

Nietzsche and the Seductions of Metaphysics

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If this talk had a subtitle, which it does not, it might read something like "A Study in the German Imagination," or else "Nietzsche's Anthropology of the All Too Human." Conversely, the talk's title on another day might have been called "Anti-Nietzsche" or even "The Seductions of Nietzsche." All of these alternatives will be at play in my talk today. What I will be giving you are the beginnings of a critique of the surface meaning of Nietzsche's later "philosophy" (so-called). I will be proposing that Nietzsche's "philosophy" is in fact reducible to a deep form of cultural criticism that his writings perform rather than enunciate as such, declaratively. Doing so will involve turning the Nietzschean apparatus around, back upon itself, and viewing it as a form of self-inflicted criticism, as is illustrated by my talk's epigraph, which is the first item on your handout, and which reads: "In the Alps I am invincible, namely when I am alone and have no other enemy than myself." What matters in statements like these (and they abound in Nietzsche's corpus, which they also typify) are not their obvious contents but the ironies in which they come sheathed. In the face of this kind of remark, the question to ask is not whether Nietzsche's writing represents a kind of Pyrrhic victory, nor what it means to be invincible in self-defeat, but what kind of sly humor it takes to pose for a camera the way Nietzsche does here, wryly pretending to elude its detection and yet eager to be caught in the act. Nietzsche is a self-conscious poser and a poseur (the tonality of his voice is everywhere that of a falsetto). He is constantly performing in the presence of an audience, but slyly so. I want to link this playfulness with a more serious kind of game today, and to suggest ways in which Nietzsche is supremely aware of his talent for engaging his readers and his ability to trigger the various registers of his contemporaries' ideas and fantasies (and indeed their deepest and most unmentionable fears).

Just as he liked to claim about himself, he is truly a cultural psychologist (or pathologist), whose primary object, I want to suggest, is the material of cultural fantasy itself. Ideally, one would want to flesh out the picture with a far richer sampling of this material and with a broader historical contextualization than I have time to provide you with today. My more modest aim will be to outline the logic of one aspect of the problem, and to offer you a fresh, and possibly disturbing and depressing, perspective on Nietzsche's view of the subject, which is to say the subject of cultural fantasy and above all of self-deception. Construing the subject in this way is, I believe, a far more productive way of posing the question of subjectivity and agency, both in Nietzsche and in general, and of exposing the heart of his several projects. But with that said, we can turn to the first section of the talk (there will be four in all), which is titled:

1. "The Logic of Feeling"

In section 2 of The Antichrist we find the following logical catechism:

What is good? — All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man.

What is bad? — All that proceeds from weakness.

What is happiness? — The feeling that power *increases* — that a resistance is overcome. (A 2)

The point, which would appear to need no commentary and which is abundantly attested elsewhere in Nietzsche's works, is that power, the will to power that is the core of his so-called "theories" or "doctrines," resides in a feeling, not in a fact. The will to power is not a fact, but the projection of one; it is a feeling of power, a "Machtgefühl," or what amounts to the same thing, "a consciousness of power."

But this ought to be a source of puzzlement. Elsewhere in the same work (and in all of Nietzsche's writings), it is this very quality of projection, of illusory belief, that comes in for the harshest of criticism. Indeed, Nietzsche's entire "attack on Christianity" which is to say on

modern “morality” in the widest possible sense of the word (namely, modern mores, habits, conventions, conscious and unconscious beliefs, assumptions, and acts, in a word, the deeper formations of culture at the level of the subject and its identifications), is based on a critique of this kind of misplaced feeling. Hence, a few sections later in the same work we read, “A people which still believes in itself still also has its own God. In him it venerates the conditions through which it has prospered, its virtues—it projects its joy in itself, its feeling of power on to a being whom one can thank for them.” (AC 16). Now, Nietzsche’s obsession with Christianity as a degenerative phenomenon has a very specific cause. Christianity is the institutionalization in a religious form of feeling taken for fact (“the illusion-creating force is there at its height”); civil society, on the other hand, even after the death of God, is a continuation of religion by other means: it is a disguised religiosity. The significance of Nietzsche’s book The Antichrist lies first and foremost in its exposure of the structures of belief, of feeling, and of illusion that are so deeply, and possibly inextinguishably, rooted in the history of Western culture.

Placing two texts like this from The Antichrist side by side (those from section 2 and 16) of course poses a vital problem, one which Nietzsche is not openly prepared to address. Power is an illusory state, a projected feeling, and a form—indeed, the very form—of “belief.” This is in line with good Nietzschean “doctrine”: there are no facts, only interpretations; power is one such interpretation, as is the very hypothesis that this is the case, the hypothesis of the will to power itself. And yet all the recipients of Nietzsche’s critique are instances of this very same kind of (mis)projection. And that is where the problems begin.

