹ The most troubling passage concerning Nietzsche's notion of will to power is surely the one where he describes the essence of all life as an exploitative will to power. This "exploitation [*Ausbeutung*]," 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" (BGE 259).³⁰ Since Nietzsche suggests in this passage that this "exploitation" is not a character of primitive societies that humanity has evolved out of, but is rather the essence of all life, one wonders how it could be possible, if Nietzsche is right here, to overcome this exploitative will to power. Perhaps Loeb provides a solution to this problem when he suggests that we take more seriously Nietzsche's claim in *Ecce Homo* [EH] "that his post-Zarathustra books were supposed to be purely critical and merely preparatory to the constructive solutions he had already proposed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*."³¹ This suggests that the solution to the problem posed by the exploitative will to power, the redemption of nature, lies in the transformation of human beings that is the main point of Zarathustra's teachings.

²⁹ KSA 4: 74.

³⁰ KSA 5: 208.

³¹ Loeb (2008: 172). Nietzsche's remark is in his comments on BGE: KSA 6: 351.

Dionysus versus the Crucified

In GS, Nietzsche introduces Z with these words, “*Incipit Tragoedia*,” suggesting that he understood *Zarathustra* as a tragedy (GS 342). This lends support to John Sallis’s view that BT was more than Nietzsche’s youthful Romanticism, but also a preview of his mature thought.³² If *Zarathustra* is a tragedy, it is not because it has the form of a tragedy, but because it aims at what Nietzsche, in BT, regarded as “the aim of art, which is to effect a metaphysical transfiguration [*Verklärung*]” (BT 24).³³ This emphasis on *Zarathustra* as a tragedy, on the transformative power of art, suggests that the central teachings of Zarathustra are closely connected with the figure of Dionysus in Nietzsche’s thought. In Greek myth and tragedy, the transformative power of Dionysus is often suggested through fire and lightning, and this theme is brought out in the beginning of the book as Zarathustra introduces the Overhuman: “Behold, I teach to you the Overhuman: it is this lightning’ [...] ‘Behold, I am a herald of the lightning and a heavy drop from the cloud: but this lightning is called *Overhuman*” (Z P 3, 4).³⁴ This all then suggests that the redemption of nature in Nietzsche’s thought is closely entwined with the figure of Dionysus and the opposition with which Nietzsche identifies himself in the closing line of the autobiography. In a recent reflection on Nietzsche’s thought of eternal recurrence, Bevis McNeil draws attention to this connection between Zarathustra and Dionysus, and the closing line of EH, when he highlights David Krell’s point that the

³² Sallis (1991). I reflect on Sallis’s reading in Freeman (2013).

³³ KSA 1: 151. Anticipating his mature work, Nietzsche emphasizes here that it is not the “‘reality’ of this world of appearances” but the suffering hero that undergoes this transfiguration. (Speirs translation, 113).

³⁴ In his classic book, Carl Kerényi draws on ancient sources in emphasizing that “Fire is a Dionysian weapon” (Kerényi 1976: 78). In Euripides’s *The Bacchae*, Dionysus introduces himself as the son of Zeus, born from lightning (Euripides 1958: 543).

problem with Heidegger's understanding of eternal recurrence is his refusal "to entertain the figure of Dionysos."³⁵

We might get some idea of this opposition between Dionysus and 'the Crucified' from what he says about BT in the "Attempt at a Self-Criticism" attached as a preface to the second edition of the book. There he makes clear that his first book is opposed to the Christian teaching which is "hostile to art" because of its "*hostility to life*—a furious, vengeful antipathy to life itself: for all of life is based on semblance, art, deception, points of view, and the necessity of perspectives and error" (BT Attempt 5). We might also better understand this opposition between Dionysus and 'the Crucified', and the key to Nietzsche's thought, if we consider why he thought in BT that tragedy died by suicide, at the hand of Euripides, under the influence of Socrates. A clue to understanding why Nietzsche thought this comes from comparing the ending scene of Euripides's *Iphigenia at Aulis* with the 1977 Greek film *Iphigenia*, where director Michael Cacoyannis seems to close with a more Nietzschean ending, perhaps correcting Euripides's fatal mistake. The tragic character of existence is aptly expressed by Iphigenia when she wonders why she has to die because the winds will not blow, while others are drowning at sea because the winds are too strong. Iphigenia is distraught and horrified by the tragic character of existence, striking out in anger at Helen for bringing on her fate. However, when Achilles comes on the scene and promises her mother that he will defend Iphigenia, willing to give his life to save her from the sacrificial altar, a remarkable transfiguration occurs in Iphigenia. This transfiguration is brought about through Dionysian lightning. In the text, Iphigenia explains her transfiguration: "Then something flashed into my

³⁵ McNeil (2020: 200). Krell further explains, "If the 1936-37 lectures on will to power as art overlook woman, those on eternal recurrence neglect Dionysos" (Krell 1991: 275).

