

# Twilight of the Humans:

## Nietzsche, Dismal Politics, and the Coming Planetary Apocalypse<sup>1</sup>

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*Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation.*

-Wernher von Braun

*There is time, if you need the comfort, to touch the person next to you, or to reach between your own cold legs...*

-Thomas Pynchon (*Gravity's Rainbow* 775)

### § I – A Fable: “Humanity is Dead!”

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 towards 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!

Political thought has yet to acknowledge that the contemporary moment is shrouded by the *coming planetary apocalypse*. Distracted by triumphant aggrandizements about democracy, rising standards of living, and declining rates of political violence, few soothsayers predict the eclipse of the foundational ideas which have determined the politics of the past several centuries (e.g. civil disobedience, contract, legitimacy, liberty, tolerance, separation of powers, rights, etc.). Unmoored, there is little guarantee that the search for new ideas will be

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successful. Friedrich Nietzsche, more so than his precursors or contemporaries, is the crown-priest of an apocalyptic *style* of politics. In comparison to the teleological eschatology of Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, and Karl Marx, who each envision a perpetual peace grounded in liberalism or socialism, Nietzsche's apocalyptic eschatology is a more fitting model for contemporary politics.<sup>2</sup> It is the political principles of modernity which will obstruct social movements and their demands for effective, immediate response to ecological collapse. As put by Nancy Rosenblum: "We face the incapacity of democratic representatives to engage questions of intergenerational justice, indeed survival." Democratic liberalism impedes politics and promises a *dismal* future. Begrudgingly and only through accumulating experience, the eternally recurring failure of eco-socialism will demonstrate the inescapability of a new political paradigm: eco-nihilism. Nietzsche's philosophy is prophetic, announcing the horizons of our present, our politics. More and more, the next century will come to realize that Nietzsche is the philosopher *par excellence* who determined the politics of catastrophic climate change. The death of man is foretold.<sup>3</sup> It is the tragedy of our day that this pronouncement is realized *too late*.

Nietzsche's most well-known maxim first appears half-way through *The Gay Science*: "God is dead" (167). The madman announces in the marketplace that we have killed him. And yet, this pronouncement comes *too early*. We are trapped in caves transfixed by the shadows of the old buddhas. Modernity recast theology into secular institutions; we find transcendence in truth, science, morality, the state, etc. Vanquishing the resilient shadows of God may end up taking thousands of years. Nietzsche's philosophy carries within it, silently affixed in its subterranean depths and unconscious impulses, vestiges of theology throughout. Gilles Deleuze asserts that "[w]e distort Nietzsche when we make him into a thinker who wrote about the death of God... what interests him is the death of man" (*Foucault* 129-130). It is we who have killed man. Mistaken that the species could live forever we sought a new God to dethrone. But in killing nature we condemned ourselves. It is humanity and our false idols that are finite and nature and an unredeemable earth that are infinite, capable of ceaseless transformation.

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<sup>2</sup> The literal meaning of apocalypse refers to the disclosure and uncovering of knowledge. Eschatology is the study of last things, the end times, theologies concerning absolute knowledge, death, and the final judgement. In announcing a new messianism, Nietzsche's political philosophy reveals much, but arrives after we have lost our faith.

<sup>3</sup> I use the gendered term 'man' throughout. Some of this is admittedly, regrettably, stylistic. Nietzsche's language is gendered. But it also feels reassuring to imagine, even if rhetorically, the coming catastrophe to be restricted to men.

Nietzsche's earliest essays question the survival of the species and imagines divergent fates of humanity. These allusions are foundational for his later leitmotifs, revealing several thematic tensions: self-creation versus fatalism, life-affirmation overcoming nihilism, the will to power and the eternal return. This essay utilizes Nietzsche's apocalyptic style to frame his political philosophy from beginning to end. By grappling with the future trajectory of human existence, Nietzsche's philosophy announces the descent of man and its overcoming. The horizon of our politics is situated by this thought. If Nietzsche, the madman, was the first to pronounce "Humanity is Dead!" it is we, of the future, denounced as mad Cassandras but lamentably sober and sane, who are entrusted to erase the shadows of ruinous humanity.

The inevitability of species-extinction requires an *untimely mediation*. We look to the past the moment we realize there is no future. As humanity comes to terms with the likelihood of a delayed extinction, politics will devolve into a struggle for survival. As the world falls, each of us will seek out meaning in the meaninglessness of our preceding journey. Nietzsche's warning appeared too early and the realization of existential danger too late. Humanity is a, tragically fated, species-toward-death, manifesting a destined devolutionary descent. The pronouncement of the end of man heralds a new, dismal politics worthy of our age.