Suppose that power resides solely in the feeling of power, that, as Nietzsche says, “It is not the works, it is the faith [or “belief”, der Glaube] that is decisive here, that determines the order of rank.” How in that case could the distinction between a rightful and a false claim to power be adjudicated, between “active” willing and “reactive” ressentiment? How could one tell (say) Zarathustra and Wagner apart if and insofar as both had the same feeling, the same pleasurable sensation of power (the same “Lust-Gefühl”)? Power is inseparable from the sensation one has of power, because power depends upon a pleasurable feeling, upon a sensation

of difference, “a feeling of more power” (“ein Plus-Gefühl von Macht,”), or as he writes in Beyond Good and Evil, “the feeling of growth, the feeling of increased power.” This is the only criterion of power. How, then, can Nietzsche coherently deny to anyone who possesses the sensation a rightful claim to power? And how certifiable is the sensation? Does feeling certify power, or is it the other way around? Clearly, feeling certifies power and it is self-certifying as well. If so, then power may turn out to be no more than the codification of an error.

Clearly, much hangs on the issue. The will to power, so viewed, is now vulnerable to Nietzsche’s critique of decadence and of resentment (a term whose root meaning, in the sentiment of sensation, brings us back again to the problem of power as the sensation of power). Perhaps worse, the very idea of “affirmation”, the unconditional, positive attitude towards life (viewed as will to power) is in danger of being disowned. For again, affirmation resides in the mere feeling of affirmation, in the feeling of power and of “sovereignty” one has: an irrefragable good and an essential and ineliminable property of life and of living subjects, affirmation ought to be something about which we can never, so to speak, go wrong whenever we feel it. And yet Nietzsche’s critique of resentment is an indictment of the affirmation of life that the reactive subject claims to have and feel. How consistent and effective is Nietzsche’s critique? How coherent is his view of power?

Bound up with this problem is another, namely the periodization of Nietzsche’s thought. For there is the troubling fact that the early Nietzsche mounts a fairly consistent critique of power, right up through Daybreak (1881), while the so-called “mature” Nietzsche, starting with Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1883-85), embraces some forms of power, while castigating others. In Walter Kaufmann and others, this rupture miraculously comes out as a turning away from dualism to monism. But it is plain that power is ambiguous for the late Nietzsche, not monistic, and that the object of his earlier critique—the psychology of power—shows no signs of diminishing in the “mature” period and every sign of being written into the phenomenon of the will to power itself (in its blatant anthropomorphism and psychologism)—assuming, that is, we correctly identify the object of Nietzsche’s criticism in both phases. What is more, the earlier

critique was directed not against the fact of power per se or even the modalities of its exercise (for example, external and internal uses of power) but against the feeling of its possession, and more generally, against what Nietzsche in Daybreak and elsewhere (even later) calls “the logic of feeling”. Needless to say, the persistence of the idiom of force as a feeling into the later period and the memory of its earliest critique threaten to undo all the great symmetries in Nietzsche, such as the discovery of the difference between “power” and “the will to power” (which is to say, the distinction between “power and true power”—so Walter Kaufmann), or between the mere “representation of power” and “the actual will to power” (so Gilles Deleuze), or between the “fact” and the “feeling” of the will to power (so Alexander Nehamas and others). Threatened, in a word, is the sublimation of power into an act of total and unchallengeable affirmation.

Against the prevailing view, I would like to suggest that the will to power continues the line of Nietzsche’s earlier inquiries into the frailties of the imaginary construction of power, and that as a consequence none of the distinctions between power and true power and the like is meaningful. Since this is not the place to mount a full-scale demonstration, I hope to make the point valid first by appealing to the fragilities not of power itself, but of Nietzsche’s account of it in his later writings, and then by considering these fragilities as an integral element of Nietzsche’s style of thinking and writing. The general thrust of my argument, although it is not a case that can be fully spelled out here, will be that the will to power and its associated doctrines (genealogy, self-overcoming, the concept of the Übermensch, of becoming what one is, and so on) are a faintly disguised critique of the modern subject and its fascination with the one trait it absolutely lacks: power. Shot through with ambiguity, with ambivalence, and with incoherence, the will to power owes all of these traits to their fascinating source, the human, all-too-human natures that Nietzsche shows us that we are. For (and I think this ought to be uncontroversial, although it is not often put this way by his readers) the will to power is nothing more or less than an account of our nature (that of “the type ‘man’”) and our life. Finally, Nietzsche’s critique is culturally specific: it contains references to contemporary paradigms of the European (and

especially the German) cultural imaginary, which are now for the most part lost to us, although they strangely continue to exert a powerful attraction on us today. To the extent that they do, we are quite plainly still Nietzsche's contemporaries.