mind like lightning, like a zigzag of fire, so that I couldn't doubt its rightness: I am resolved to die. All I want is to end my life well, to cleanse myself of these mean thoughts."³⁶ So far, Euripides' play effectively conveys the tragic character of existence and the Dionysian power of transfiguration in the character of Iphigenia. But at the end of Euripides's drama, when Agamemnon breaks through the smoke of the sacrificial fire, he finds a deer sacrificed instead of his beloved daughter. The goddess Artemis has exchanged Iphigenia for a deer, and Iphigenia is raised up to Olympus. He tells his wife that she should be happy with their daughter's fate now that she has been given eternal life with the gods. In the film, Cacoyannis does not show us the deer or Iphigenia brought back to life. We see only the horror on Agamemnon's face as he confronts the sacrificial altar, and then finally the seething vengeance on Clytemnestra's face as she watches the ships departing for Troy. In Nietzsche's view in BT, Euripides pulled the gaze of the Greeks away from confronting the tragic character of existence, and this led to the death of tragedy. Cacoyannis's film directs our attention back to the tragic character of existence and the remarkable transformation in Iphigenia.

Like the transfiguration of Iphigenia that cleanses her of vengeance, the transformation or overcoming of human beings that is the focus of Nietzsche's tragedy involves the cleansing of human beings of *ressentiment* and the spirit of revenge. In some remarkable passages at the end of the section on "The Four Great Errors" in *Twilight of the Idols* [TI], Nietzsche begins by unmasking the theologian instinct for revenge and *ressentiment* in the very notion of "free will":

Error of Free Will.—We no longer have any sympathy nowadays for the concept of 'free will': we know only too well what it is—the most disreputable piece of trickery the theologians have produced, aimed at making humanity 'responsible'

³⁶ Euripides (1998: 300).

in their sense, i.e. at *making it dependent on them* . . . I shall give here simply the psychology behind every kind of making people responsible.—Wherever responsibilities are sought, it is usually the instinct for wanting to punish and judge that is doing the searching. Becoming is stripped of its innocence once any state of affairs is traced back to a will, to intentions, to responsible acts: the doctrine of the will was fabricated essentially for the purpose of punishment, i.e. of wanting to find guilty. The old psychology as a whole, the psychology of the will, presupposes the fact that its originators, the priests at the head of ancient communities, wanted to give themselves the right to impose punishments—or give God the right to do so . . . People were thought of a ‘free’ so that they could be judged and punished—so that they could become guilty” (TI Errors 7).

In closing this passage Nietzsche describes his project as “a movement in the *opposite* direction”, an attempt “to eliminate the concepts of guilt and punishment” and “to cleanse [*reinigen*] psychology, history, nature, social institutions and sanctions of them” of the theologian instinct which “infects or plagues [*durchseuchen*] the innocence of becoming with ‘punishment’ and ‘guilt.’” The passage then closes with a succinct summary of this critique: “Christianity is a metaphysics of the hangman” (TI Errors 7).³⁹

Then in the final even more remarkable passage of the section Nietzsche goes on to further explain this movement in the opposite direction, this cleansing from the theologian instinct: “What can *our* doctrine be, though?—That no one *gives* man his qualities, neither God, nor society, nor his parents and ancestors, nor *man himself* [. . .]. *No one* is responsible for simply being there, for being made in such and such a way, for existing under such conditions, in such surroundings. The fatality of one’s being cannot be derived from the fatality of all that was and will be” (TI Errors 8). This would seem to imply the most open acceptance of our differences. No one is to be blamed for being who they are, for being made in any particular way, and for the circumstances of their existence. This would be the end of all discrimination, all prejudice based on race,

³⁹ KSA 6: 96.

nationality, gender, gender affiliation, sexual orientation, disabilities, and whatever else has led to the enmity among human beings. Nietzsche goes on even further to call into question any teleological judgment: “*No one* is the result of his own intention, his own will, his own purpose, *no one* is part of an experiment to achieve an ‘ideal person’ or an ‘ideal of happiness’ or an ‘ideal of morality’—it is absurd to want to *discharge* one’s being onto some purpose or other. We invented the concept of ‘purpose’: in reality, ‘purpose’ is *absent*” (TI Errors 8). Nietzsche then goes on to take this a step further, in perhaps the most remarkable part of this passage, this cleansing from the theologian instinct for revenge:

One is necessary, one is a piece of fate, one belongs to the whole, one *is* in the whole—there is nothing which could judge, measure, compare, condemn our Being, for that would mean judging, measuring, comparing, condemning the whole . . . *But there is nothing apart from the whole!* That no one is made responsible any more, that a kind of Being cannot be traced back to a *causa prima*, that the world is no unity, either as sensorium or as ‘mind’, *this alone is the great liberation*—this alone re-establishes the *innocence* of becoming . . . The concept of ‘God’ has been the greatest *objection* to existence so far . . . We deny God, we deny responsibility in God: *this alone is how we redeem the world.*—(TI Errors 8).