## § II – On Knowledge and Life in an Extra-Moral Sense

In the opening and concluding scenes of Nietzsche's opus, Zarathustra thus spoke: "You great star, what would your happiness be had you not those for whom you shine?" (9). It is predictable folly and hubris that the onset of catastrophic climate change is categorized as the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene-label is a crude anthropomorphism. While the impact of humans precipitated the rise of the planet's temperature, it will be the volatility of the ecosystem that will threaten human life. Climate change is when nature strikes back. Whereas we have established with absolute knowledge what humans are and are not capable of, we do not yet know, but soon will, what the earth is capable of. The significance of the universe does not depend upon human existence. Humans are a self-obsessed species, who cannot contemplate a meaning outside of their own existence. The search for existential meaning is Nietzsche's foremost endeavor and philosopher's loftiest question.

Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense", one of his earliest essays, is a *tour de force*. Here at the very beginning of Nietzsche's *oeuvre*, in the very first lines, it is striking and significant that the critique of truth is prefaced by the

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impermanence of the species.<sup>4</sup> The fleeting evanescence of human existence chastens the narcissistic adulation of our grand artifices. Nothing is so valuable, or everlasting, that the colossal forces of nature could not wipe it from existence. World history when juxtaposed alongside natural time is rendered insignificant and meaningless. It is worth reading, and rereading, this opening passage, and then reading all of Nietzsche's philosophy that follows as a footnote to this introductory thought.

In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the highest and most mendacious minute of 'world history' — yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die (42).

To acknowledge the death of God is to admit that humans are nothing more than clever animals accidentally existing, without purpose, necessarily finite. Knowledge is a particularity of human life. "For this intellect has no further mission that would lead beyond human life. It is human, rather, and only its owner and producer gives it such importance, as if the world pivoted around it" (ibid). The mosquito feels the same sense of self-centered importance, with none of the embarrassment or misery. Transcendental truths, fostered to preserve life, fabricate illusions as real. Knowledge is constructed in the service of life in the same way that fangs and claws sustain animal lives. While the stars will continue to smile long after we are gone, there is no beyond for knowledge without those human lives for which it shines. For Nietzsche, apocalypse *reveals* the problem of value, or what is and what is not valuable. Only by considering destruction is redemption possible and sought. The struggle of life consists in the recognition of our existential mortality; so too, knowledge and politics necessitates addressing the mortality of the species.

In *Daybreak*, a powerful ode to life, whose mere title contrasts with the sunset flight of Hegel's philosophy (Shapiro 10), Nietzsche imagines "a tragic ending for knowledge" at the hands of a "self-sacrificing mankind" (*Daybreak* 31). Nietzsche posits a dangerous *perhaps*: that mankind could go extinct because of its passion for knowledge. "Perhaps mankind will even perish of this passion for knowledge!" (184). The drive for ever-more knowledge might result in a techno-scientific suicidal plunge. Despite the cosmological interpretations of the eternal

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<sup>4</sup> This parable appears not once, but twice, echoed, slightly different, in "On the Pathos of Truth."

return, there is no going back or reverting to a prior barbarism. “[W]e would all prefer the destruction of mankind to a regression of knowledge!... [I]f mankind does not perish of a *passion*, it will perish of a *weakness*” (ibid). Instead of accepting our fate and resigning ourselves to death, humans must struggle to survive using the very means which precipitated our collapse. Escaping impending extinction and planetary destruction requires the harnessing and acceleration of techno-science. Nietzsche poses a counter-*perhaps*, an absurd hope contrasted with the tragic ending of knowledge: “Perhaps, if one day an alliance has been established with inhabitants of other stars for the purpose of knowledge, and knowledge has been communicated from star to star for a few millennia: perhaps enthusiasm for knowledge may then rise to such a high-water mark?” (31). The survival of knowledge rests on humanity becoming astronauts, going beyond the earth, transcending our horizons and very humanity, and establishing cross-species political relationships throughout the galaxy. By becoming galactic voyagers, by sharing knowledge with other intelligent non-human life forms, knowledge, art, history might one day last forever.

Our individual mortality grounds our sense of humanity. Is it not a dangerous gambit to dream of the immortality of the species? The fear of extinction is that our disappearance implies we *squandered* life. To consider the end of the world is to confront a unique type of nihilism, such that human history would be rendered retroactively meaningless.