Now, if this is right, then Nietzsche's writings call for a differently nuanced attention from the kind they have received in the past. One will have to read them with an ear to the way they betray meaning, to the way they betray themselves and ourselves as we attempt to invest them with sense, coherence, and clear purpose. They can have none of these traits because we display none of these traits either: his writings and his teachings are a psychological mirror of ourselves. We cannot expect to find meaning laid bare and ready for our possession in Nietzsche's texts; instead we have to look for this meaning in "every staccato, every rubato" of his sentences, in the near-inaudibilites of his writings, in what they steal, in what they refuse, in their deceptiveness. The standard assumption is that Nietzsche's writings never lie, they never deceive us. But, as he says, jeopardizing his own professed ideal of "honesty" (Redlichkeit), "Suppose we want truth: why not rather untruth? And uncertainty? Even ignorance?" not to say "deception." True, Nietzsche's writings can be shrill (perhaps in a kind of pantomime of hysteria, as they "act out" meaning), but what interests me here are the more insidious and posthumous devices of critiquing that Nietzsche has at his disposal, the tacit meanings that can be heard in his writings above their din. As he says of the hermit, a figure for the philosopher, "in his strongest words, even in his cry, there still vibrates a new and dangerous kind of silence—of burying something in silence . . . : does one not write books precisely to conceal what one harbors?" I hope that some of this silence and its dangers will emerge from the present talk. To this end, let us take up for consideration three short texts from various parts of his later corpus (labeled i, ii, and iii on your handout).

2. Sancta Simplicitas, or, the Art of Self-Contradiction

- (i) "O sancta simplicitas! In what strange simplification and falsification man lives! . . .
 . How we have made everything around us clear and free and easy and simple! . . . —
 how from the beginning we have contrived to retain our ignorance in order to enjoy an

almost inconceivable freedom, lack of scruple and caution, heartiness, and gaiety of life—in order to enjoy life! And only on this now solid, granite foundation of ignorance could knowledge rise so far—the will to knowledge on the foundation of a far more powerful will: the will to ignorance, to the uncertain, to the untrue! Not as its opposite, but—as its refinement!” (BGE 24 [1886])

(ii) “[T]here is a will to power in the organic process by virtue of which dominant, shaping, commanding forces continually extend the bounds of their power and continually simplify within these bounds: the imperative grows.” [And, now describing what he call “a ‘basic will of the spirit,’”:] “The commanding something which the people call ‘the spirit’ wants to be master in and around its own house and wants to feel that it is master. It has the will from multiplicity to simplicity, a will that ties up, tames, and is domineering and truly masterful. . . . The spirit’s power to appropriate the foreign stands revealed in its inclination to assimilate the new to the old, to simplify the manifold, and to overlook or repress whatever is totally contradictory. . . , retouching and falsifying the whole to suit itself.” (WP 644 [1886/87] and BGE 230; last emphases added)

(iii) “The intention was to deceive oneself in a useful way; the means, the invention of formulas and signs by means of which one could reduce the confusing multiplicity to a purposive and manageable schema.” (WP 584 [1888])

The first of these remarks is (possibly) a critical comment on humankind’s seemingly unlimited powers of simplification—powers which Nietzsche claims are in fact driven by need and weakness, or (in his own impatient vocabulary) by ressentiment and a “slave morality.” The second of the remarks describes a “drive” that is “apparently opposed” to the first drive, which is to say that it describes a will motivated not by resentment but (presumably) by higher, “nobler” impulses. And yet the two accounts are strikingly, and unexpectedly, identical, and not just similar. Can Nietzsche really be claiming the same thing—sancta simplicitas—to be true of the will to power in both its canonically good (“strong”) and bad (“weak”) forms? In other words,

can both kinds of power be instances of a simplifying will?

That they can be is suggested not only by these passages but by countless others like them. But this is prima facie odd, because at stake in “holy simplicity” is not an incidental trait of willing in general but a deep and essential feature that ought in principle to be a distinguishing criterion between kinds of willing, but which is not. So complete is the overlap, there seems to be no way to tell the alternatives apart, nor does Nietzsche help us out with his customary clarifying labels—we are left to surmise, or wonder at, the direction of his meaning in the passages just quoted. The consequences are immense but also disorienting, especially if we proceed according to the standard map of Nietzsche’s thought, a map supplied by himself and too often followed by his readers.

By way of illustration and a test, consider text (iii) above. What does it describe: the appropriative, irresistably tyrannical will to power (“the will to life,” “to truth,” “to mastery”) or its stigmatized opposites (“the will to ignorance,” “to falsehood,” etc.)? The language is defiant and uncertain, and it forbids a clear answer. What is more, to oppose kinds of willing in this way is misleading and itself runs the risk of being an oversimplification. “The will to ignorance, the will not to know,” for instance, is often recognized by Nietzsche to be a condition of “the will to life” and of “to truth” not their opposite, while other pairings seem variously interchangeable, to judge from the evidence of Nietzsche’s texts (and from the uncertainties of his commentators). But in point of fact, all of these forms of willing are equally necessary, equally valid—and equally suspect. Is the first passage a critique or a celebration of sancta simplicitas? Is the second really an account of the will to power after all? Or is it about a will that mistakes itself for a will to power? And finally, is the will to power anything other than this mode of self-deception—a defense against its own illusions?