If the radical acceptance of all our differences wasn’t hard enough, now this redemption of the innocence of becoming seems to call for abandoning the instinct for holding anyone responsible for their actions. Would this not call into question our entire criminal justice system? Due to inebriation, or a lack of sleep, or even just a moment’s lack of attention, a driver crosses the center line of the highway and the head-on collision takes the life of someone who was driving responsibly. It happens all the time and it is easy to understand the desire for justice, the impulse to hold the negligent driver responsible. It is even easier to understand in cases of criminal activity, especially

unspeakable crimes such as murder, torture, the violation of a child, or crimes against humanity committed by nations.

Again, it is difficult to unmask Nietzsche here and easy to see the mischief that can and has been done in interpreting passages such as these. I suspect, however, that far from excusing such behavior, Nietzsche was attempting, on the one hand, to unmask the hidden psychology, the instinct behind all holding responsible, guilt and punishment, and on the other, revealing the theologian instinct in Christian morality which condemns, with its doctrine of original sin, human beings and nature.

*All the concepts of the Church are recognized for what they are: the most malicious false-coinage there is for the purpose of *disvaluing* nature and natural values; the priest himself is recognized for what he is: the most dangerous kind of parasite, the actual poison-spider of life. . . . We know, our *conscience* knows today—*what* those sinister inventions of priest and Church are worth, *what end they serve*, with which that state of human self-violation has brought about which is capable of exciting disgust at the sight of mankind—the concepts of ‘Beyond’, ‘Last Judgement’, ‘immortality of the soul’, the ‘soul’ itself: they are instruments of torture, they are forms of systematic cruelty by virtue of which the priest has become master, stays master. . . .” (A, 38)*

One only has to consider the actual torture chambers hidden in the history of the Church to begin to understand Nietzsche’s polemic against Christianity. While one might think that this was all in the past, the unrelenting grip on the death penalty in this ‘Christian’ nation, when it has been clear for many years now that it is impossible to prevent the execution of innocents, suggests that the instinct for revenge often lies beneath the demands for justice. This systematic cruelty Nietzsche calls attention to here is still at work today wherever there is guilt and punishment imposed upon individuals not for criminal behavior but for being just who they are. The instruments of torture in the concepts of the ‘soul’ and the promise of eternal reward in another world condemn all of humanity to face tremendous suffering as a result of the impending

ecological catastrophe. If human beings are not able to find the antidote to the poison of what Nietzsche calls the 'theologian instinct' of the priests, it will be impossible to overcome the homesickness that plagues humanity.

If we are not able to overcome the instinct that leads to holding someone responsible and thus to guilt and punishment, then it will also be impossible to break the cycle of violence that leads to endless wars, and today even genocide upon genocide. The only end to the cycle of violence between nations, as Kant famously put it, would be the perpetual peace of the graveyard.⁴⁰ Nietzsche's response is far more radical than Kant's proposal of a peace treaty among nations. Those who are only familiar with the sometimes militaristic rhetoric in Nietzsche's later writings would likely be surprised by what Nietzsche writes here in late 1879 in *Human, All Too Human* [HH], where even the justification for war in self-defense is renounced.

The means to real peace. – No government nowadays admits that it maintains an army so as to satisfy occasional thirsts for conquests; the army is supposed to be for defence. [...] This is how all states now confront one another: they presuppose an evil disposition in their neighbor and a benevolent disposition in themselves. This presupposition, however, is a piece of *inhumanity* as bad as, if not worse than, a war would be; indeed, fundamentally it already constitutes an invitation to and cause of wars, because, as aforesaid, it imputes immorality to one's neighbor and thereby seems to provoke hostility and hostile acts on his part. The doctrine of the army as a means of self-defense must be renounced just as completely as the thirst for conquest. (HH II, Wanderer 284)

What Nietzsche goes on to say is even more shocking, and it seems utterly unrealistic today, especially in the nation with by far the most powerful military force in the world, the 'Christian' nation that takes such great pride in its military strength. Yet Nietzsche is looking toward a future that is still not on the horizon. Anticipating his Zarathustra narrative, Nietzsche is suggesting a future evolution of humanity:

⁴⁰ Kant (1991: 93).

And perhaps there will come a great day on which a nation distinguished for wars and victories and for the highest development of military discipline and thinking, and accustomed to making the heaviest sacrifices on behalf of these things, will cry of its own free will: '*we shall shatter the sword*' – and demolish its entire military machine down to its last foundations. *To disarm while being the best armed*, out of an *elevation* of sensibility – that is the means to real peace, which must always rest on a disposition for peace: whereas the so-called armed peace such as now parades about in every country is a disposition to fractiousness which trusts neither itself nor its neighbor and fails to lay down its arms half out of hatred, half out of fear. Better to perish than to hate and fear, and *twofold better to perish than to make oneself hated and feared* – this must one day become the supreme maxim of every individual state! (HH II, Wanderer 284).

In closing the passage, Nietzsche suggests this transformation of humanity comes from a lightning-bolt, thus recalling the figure of Dionysus, and also perhaps suggesting he was already thinking of Zarathustra:

As is well known, our liberal representatives of the people lack the time to reflect on the nature of man: otherwise they would know that they labour in vain when they work for a 'gradual reduction of the military burden'. On the contrary, it is only when this kind of distress is at its greatest that the only kind of god that can help here will be closest at hand. The tree of the glory of war can be destroyed only at a single stroke, by a lightning-bolt: lightning, however, as you well know, comes out of a cloud and from on high.—(HH II, Wanderer 284).