If in all he does he has before him the ultimate goallessness of man, his actions acquire in his own eyes the character of useless squandering. But to feel thus *squandered*, not merely as an individual but as humanity as a whole, in the way we behold the individual fruits of nature squandered, is a feeling beyond all other feelings (*Human, All Too Human* 29).

The coming planetary apocalypse makes species-preservation a political demand. However, existential meaning has normally been an individual, not a species-level, question. Species-extinction calls into question the meaninglessness of human existence as a whole. “It reminds us of the reasoning of Columbus: the earth was made for man... ‘It is probable that the sun should shine on nothing, and that the nocturnal vigils of the stars are squandered upon the pathless seas and countries unpeopled’” (*Daybreak* 26). Notice the repetition: ‘squandered’ is used similarly in two different books, in passages comparing pioneers lacking a final destination. It is worth expounding upon Nietzsche’s use of the phrase squander. I am as yet unaware of any reader of Nietzsche who has taken up this notion as fundamental for his philosophy. The threat of squandering is the source of

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Nietzsche's greatest fear. His entire philosophy is a demonstration of the futility of such a fear, but also a warning. It is not just that the meaning of life is called into question, but that meaning is determined by the quality of the life lived, the determination of one's wasted opportunities. If meaning is use, meaninglessness is only attributed to the useless, to the wasted ones, to the discarded, to those who misuse and throw away what is of immense value. Further recall Zarathustra who asked the sun how it could be happy without those for who it shined. Like Columbus, must we *colonize the universe* so as to not squander our lives? Is it up to us, individually and collectively, to *redeem* the earth?

Book V of *Daybreak* is an extended treatment of the death of man. The first scene imagines a great silence. "Here is the sea, *here we can forget the city* [my emphasis]. The bells are noisily ringing the angelus – it is the time for that sad and foolish yet sweet noise, sounded at the crossroads of day and night – but it will last only for a minute!" (181). Notice the repetition: nature alongside, and overshadowing, civilization. Further recall the clever animals who only last a minute. "Now all is still! The sea lies there pale and glittering, it cannot speak... O sea, O evening! You are evil instructors! *You teach man to cease being man!* [my emphasis] Shall we surrender to you?" (ibid). Humans and their cities will one day become like the sea: silent. The death of God dismisses human exceptionalism. Our godlessness reveals our animality. But most importantly, undermining human idolatry reveals our lives as the accidental product of expansive, timeless, majestic natural forces.

Nietzsche deems our cultural habits destructive weeds. To save the world a transvaluation of values, ecological, economic, familial, sexual, social, political, etc., is necessitated. But we do not know whether we are at the end of history or the beginning of something else entirely. "[W]e live an existence which is either a *prelude* or a *postlude*, and the best we can do in this *interregnum* is to... found *experimental states*. We are experiments: let us also want to be them!" (190). The unknowability of humanity's fate frees us to do anything, to radically experiment and transform ourselves, individually or collectively. With the death of God, we are taught, everything is now possible. We must create new values that empower our passions and vigor for life. In preferring death to happiness, we should rather collectively perish than return to pre-social, pre-scientific forms of existence. In a remarkable passage, one which captures the essence of the entire book and extended meditation on species-extinction, Nietzsche resolves that mankind end on its feet and defiant, not with head bowed and acquiescent. "This is the main question. Do we wish [mankind's] end to be in fire and light, or in the sands?" (184).

Nietzsche ends the book with another fable, this one not of a city, but of brave birds flying farfetched distances over a sprawling sea. Weariness prevents us from surpassing the horizon. “But what does that matter to you and me! *Other birds will fly farther!*... Will it perhaps be said of us one day that we too, *steering westward, hoped to reach India* – but that it was our fate to be wrecked by infinity?” (228-229). If Nietzsche introduced his philosophy, the critique of truth, value, external meaning, through the inevitability of human extinction, *Daybreak* represents the heroic refusal of such a thought. Humanity is compelled by a survival instinct. While humanity tarries dangerously close to ecological suicide, Nietzsche resists the diminishing of our horizons and the dying of the light. The dogged flight to the unknown transcends the pursuit of meaning for something grander and alien.