Questions of this nature of course go right against the grain of Nietzsche’s apparent purpose, and consequently against our own instincts as readers of his texts. We naturally tend to fight shy of the conclusion that in the will to power, a theory in which “there are no opposites,” extremes do meet and at times in disconcerting ways. True, Nietzsche’s philosophy is erected on

a series of oppositions (summed up by the pairings: active, affirmative, and life-affirming on the one side and reactive, negative, and life-denying on the other); and in fact his philosophy is itself constituted out of a stance of pure oppositionality, and often even out of a denial of this fact (disclaimers that are all literally incredible). And yet, as he says, “the fundamental faith of the metaphysicians is the faith in opposite values.” Nietzsche offers no convincing arguments for his counter-claim about the nonexistence of opposites, and his own allegedly non-metaphysical practice continually belies itself. Not even the counter-appeal he makes to “degrees of difference” that at most “appear to be opposites” solves the difficulty; instead, it leads us back to it, to the subjective “logic of feeling” and to the basis of belief that we have been discussing. For as he says, these “gradations” are in fact to be found only “innerhalb des Subjektiven,” within the realm of subjectivity, as one of its many appearances. Nietzsche’s appeal to grades of differences that appear to us as opposites concedes more than it perhaps should, for it acknowledges that we cannot think in the absence of opposites (or their appearance). Nietzsche surely cannot do this himself. Instead, he inoculates us with a suspicion: “It might even be possible that what constitutes the value of these good and revered things is precisely that they are insidiously (or “embarrassingly”: auf verfängliche Weise) related, tied to, and involved with these wicked, seemingly opposite things—maybe even one with them in essence (wesensgleich).”

This statement, while it gives the universal foundation to Nietzsche’s theory of power and of the “genealogy” of power, simultaneously undoes much of what his own writing appears to erect. Let us assume that the will to power permeates all that exists. In what way is the modern, truly decadent instance of German middle-class Biederlichkeit or a Christian, ascetic priest “essentially identical” with a Zarathustra, let alone with a “blond beast” or a “beast of prey”? Nietzsche sets these caricatures up as worlds apart, as essentially remote possibilities of human potential. How can we imagine them otherwise? A truly Dionysian reader, one should think, will have the strength (not to say the largesse) to see through these imaginary barriers. The question that Nietzsche’s writings continuously pose to us, I want to suggest, is whether we

actually do have the strength to dwell at the limits of such radical uncertainty. I believe that Nietzsche at least made an attempt to do this, and that we must also. But even supposing we succeed, the result will be disastrous, for the overflowing energies of Dionysianism in a sense will have overflowed the image of Dionysianism itself. Where does this leave us? Here, we arrive at a genuine impasse, a true Verfänglichkeit, an “insidiousness,” if not an awkward “embarrassment.”

I want to dwell on this impasse for a moment. One could, and no doubt some have, focussed exclusively on the series of contradictions that actually make up the bulk of Nietzsche’s writings, for instance Nietzsche’s condoning of superficiality in some places (most famously, in The Gay Science) and his repudiation of “the cult of surfaces” elsewhere; or his condemnation of deceitful masks and labyrinths of the soul, balanced against his celebration—and cultivation—of the same; or his critique of negation as an identifying characteristic of nihilism and his claims elsewhere that “No-saying” is an indispensable condition of life; or his attribution to “philosophers of the future” traits that he finds deplorable in degenerate minds (for instance, “life in hiding, “stoicism,” “retrograde [and slithery] bypaths [Schleichwege],” or “the certainty of value standards”); or his identification of “wanting to be different” with “life” (“Is not living . . . wanting to be different [Anders-Sein-Wollen]?”), and, contrarily, with ascetic nihilism again (not to mention the conflict this creates with the imperative and slogan, “Become what you are!,” or with the ideal of self-affirmation: are we to say that life is essentially—resentful?); or, to take a spectacular instance, one likely to elude even his harshest critics, Nietzsche’s conflicting claims, in Twilight of the Idols, that “in the Dionysian state . . . the entire emotional system is alerted and intensified: so that it discharges all its powers of representation, . . . [and] the essential thing remains . . . the incapacity not to react (—in a similar way to certain types of hysteric . . .),” and, a few short sections earlier, that the “goal” of “noble culture” is a “first preliminary schooling in spirituality: not to react immediately to a stimulus, but to have the restraining, stock-taking instincts in one’s control. . . . the essence of it is precisely not to ‘will,’ the ability to defer decision,” whereas “all unspirituality, all vulgarity, is due to the incapacity to resist a stimulus—

one has to react, one obeys every impulse”—“such a compulsion,” he adds, is “already morbidity, decline, a symptom of exhaustion”—a symptom of hysteria, shall we say?; or in the Antichrist his complaint, which rings hollow, that “the priest disvalues, dissanctifies nature,” which is to say rejects what Nietzsche here, out of pure convenience, treats as intrinsically valuable (“every natural custom, every natural institution (state, administration of justice, marriage, the tending of the sick and poor), every requirement presented by the instinct for life, in short everything valuable in itself,” even if elsewhere such “disvaluation (Entwertung)” is precisely the role he reserves for himself (nor is it clear that Nietzsche has, or has the right to have, any notion of “value in itself”); and when he goes on to explain the mechanism of the religious valuation he appears to deplore—“a sanction is subsequently required—a value-bestowing power is needed, which denies the natural quality in these things and only by doing so is able to create a value”—one can only ask (again) why this is worthy of critique, and how Nietzsche can consistently hold his own “free spirits” to be any different, and so on.