With the figure of Dionysus we return now to Nietzsche's last words and the opposition by which he suggests his thought should be understood. In the two passages preceding the last words, Nietzsche suggests that the image of 'the Crucified' represents the 'theologian instinct' that has poisoned humanity with *décadence* values, turning human beings against life, devaluing nature, and rendering the earth a place that is not our home. "Have I been understood?" Nietzsche begins. He goes on to explain that what distinguishes him from the rest of humanity is "having *discovered* Christian morality", "the greatest uncleanness that humanity has on its conscience" and a "crime *against life*":

Christian morality—the most malignant form of the will to falsehood, the true Circe of humanity: the thing that *ruined* it. It is *not* the mistake as such that

incenses me about this sight, *not* the millennia-old lack of ‘good will’, of discipline, of decency, of bravery in spiritual matters that its victory betrays—it is the lack of nature, it is the utterly dreadful fact that *anti-nature* itself has been receiving the highest honors as morality and as law, as categorical imperative, has been hanging above humanity!” (EH Destiny 7)⁴¹

The values of Christian morality, Nietzsche goes on to explain, involve a profound misunderstanding of humanity, turning human beings against “the primordial instincts of life.” With the invention of the ‘soul’, the body becomes something shameful, leading human beings “to feel there is something impure about the prerequisites for life, sexuality.” What is thus “most profoundly necessary to flourishing” becomes something evil, and this turning against life is what Nietzsche means by *décadence*:

What? Might humanity itself be in *décadence*? has it always been? –What is incontrovertible is that it has been taught only *decadence* values as the highest values. The morality of unselfing oneself is the morality of decline par excellence, the fact that ‘I am being destroyed’ translated into the imperative: ‘you *should* all be destroyed’ [. . .] The sole morality that has hitherto been taught, the morality of unselfing oneself, betrays a will to the end; at the most fundamental level it *denies* life.” (EH Destiny 7)

Nietzsche then acknowledges that it is possible that is not humanity itself that is decadent, but “only that parasitic kind of man, the *priest*, who through morality has lied his way up to being the determiner of humanity’s values—who realized that Christian morality was his means to *power*.” What sets Nietzsche apart from the rest of humanity is his insight that “the teachers, the leaders of humanity, theologians to a man, were also all *décadents*” (EH Destiny 7). Then, in the next passage, the penultimate passage of the book, Nietzsche begins again: “Have I been understood?” He explains that everything that he has just said, he had already expressed “through the mouth of Zarathustra.” It is

⁴¹By “Circe of humanity” Nietzsche is likely referring to the story in Homer’s *Odyssey* where the enchantress Circe turns Odysseus’s men into swine. This suggests that Nietzsche’s attempt to expose the *décadence* values which turn the human being against the primordial instincts of life is not about regressing human evolution, turning humans into swine.

here where Nietzsche explains, in a passage that has often been misunderstood as just a symptom of the madness and megalomania that was to come, why he is a destiny: “The *discovery* of Christian morality is an event without parallel, a real catastrophe. Anyone who raises awareness about it is a *force majeure*, a destiny—he breaks the history of humanity in two. You live *before* him or you live *after* him” (EH Destiny 8). Invoking both Dionysus and Zarathustra with the image of lightning, he continues with his critique of Christian morality: “The lightning-bolt of truth has struck precisely what stood highest hitherto: anyone who understands *what* has been destroyed there should look to see if he has anything left in his hands. Everything called ‘truth’ so far has been recognized as the most harmful, malicious, subterranean form of lie; the holy pretext of ‘improving’ humanity recognized as a ruse to *drain dry* life itself and make it anaemic. Morality as *vampirism*” (EH Destiny 8). Building to a crescendo, Nietzsche then explains how the very concept of ‘God’ has led to the denial of life and the devaluing of the earth:

The concept of ‘God’ invented as a counter-concept to life—bringing together into one dreadful unity everything harmful, poisonous, slanderous, the whole mortal enmity against life! The concept ‘hereafter’, ‘true world’ invented in order to devalue the *only* world there is—so as to leave no goal, no reason, no task for our earthly reality! The concepts of ‘soul’, ‘spirit’, ultimately even ‘immortal soul’ invented so as to despise the body, to make it sick—‘holy’—so as to approach with terrible negligence all the things in life that deserve to be taken seriously, questions of food, accommodation, spiritual diet, the treatment of the sick, cleanliness, weather!” (EH Destiny 8)

Here we see where Nietzsche suggests that these *décadence* values render the earth into a place that is not our home, and direct our attention away from the body, despising it and making it sick. It is not hard to see the relevance of Nietzsche’s critique today in the health of human beings and the earth. If the soul was understood as embodied, it would be hard to understand the unhealthy diet that is so common; and if

the earth was really understood as our home, it is hard to see how people would even think of polluting it with the chemical and radioactive poisons that now render so much of the earth a wasteland. And, of course, if the earth were understood as our home, the nuclear arsenal that still hangs over all our heads like the sword of Damocles would be unthinkable. Finally, Nietzsche emphasizes that these decadent values should be left behind, closing with the crescendo of Voltaire's famous indictment of Christianity:

Ultimately—and this is the most terrible thing—in the concept of the *good* man siding with everything weak, sick, misshapen, suffering from itself, everything *that ought to perish*—the law of *selection* crossed, an ideal made out of the contradictions to the proud man who turned out well, to the yes-saying, future-assured, future-confirming man—who is called *evil* from now on . . . And all this was believed in *as morality!* —*Écrasez l'infâme!* (EH Destiny 8)

Then, of course, after the crescendo and the clash of cymbals there is the *sforzando*, the final chord, “Have I been understood: *Dionysus versus ‘the Crucified’*” which brings to a close not only the autobiography, but the whole of the corpus written for publication under the name of Nietzsche.⁴² To summarize, with ‘Dionysus’ we see Nietzsche’s emphasis on art, on the recognition that the world even in its smallest part is infinite and thus open to interpretation, while in ‘the Crucified’ we see the Christian denial of art and Nietzsche’s critique of truth as the Christian conception of ‘God’ and the death on the cross are not recognized as interpretations. With the death on the cross we also see the theologian instinct leads to the sickness with humanity, as well as the promise of immortality in another world which renders the earth a wasteland. With ‘Dionysus’ we also see what Nietzsche regarded as the highest aim of art, the lightning-bolt that leads to the transfiguration of humanity and the redemption of nature. To

⁴² *Sforzando* is an Italian musical term meaning “suddenly with force,” indicating a strong, sharp accent on a single note or chord used to add dramatic impact by making a particular sound stand out powerfully from its surroundings.

understand this more fully we have to return to Zarathustra's teachings and consider how the thought of eternal recurrence, which Nietzsche explains struck him like a bolt of lightning (EH Zarathustra, 4), works as the catalyst for this transfiguration and redemption.

The Lightning-bolt of the Thought of Eternal Recurrence

"I, the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysus—I, the teacher of the eternal recurrence" (TI Ancients, 5). In this closing line of TI we see, as in the closing line of EH, Nietzsche's identification with Dionysus, but we also see another connection between Dionysus and Zarathustra's thought of eternal recurrence. Paul Loeb directs our attention to this line and provides some evidence from the unpublished notes how Nietzsche gets the idea of eternal recurrence from the Dionysian mystery-cults of the ancient Greeks.⁴³ In one of those notes, from the spring of 1888, Nietzsche writes: "Dionysus cut into pieces is a *promise* regarding life: it [life] will be eternally reborn and return home again from destruction."⁴⁴ It becomes clear in the narrative of Zarathustra that the thought of eternal recurrence has to do with the problem posed by time and the ephemeral nature of existence. In the section titled "On Redemption," Zarathustra reveals that redemption involves overcoming the problem of time and time's passing. That the will cannot break time and will backwards and change the past leads to the will's fury. As McNeil explains this: "The fact that the will cannot will backwards and cannot change the past creates the greatest anguish. Consequently, the human will sees itself as a victim of the past, and

⁴³ Loeb (2012: 3).

⁴⁴ KSA 13:14 [89].

in a fit of rage and in a spirit of revenge, it turns against life.”⁴⁵ In a key passage, Zarathustra explains the redemption from the spirit of revenge: “To redeem that which has passed away and to re-create all ‘it was’ into a ‘Thus I willed it!’—that alone should I call redemption” (Z II Redemption). Lampert offers this explanation: “Here, Zarathustra’s teaching on revenge takes its most comprehensive form as he reports cryptically that the interpretations of the human condition that have prevailed until now all stem from revenge, the creative will gone mad in its prison of time. The teachings that have housed mankind have turned the earth on which he dwells into a prison or a cave. The creative will that is the liberator turned to punishing, for when the will is not free to will completely, it wills its own destruction as the appearance of redemption.”⁴⁶

Of course, it was the problem of suffering, dealing with impermanence, time, and the passage of time that led the sages of ancient India to seek liberation from the round of *samsāra* and not have to come back and be reborn again to this world.⁴⁷ In *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche says that Buddhism is “a hundred times more realistic than Christianity” in that the concept of “God” had already become abolished, and in its psychological approach to the problem of suffering as opposed to the “struggle against sin,” and also healthier than Christianity in resisting “the feeling of revengefulness, of antipathy, of *ressentiment*” (A 20). And yet, because Nietzsche understood *nirvāṇa*, as Schopenhauer thought, to be the final goal of extinction, he concluded that Buddhism

⁴⁵ McNeil (2020, 44).

⁴⁶ Lampert (1986: 144).