Nietzsche’s stunning and stunningly provocative self-contradictions, which can occur within the space of a page or a paragraph, are notable in themselves, and it is pointless to deny their existence (just as it is pointless to indict them without pushing the question of contradiction to a sufficiently radical extreme). What interests me here, however, is the halting effect that Nietzsche’s logic can have within a given utterance as it hovers equivocally between neutral description, critique, and approval. There is a lushness to Nietzsche’s styles, as if his language were inhabited by too many voices and too many knowing and critical eyes all at once. Texts (i) and (ii) above are examples of the way in which neutral description can shade off into critique, though not yet clearly into approval. Take another, which, however, does: “Every morality is, as opposed to laisser aller, a bit of tyranny against ‘nature’; also against ‘reason’; but this in itself is no objection What there is in it of ‘nature’ teaches hatred of the laisser aller, of any all-too-great freedom, and implants the need for limited horizons and the nearest tasks—teaching the narrowing of our perspective, and thus in a certain sense stupidity, as a condition of life and growth.” Can this law of perspectival optics possibly apply to Nietzsche’s “master morality”?

One way—the wrong way—to remove this worry is to imagine that when Nietzsche says “condition of life and of growth” he really means a precondition to a life better conceived. That is also the hopeful thrust of the passage, which professes a kind of “ideology of training and breeding” consistent with the program of the work in which it appears (Beyond Good and Evil). But Nietzsche precisely does not say that “stupidity” and “the narrowing of perspective,” by which he means illusions and lies, constitute a passing phase of life. They are, quite simply, life’s enduring and indelible characteristic.

Here, again, we find the thrust of Nietzsche’s rhetoric at odds with itself: it points in two ways, towards a hopeful repealing of life’s laws in a distant futurity and towards a more somber, darker truth. Hopefulness, after all, is a trait shared by free-spirited philosophers of the future and by Christian believers alike. It may be, as he claims, that “intense hope is a much stronger stimulant to life than any single instance of happiness which actually occurs.” Needless to say, such hope is the offspring of a “flawed optics.” Paradoxically, the very means to redemption cancels out the possibility for redemption: to want to get beyond “wanting to be different” is on Nietzsche’s own rules itself the negation of the wish to do so, the surest sign that the wish will falter. Perhaps, then, it is wrong to want altogether; but on the other hand, the suspension of wanting, and of this particular desire, is impossible too. A stalemate of the will looks imminent, one that, like any other condition of life, is (in Nietzsche’s words) inalterably “willy-nilly.” But there is a further, essential aspect of the will to power, one I have neglected to mention so far, in part only because it ought to go without saying: the will to power is willy-nilly the source of all of our idealizations.

3. Nietzsche’s All-Too-Human Anthropology, or the Seductions of Metaphysics

The passage on the “need for a limited horizon” and the “narrowing of perspective” just quoted brings us to the heart of my argument today. That passage not only demonstrates how the basic features of the will to power—in a word, its tyranny against nature and reason—are uniformly valid with respect to both active and reactive agents. It also shows how both kinds of agent are subject to the same constraints. To put this point in its most troubling form, it is the

constraint of both kinds of agent to act in accordance with the logic of the stigmatized form of agency—to conform to a certain “stupidity,” “narrowness,” and “limitation”—and this is simultaneously the source of whatever “power” they have or express, or rather feel they have and express. I now want to show how these constraints are in Nietzsche’s eyes fundamentally and irreducibly/indelibly human ones, and that, accordingly, Nietzsche’s much-celebrated exemplars of superhumanity are in point of fact to a superior degree examples of the all-too-human condition of humanity, the condition that Nietzsche’s “theory” of the monistic (if ambivalent) will to power after all describes. The thrust of my argument will be that Nietzsche’s philosophy contains implications about the constraints on human capacity that are so considerable and so insuperable as to exclude the superhuman possibilities that his philosophy also seems to put on offer.

Let us start by considering the idea of superhumanity itself, Zarathustra’s seductive invention, which (we should not forget) appears only to a yearning, ascetic soul that is striving to overcome itself, and even then only in a dream. The Zarathustran idea invites us to be tempted by the thought of an Overman, which is to say by the possibility of mankind’s acceding to some future, higher perfection—an eternal seduction, this compelling, metaphysical thought, which runs, “you are more, you are higher, you are of a different origin!” But as much as Nietzsche encourages this thought, he is perfectly capable of contradicting it too. Hence, in the same passage Nietzsche maintains that a free spirit must remain “deaf” to such a “metaphysical seduction,” and that “under such flattering colors and make-up the basic text of homo natura must again be recognized.” But if so, then in what way is the Overman an instance of “that eternal basic text” of man?