⁴⁷ Although Nietzsche was critical of both Hinduism and Buddhism in holding the final goal to be liberation from the round of *samsāra*, Shruti Jain suggests resonances between Nietzsche’s thought and Shaktism in the Hindu tradition (Jain, 103-117). Parkes suggests resonances between Nietzsche’s thought and Mahāyāna Buddhism when *nirvāṇa* is understood, not as a liberation from this world, but rather, as another way of being here (Parkes: 1996: 373). Various comparisons between Nietzsche’s philosophy and Asian thought are explored in the seminal anthology, *Nietzsche and Asian Thought* (Parkes: 1991).

was like Christianity in being nihilistic, hostile to life, a religion of *décadence*, and thus not loyal to the Earth. In BGE, Nietzsche describes the opposite ideal of Buddhism and Schopenhauer: “the ideal of the most high-spirited, alive, and world-affirming human being who has not only come to terms and *learned* to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have *what was and is* repeated into all eternity, shouting insatiably *da capo*” (BGE 56). In this enthusiastic acceptance of repeating, from the beginning, the whole spectacle of life again and again through all eternity, such a world-affirming human being would be one who has been struck by the lightning bolt of Zarathustra’s thought of eternal recurrence.

In the crucial passage where the thought of eternal recurrence is brought forth, Zarathustra is at sea, addressing sailors on a ship. Perhaps the most important part of this story is at the beginning, when Zarathustra explains to whom the vision and the riddle are told: “To you, bold searchers, tempters, experimenters, and whoever has embarked with cunning sails on terrifying seas” (Z III 2).⁴⁸ Zarathustra continues to explain that the story is addressed to those like Odysseus and his men “whose souls are lured with flutes to every confounding chasm,” and those who are not like Theseus, and thus “do not want to grope along a thread with cowardly hand.” It is only to those willing to live dangerously that Zarathustra recounts “the riddle that I *saw*—the vision of the loneliest.” While much of the philosophical commentary on the thought of eternal recurrence involves thinking through different arguments about what Nietzsche may

⁴⁸ KSA 4: 197. In the notes to his translation Parkes explains: “There is a play here between *Sucher* (searchers, seekers) and *Versucher* (tempters, experimenters): I have used both ‘tempters’ and ‘experimenters’ to translate *Versucher*, since Nietzsche often refers to his philosophy as *versucherisch* in the dual sense of ‘experimental’ (in the spirit of Montaigne and Emerson, something to be tried out or tested in the reader’s own experience) and also ‘seductive’ (above all in its poetic style)” (Nietzsche, 2005: 307-308). In BGE Nietzsche ventures to baptize the philosophers of the future with the name *Versucher*. (BGE 42; KSA 5: 59).

have meant, whether it is a cosmological hypothesis about the way time really works, or an existential imperative challenging one to act in every moment as if every moment were to recur eternally, it is important that especially here one should keep in mind the *versucherisch* of Nietzsche's thought, and that the main point of the thought is its potential as a catalyst, a Dionysian bolt of lightning, for the redemption from the spirit of revenge.

When Nietzsche first introduces the thought of eternal recurrence in the famous section of GS, he suggests the thought of having to live this same life over and over again throughout eternity as having this potential for transformation: "If this thought gained power over you, as you are it would transform and possibly crush you; the question in each and every thing, 'Do you want this again and innumerable times again?' would lie on your actions as the heaviest weight!" (GS 341). In the crucial section of Z, "On the Vision and the Riddle," Zarathustra relates the story of his confrontation with a dwarf, the spirit of gravity, who had been sitting on his shoulder and pouring leaden thoughts into his ear. The problem of time and time's passing, the problem of suffering, takes place in each moment. The inability to say 'yes' to the present moment leads to the nihilistic denial of life and the longing for eternal life in another world. In the gateway of the Moment, Zarathustra challenges the dwarf with the thought of eternal recurrence. After this confrontation with the spirit of gravity, the scene shifts like in a strange dream. Zarathustra hears a howling dog and seems a bit bewildered: "Where had the dwarf gone now? And the gateway? And the spider? And all the whispering? Had I been dreaming? Had I woken up? Between wild cliffs I stood all at once, alone, desolate, in the most desolate moonlight" (Z III, Vision and Riddle). Then there is a most horrible image—a young shepherd, writhing and convulsing, with a heavy black snake hanging

out of his mouth. The snake is an obvious reference to the Ouroboros image of a serpent biting its own tail, which is found in ancient Egypt and later in Gnosticism and in alchemical texts. It is sometimes used as a symbol of the cyclical nature of time.⁴⁹ The shepherd is nauseated by the thought of eternal recurrence. And who wouldn't be? The thought of having to live the same life over and over throughout eternity seems at first glance a most nihilistic thought, suggesting that nothing new ever really happens, rendering life meaningless. The bold seafarers, the attempter-tempters, are then challenged to guess the riddle and interpret the "vision of the loneliest." Zarathustra explains that the vision is also a "premonition," and the riddle is to guess who is the "shepherd into whose throat the snake thus crawled" and "who is it that must yet come some day?" The shepherd finally heeds Zarathustra's call and bites through the snake, and then, after he spews out the head of the snake, he jumps up transformed and laughing: "No longer shepherd, no longer human—one transformed, illumined, who *laughed!*" (Z III Vision and Riddle).

Lampert takes note of this and suggests that the "transformed, laughing shepherd" is the Overhuman and the premonition is Zarathustra's own transformation: "The second part of the vision contrasts the heavy black snake of suffering with the laughter that follows once the suffering has been overcome. When the head of the snake has been bitten off and spit out [. . .] Zarathustra, the one who wills eternal return, is

⁴⁹ The Egyptologist Jan Assmann points out that on the tomb of Johann Gottfried von Herder in Weimer there is an image of an Ouroboros and there he explains how this imagery is connected with alchemy and the Egyptian myth of the journey of the Sun: "This concept of time, its circulatory nature, its energies of infinite regeneration, and finally its power of protection against any form of transiency, is expressed in the symbol of the snake that forms a circle by taking its tail in its mouth—ouro-boros, or "tail-devourer", in Greek" (Assmann 2019: 25). The way that Nietzsche uses alchemical imagery and the journey of the Sun in Zarathustra's journey suggests his familiarity with the Ouroboros imagery and perhaps with the image on Herder's tomb.

redeemed.”⁵⁰ The emphasis on laughter here at this critical juncture, along with Nietzsche’s suggestion at the end of BGE that there is “an order of rank among philosophers depending on the rank of their laughter—all the way up to those capable of golden laughter”, may lead one to suspect that the thought of eternal recurrence might be something of a joke—perhaps one of the bad jokes with which, Nietzsche relates in one of his last mad letters, he is whiling away eternity.⁵¹

One of the interesting features of McNeil’s interpretation of the eternal recurrence is his emphasis on the centrality of Heraclitean playfulness in the thought of eternal recurrence. What Heidegger misses in his interpretation, according to McNeil, is “the metaphor of play at the heart of Nietzsche’s cosmology of eternal recurrence.”⁵² In developing this view, McNeil suggests that this playfulness helps us “to lead more fulfilling lives free from guilt and resentment”; but it involves “an understanding of play beyond recreation, relaxation or frivolity.”⁵³ Would this playfulness in the thought of eternal recurrence include the possibility that it might be something of a joke?⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Lampert (1986, 170).

⁵¹ BGE 294; KSA 5: 236. The mad letter is the one to Jacob Burckhardt in which Nietzsche writes: “Since I am condemned to while away eternity with bad jokes, I have a writing business here which really leaves nothing to be desired” (Hayman, 1982: 335). I have previously suggested the thought of eternal recurrence might be a joke in (Freeman, 2023), (Freeman, 2024) and (Freeman, 2025).

⁵² McNeil (2020: 191).

⁵³ Ibid: 195.

⁵⁴ The first hint I came across suggesting that the thought of eternal recurrence might be something of a joke comes from Maurice Blanchot, who stated that the overcoming of Nihilism in the thought of eternal recurrence “has the air of a joke” (Blanchot, 1985: 126). There is also Gilles Deleuze’s remark in the same volume: “Those who read Nietzsche without laughing—without laughing often, richly, even hilariously—have, in a sense, not read Nietzsche at all” (Deleuze, 1985: 147). In *Joy and Laughter in Nietzsche’s Philosophy*, the contributors take up the importance of “joy, cheerfulness, laughter, and gaiety” as “central to an adequate understanding of Nietzsche’s aims” (Kirkland and McNeal, 2022: 2). McNeal emphasizes the free spirit’s “Dionysian mirth” which “facilitates a revaluation of values” as well as “the laughter required to contemplate the most abysmal thought” (192). It is this mirth which emboldens Nietzsche’s free spirits “to chart a course toward the distant transfiguration of humankind” (McNeal, 20022: 209).

In any case, the golden laughter that Nietzsche suggests marks the highest rank of philosophers brings out another crucial aspect of the redemption of nature in Nietzsche's thought. Throughout *Zarathustra*, 'gold' is used to suggest the highest virtue, the capacity for the gift: "Only as an allegory of the highest virtue did gold assume the highest value. Gold-like shines the glance of the one who bestows" (Z I Bestowing Virtue). This theme of the gift is introduced at the beginning of the text in Zarathustra's address to the morning sun and also in the exchange with the hermit in the forest as Zarathustra makes his way down the mountain. As the sun gives its light without asking for a return, the golden sun is an image for the gift-giving love. We know that at the time Nietzsche was composing *Zarathustra*, he was struggling to convalesce from lovesickness as a consequence of his infatuation with Lou Salomé. In a letter at the time Nietzsche writes: "Unless I can learn the alchemist's trick of turning this filth into gold I am lost."⁵⁵ Throughout the narrative of *Zarathustra* Nietzsche uses alchemical imagery to suggest this transformation from the heaviness of leaden thoughts and the spirit of revenge into the gold of the love that is a gift. In his remarks on the text in EH, Nietzsche draws special attention to the "Night-Song" in which Zarathustra sings: "Night it is: now all songs of lovers at last awaken. And my soul too is the song of a lover" (EH III Z 7). There Nietzsche describes the song as a Dionysian lament expressing "profound melancholy," and it suggests the anguish of Zarathustra's lovesickness through the imagery of the sun in its solitude during the day longing for night and the company of shining stars.