This passage from Beyond Good and Evil (likewise from section 230) is a good example of Nietzsche’s dizzying tautologies. But they also have point. Directly upon issuing this imperative to scratch away through the superficial veneer and to recognize again that “poor, bare, forked animal” that is man (“to translate man back into nature”), Nietzsche adds a second imperative: “to see to it that man henceforth stands before man as even today, hardened in the

discipline of science, he stands before the rest of nature.” But the logic fails here, in part because “that eternal basic text of homo natura” is itself a metaphysical coloration overlaid upon the actuality of man (Nietzsche’s argument is thus metaphysically tainted), and in part because man’s view of man is naturally self-occluding (the laws of perspective dictate this alone—man (sic) simply cannot stand before himself in the way that Nietzsche wants), just as man’s nature is what blocks and bedevils his view of nature itself (a point that Nietzsche is quicker to make when it is more convenient to do so). Zarathustra knows better: “Never yet has there been an overman. Naked I saw both the greatest and the smallest man: they are still all-too-similar to each other. Verily, even the greatest I found—all-too-human.” What is left unstated is the possibility, which I want to consider in the remainder of this talk, that the Overman—the very idea of him—is also “all too human.”

How does one overcome oneself? Nietzsche’s answer is the imperative, which is a paradox, “Become what you are.” Here we might as well apply Nietzsche’s own objection to himself: “How could you not do that? Why make a principle of what you yourselves are and must be?” Taking himself as a paradigm, Nietzsche can claim, with a certain theatrical hyperbole, to have achieved the extraordinary diversity that he is by having become what he is (“a huge multiplicity that nonetheless is the opposite of a chaos”). It is this side of Nietzsche’s thought that has exercised the greatest attraction upon his readers, and understandably so. We are all a bit of chaos (as he elsewhere concedes), and who wouldn’t prefer to regard herself as a potentially coherent “whole”? Hence the communis opinio about Nietzsche: “The unphilosophic and inartistic mass remain animalic, while the man who overcomes himself, sublimating his impulses, consecrating his passions, and giving style to his character, becomes truly human or—or as Zarathustra would say, enraptured by the word über—superhuman”. Self-overcoming and self-cancellation are how one “affirms oneself” and becomes what one is?

To become what one is has, however, another, less flattering and less promising ring to it. It implies that we just are what we are, and there is no way around it: we must content ourselves to the fact, and fate, of being thus. There is this other side to Nietzsche, which one tends to

ignore in favor of the more exhilarating prospects that his writings also hold out: his scathing insight into our inalterable and stubborn selfsameness, our human, all-too-human recidivism, the very proof of which is the inextinguishable but futile desire not to be thus (our tendency to Jenseits-conceptions in general). Nietzsche's talk of "the inveterate tartuffery of morals" as something that is "not to be overcome" (it is "unconquerable": unüberwindlich), of the "remote, primordial, and inclusive household of the soul" and its relentless "atavism", which forces subjects into a conceptual (and grammatical) sameness ("interpretation according to a schema that we cannot throw off"), of "something unteachable" in us that isn't merely one of our features but apparently is our defining essence (it lies "at the bottom of us, really 'deep down'") and which reveals not what we can become, but only "an unchangeable 'this is I'" (ein unwandelbares 'das bin ich')—all this tells a different story. Follow Nietzsche in this depressive mood, in this literal gloss on homo natura (it appears in the next section of Jenseits), and you will discover that to become what one is to become, or simply to be, the "problem we are." It is to stumble upon "a granite of spiritual fatum, of predetermined decision and answer to predetermined selected questions": it is to stand naked before oneself as the "great stupidity we are". And that is our will to power? This strand of Nietzsche's thought and writing leads away from the gleaming specters of both the Overmen and the Undermen and towards a far more troubling, far bleaker prospect, that of a mankind that is neither "over" nor "under," neither exalted nor debased, but simply is what it is—assuming, that is, we can think such a thought in all of its unordained banality. Nietzsche knows better: he knows that we cannot.

As with Nietzsche's ostensible master narrative, which provides an analogue, as it were, to our various states of delusion, so too here: les extrêmes se touchent. Nietzsche exploits these potentials of his own rhetoric and logic, thrilling meaning and even his own coherence. Hence the playful and perverse logic of the identification in The Antichrist of Jesus with the Nietzschean free spirit (witness his "glad tidings"—for instance, "that there are no more opposites", his unimpeachable "Lebensphilosophie", his "inner 'lights', inner feelings of pleasure and self-affirmation, nothing but 'proofs by potency'", and his teaching of a state