⁵⁵ Letter to Franz Overbeck, 25 December 1882. Hayman (1982: 254).

In GS Nietzsche hints at this overcoming of lovesickness when he makes a distinction between what most people call love, which is really avarice, and friendship: “Here and there on earth there is probably a kind of continuation of love in which this greedy desire of two people for each other gives way to a new desire and greed, a *shared* higher thirst for an ideal above them. But who knows such love? Who has experienced it? Its true name is *friendship*” (GS 14). There is a profound irony here, which Derrida notes in his reflection on the gift-giving love in Nietzsche: “For is not what has just been repeated, doubled, parodied, perverted and assumed also the Gospel message?”⁵⁶ Of course, in his polemic against Christianity, Nietzsche explains that ‘Christianity’ has always been a misunderstanding for “there has been only one Christian, and he died on the Cross. The ‘Evangel’ *died* on the Cross” (A 39). Whereas ‘Christianity’ turned the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ into the promise of eternal life in another world, Nietzsche emphasizes that it “is not something one waits for; it has no yesterday or tomorrow, it does not come ‘in a thousand years’—it is an experience within a heart; it is everywhere, it is nowhere” (A 34).

There is an interesting preview of Zarathustra’s transformation and the redemption of nature in the section titled “On Great Events.” There, Zarathustra is on a volcanic island, where “a fire-mountain steadily smokes” (Z II Events).⁵⁸ Zarathustra encounters a fire-hound coming up from the depths of the earth, bellowing loudly with wrath and envy and darkening the sky with smoke and ashes. Zarathustra challenges

⁵⁶ Derrida (1997: 284). The somber tone of Derrida’s reflection on the politics of friendship is that this gift Nietzsche emphasizes is not something humanity has yet been capable of, but is rather something “of the far-off and the future” (Ibid, 285).

⁵⁸ In the notes to his translation, Parkes explains that the “dramatic setting of the chapter also derives from the six months Nietzsche spent in a villa in Sorrento with a view of Vesuvius” (Nietzsche, 2005: 303).

this fire-hound with a story about another fire-hound who “speaks from the heart of the earth” about golden laughter and then says: “This gold, however, and this laughter—these he takes from the heart of the earth: for you should at least know this—*the heart of the earth is of gold* (Z II Events).

I suspect that the redemption of nature in Nietzsche’s thought is this transfiguration in humanity, overcoming *ressentiment* and vengefulness and becoming capable of the golden gift-giving love, and about gratitude for this gold in the heart of the earth, recognizing the earth as our home. Unfortunately, the human exploitation of nature threatens to make the earth uninhabitable, and the most powerful nation on earth is now led by a most vengeful human being for whom gold has a far different value than that suggested in *Zarathustra*. As Lampert puts it in describing Zarathustra’s blessing: “The blessing of eternal return permits mortal man to be at home on the earth under the open sky, and it permits the return of the gods who consecrate the world of mortals. Eternal return is the teaching that lets beings be.”⁵⁹

One of the things I have come to appreciate about the Hawaiian view of nature is the reverence many Hawaiians still have for Pele, the goddess of the volcano. As I have come to understand, Pele is not some disembodied goddess that happens to reside in the volcano; she is rather the fiery force of nature that comes forth from the volcano. Despite her destructive power, Hawaiians always understood that she also brought forth the land, the *‘āina* that made their life possible. Now, through science, we know that this fiery force of nature is one of the things that makes the earth inhabitable, as it is the movement of magma around our planet’s iron core that creates the magnetic field that

⁵⁹ Lampert (1986: 176).

protects the Earth from solar radiation. I have often thought of this when I have had the opportunity to witness Pele's towering fountains of lava. There is a most remarkable phenomenon that accompanies these fountains. The fallout from the fountains includes what is known here as "Pele's hair," fine hairlike filaments of volcanic glass. In the light, Pele's hair is shining gold, and in high-fountaining events, it falls to earth in copious amounts. When one walks along the crater's edge after the fountaining has stopped, it seems the heart of the earth is gold as the landscape sparkles in the sunlight, dusted with Pele's golden tresses.

Unfortunately, during the whole time Nietzsche was writing, missionaries and the settlers who came in their wake were infecting the Hawaiian people not only with the diseases that would decimate the population, but also the theologian instinct which would eventually lead to the overthrow of the nation of Hawai'i. Instead of a separation between human beings and nature, in Hawaiian culture the relationship was understood as a kinship relationship requiring respect for the land (*`āina*) and an obligation to care for the earth (*Mālama Honua*). Although the *Hōkūle'a*, a replica of an ancient Polynesian voyaging canoe, carried the message of *Mālama Honua* from Hawai'i around the world in recent voyages, there seems as much chance of that making a difference in averting the coming planetary catastrophe as Nietzsche's idea of the means to real peace being adopted today. But that may be our fate. We are onboard the Titanic rather than the *Hōkūle'a*. Maybe we have to face our fate like the brave Iphigenia—or perhaps as Nietzsche suggested in the notion of *Amor fati*—becoming one of those who, cleansed of vengefulness, can "make things beautiful" (GS 276).

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