beyond good and evil (“For Jesus had done away with the concept ‘guilt’ itself”), or the provocative approximation of the self-affirming and self-sovereign “promising creature” with the reactive subject of moral “conscience” in the Second Essay of On the Genealogy of Morals (this figure literally defies interpretation, and rightly so: he is a product of pure phantasm). (Nietzsche is parodying contemporary Christian “science,” typified by Ernest Renan and David Strauss among others, in addition to assaulting the practice of Christian hypocrisy.) Or else consider the deliberately provocative identification of modern German Christians (and—notably—anti-Semites) with Jews (they are not only “the final Jewish consequence” but an inferior “copy,” a pale after-image; but they remain, for all that, virtual Jews; Freud would later make a similar point in his work on Moses, with almost the same degree of malicious irony). (Nor can Nietzsche’s account hope to extricate itself from contamination with what it exposes. Quite the contrary, it revels in this added confusion.) Examples in Nietzsche’s works of such fatefully contrived but unwanted identifications, of such merely (and barely) apparent differences, could be multiplied at will; indeed, they obtain all the time, as they only can given the principles that guide Nietzsche’s vivisection of the logic of feeling, [and the shrewd theories of action and of the subject that these imply (as he notes, “our actions shine alternately in different colors, they are rarely univocal— . . . we perform actions of many colors”). To this we must add the direct cultural and historical implications of Nietzsche’s performances: his writings are no more and no less than a compendium of his contemporaries’ inherited fantasies, be these racial (the fantasy of racial purity), classicizing (the myth of the noble Greeks, the “Drang nach Süden”), political (nationalism or Europeanism), or in a word, cultural, which is perhaps most simply defined as the fantasy that these are not fantasies. His writings represent not so much what Germans say, but what they think and feel. With his extraordinary talent for extroversion and for mimetic identification with others and especially with others’ fantasies (Rameau’s nephew, that ventriloquist par excellence, whom Nietzsche moreover admired, offers a close parallel), Nietzsche enacts these wishes or fears, invites them, seduces them into confessing themselves, and then into traducing and confounding themselves, simply by allowing the essential

incoherence of all such fantasy projections to stand exposed in their own harsh light.]

If this is right, then the highest exemplars of the will have to be seen, still keeping within Nietzsche's fictional narrative framework of polarized opposites, as ascetic priests who hallucinate the power they feel: such is the labor of their "entire active 'bad conscience,'" which is "the actual womb of all ideal and imaginative phenomena." In revenge, appearances of light and cheerful freedom notwithstanding, a "free spirit" by Nietzsche's own logic is one who is most deeply rent by the conflict that obtains in every subject, namely that between belief and knowledge, between having a conception of oneself and being self-deceived. Falsehood is in this precise sense a condition of life. Living in the knowledge of its probable falsehood, but at the same time protected by "a great, firm dome of ignorance," a subject so conceived lives out its life in a state of deepest psychological dishonesty. "There are free, insolent spirits who would like to conceal and deny that they are broken, proud, incurable hearts" (JGB 270). Viewed in this less flattering light, the "free spirit" is to be seen not as a way out of the human, all-too-human condition, but as its most spectacular example. He is the incarnation of disavowal. But isn't that, too, a consequence of the will to power conceived as a will to falsehood? Compare the following from a late notebook:

So many subtleties of ultimate self-deception, so many seductions to life, so much faith in life! In those moments in which man was deceived, in which he duped himself, in which he believes in life: oh how enraptured he feels! What delight! What a feeling of power! . . . Die Lüge ist die Macht. Lying is what power is. (WP 853 = KSA 13, 194; emphases added).

To be sure, Nietzsche does not openly state what his writings everywhere suggest. Instead, he leaves us—if we are attentive—in a state of radical uncertainty, groping for the security of sure distinctions, and then finding them if we lack the strength of mind and even character to hold the unsavory opposites together. One more example of this uncertainty deserves to be mentioned. It belongs to the sequel to text (ii) above. To the will "to simplify the manifold" Nietzsche opposes another, or rather an "apparently opposed" "drive," "a suddenly

erupting decision in favor of ignorance, of deliberate exclusion, a shutting of one's windows, an internal No to this or that thing, a refusal to let things approach, a kind of state of defense against much that is knowable, a satisfaction with the dark, with the limiting horizon, a Yea and Amen to ignorance." The contradictions that ripple through this passage are palpable enough. How do we characterize these contrary "drives," these wills to contradictory things, these (if you like) affirmative impulses to negation and negative impulses to affirmation? Either of these, the will or the drive, could be argued to display symptoms of decadence or its opposite, a distinction that Nietzsche doesn't seem particularly concerned to draw in the present case. Instead, he leaves us wriggling in uncertainty and "unknowing." The distinction he is drawing, if he is drawing any, is after all only "apparent." Painting in the details of this second drive more fully, he continues: "Here belongs also the occasional will of the spirit to let itself be deceived, perhaps with a capricious intimation of the fact that such and such is not the case . . . , a jubilant self-enjoyment in the arbitrary narrowness and secrecy of some nook, in the all too near, in the foreground, in what is enlarged, diminished, displaced, beautified, a self-enjoyment in the caprice of all these expressions of power" (emphasis added). Who or just what is Nietzsche describing, and in what tones, approving or disapproving? No answer is forthcoming. The language resists interpretation. Indeed, it borders on the nonsensical.

Perhaps all that is really being described is Nietzsche's own philosophical and writerly practice itself; he is giving us a reflection of its own chaos. But not all is haphazard chaos in the end, for the next sentence begins, "Here belongs also, finally, that by no means unproblematic readiness of the spirit to deceive other spirits and to dissimulate in front of them," which sounds unpromising as a feature of active, noble philosophers of the future (even if it fits Nietzsche like a glove), but which is then glossed, "that continual urge and surge of a creative, form-giving, changeable force: in this the spirit enjoys the multiplicity and craftiness of its masks, it also enjoys the feeling of its security behind them: after all, it is surely its Protean arts that defend and conceal it best." The final gloss leaves no doubt that what is being described ought, in principle, to be a feature of free spirits, even if it is utterly unclear whether free spirits actually are the

subject of the description. But again, there seems to be no principle for making any such decision. What Nietzsche has been describing throughout text (ii) is nothing besides a ““basic will of the spirit,”” and for all we know he has merely described an indecisiveness internal to the selfsame will, which so to speak cannot make up its mind whether to characterize itself and to act one way or another. Hence, the passage closes, “This will to appearance, to simplification, to masks, to cloaks, in short, to the surface—for every surface is a cloak—is countered by that sublime inclination of the seeker after knowledge who insists on profundity, multiplicity, and thoroughness, with a will which is a kind of cruelty of the intellectual conscience and taste.”

Grant that the will to power, in any of its instances, works nolens volens in partial self-knowledge and in partial self-ignorance, as I think we only can, and we will have to concede that Nietzsche has merely supplied us with two, as it were internal, justifications of a will to power in each of its two “seemingly opposed” capacities. Their very opposability is itself a result of a falsification and a simplification. Nietzsche’s philosophy as a whole would in that case consist in the playing out of this two sets of “defenses” of the selfsame will, presented officially as distinct, but in fact entangled (being “essentially identical”: wesensgleich) in a self-contradictory logic—“the logic of feeling.” Nietzsche’s texts can be reduced to a series of simple contrasts; but then their logic and its irreducible complexity will have been betrayed.

4. Reading Nietzsche

A final word about the complexity of Nietzsche’s writings. His writings not only bring about stunning coincidents of opposites: they construct multiply layered objects that present themselves to our view differently depending on which layer we use as a guide or filter. There can be no one way, certainly no correct way, to read Nietzsche, given the basic incoherence of his writings when these are taken as they give themselves to be read. Grant this, however, and the risk is that there may be—quite simply—no way to read Nietzsche at all. In fact, however, the opposite is the case: there is no way to avoid overreading his overdetermined and polychromatic writings. Through his virtuoso impersonation and mimicry, the evasiveness and the sheer contortionism of his disparate voicings and ventriloquy, Nietzsche’s texts turn into

obliging sites of identification and especially of overidentification (by which I mean a reader's engagement in two or more contradictory identifications simultaneously, resulting in unsought-after attractions, approximations, and even loathings—a reaction that it is possible to document historically; it is this that a genuine study in the reception of Nietzsche ought to reveal and then diagnose. As theaters of identification, Nietzsche's works are a reflex and a critique of the fantasies of his contemporary audience, or rather of the essential incoherence of those fantasies. Dionysianism is merely the most obvious example.

Dionysianism, I want to suggest in closing, is not a theory about superabundant noble energies arising from some repressed instinctual source, let alone a theory about the self as “a work of art” or “life as literature.” It is the practice of mimetism, investment, complicity, lying, deception, self-deception—in short, “acting.” To think otherwise is to forget the source of Dionysianism in Nietzsche. Dionysus is, after all, a theatrical metaphor that is inaugurated in The Birth of Tragedy and inherited from the modern German repertory of idealizations. (To put this bluntly, Dionysus is a German god.) At any rate, what is excessive about Dionysianism in the later writings is not the compelling features of an overflowing will, but rather, as anyone can read in Twilight of the Idols, a “histrionics” that is taken to the point of “hysteria”: it is “the facility of metamorphosis,” a discharging of “all the powers of representation, imitation, transfiguration, transmutation, every kind of mimicry and play-acting, conjointly,” in a word, the sheer overabundance of roles that an actor allots to himself or else is compelled by his nature and his culture to assume. Nietzsche couldn't be more explicit if he tried: “It is impossible for the Dionysian man not to understand any suggestion of whatever kind He enters into every skin, into every emotion; he is continually transforming himself. . . . When one . . . straightway imitates and represents bodily everything one feels . . . that is the true Dionysian normal condition, at least its original condition.” If Dionysianism is indeed the “original condition” of subjects, that is because life, for Nietzsche, just is a theater and a masquerade, however unconscious we may be of this fact, and however much we deny it. In Nietzsche's eyes, acting is not only the most basic gesture of social life; it is the very condition of life, a kind of unwilled

falsehood and necessary self-deception. That is why the masquerade of human life cannot be simply unmasked and so laid bare: all that can be revealed, but never taken off, is the mask that life is.

The Dionysianism of Nietzsche's writing—which just is this theatricalization and mimicry—is “explosive” only in one precise sense: it shatters the feeling of sovereignty and of “self-glorification,” of autonomy from constraints and traditions, right where that feeling is most strongly sought after—and even when it is had, not to say enjoyed.