Nietzsche continues this line of thought in *The Gay Science*. The preservation of the species is depicted as an essential human activity and central political task. “Whether I contemplate men... I always find them concerned with a single task... to do what is good for the preservation of the human race... this instinct constitutes *the essence* of our species, our herd” (73). This passage challenges our understanding of Nietzsche as a radical individualist, dissuading his readers from acceding to herd mentality. I do not read this passage as dismissive of preserving the species. Quite the contrary, the pursuit of our self-interest belies an unobserved impulse to advance the collective. However, later in the same passage, Nietzsche demonstrates that these two cross-purposes should not be subsumed into each other. Nietzsche expresses his skepticism by arguing that this instinct has outlived its evolutionary purpose. “What might have harmed the species may have become extinct many thousands of years ago and may by now be one of those things that are not possible even for God. Pursue your best or your worst desires, and above all perish!” (ibid). *The Gay Science* completes the trilogy which began with “On Truth and Lying” and was continued in *Daybreak*. Species-extinction is not inevitable, species-survival is not just a remote possibility, but the mere contemplation of the future fate of the species is a dangerous abstraction. We should not think in terms of species-extinction or species-survival. We ought to think outside of time and judgment, in an extra-moral sense, because we have no way to knowing whether our actions serve a higher purpose. The most foolhardy and evil impulses result in the continuance and persistence of life. Developed here in this sequence is Nietzsche’s critique of causality and agency. There is no way of determining whether this or that individual or collective action preserves or imperils life. We ought not postulate extinction, nor be motivated by preservation. “To be sure, this economy is not afraid... of squandering” (*Daybreak* 184). *Squander away!*

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*The Gay Science* is especially important as it juxtaposes the preservation of the species alongside Nietzsche's foremost themes: the death of God and the eternal return. Vanquishing the resilient shadows of God requires overcoming the death of mankind. The madman announces the murder of God in the marketplace, accusing *this* thought, the great dangerous and mad contemplation of the future fate of the species, of being the culprit. "All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth for its sun?" (181). Note the difference and repetition: the sea which marks the limits of the horizon has now been transcended. For those brave birds there is no longer any land, only open-ended sea, outside of the sun's orbit, an irreversible plotting towards infinity. "Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?" (ibid). Humanity is unmoored, detached from gravity, no longer caught in orbit, lost adrift.

Nietzsche asks a rhetorical question that many have interpreted as a theoretical naturalism (Schacht). "When may we begin to '*naturalize*' humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?" (169). Nietzsche's naturalism is neither scientific nor methodological (Leiter). Nature is the descriptive terrain in which humans emerge and life is understood. Humanity is natural all too natural, being the product of nature and determined by natural processes, but nevertheless is distinct from nature. Humanity and nature are unlike by how each are constituted by temporality. Humanity is finite whereas nature is infinite. Nietzsche offers several warnings to faithful adherents of his philosophical naturalism. "Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life" (168-169). The demise of the human species neither squanders nor vindicates our mendacious minute in the sun. "Let us beware of thinking that the world eternally creates new things. There are no eternally enduring substances" (169). Nothing lasts, humans most especially. Likewise, the promise of transhumanism is a false comfort. The world is not alive, nor is it a machine. Do not ascribe cyclical movements to a world that is actually chaotic. Nature is neither cruel, nor law-like. Contrast two rival descriptions of chaos. For the Greeks, chaos represented the void, the original nothingness that predated the Titans. That there is something rather than nothing is just as conceivable as its opposite, an eternal omnipresent nothingness. But there is also the chaos of theoretical physics which ascribes a process of randomness to nature. Is the randomness of the dice-throw and the monstrous void mutually exclusive? A commitment to chance admits that nothingness is an outcome amongst many. Humans might die out, *or* they might



endure forever. But the same logic does not apply to nature! I do not interpret the eternal return cosmologically, or as a cyclical movement. There are far coarser, arbitrary, entropic movements at work. The eternal return is coupled with a metaphysics of chaos. The will to power is a metaphysical doctrine whereby nature is the differential relations of competing forces. The will to power is pure vitality. The eternal return is a regulative ideal, a process of ceaselessly recurring transformation. The eternal return is the organizing principle of life and Nietzsche's enigmatic vision is portrayed in his account of physics. Together, the will to power and the eternal return are an organized vitality. This is not a conception of life and death, but life *without* death. Energy cannot be extinguished; forces reorganize and regenerate. As a semi-infamous Nazi once claimed: nature does not know extinction, it only knows transformation. "Therefore: long live physics!" (266).

### § III – Beyond Freedom and Fatalism: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future

Though Nietzsche's philosophy "is booby-trapped" (Williams 66), there is a sincere honesty in his mischievous efforts to deceive (Johnson). Nietzsche's principal themes are pitted against each other, while being simultaneously interconnected, producing a tension, but eventual coalescing, of rival conceptual forces. These contradictory themes are not dialectical pairs, in which one dominates and subsumes the other. Rather this *style* composites motifs, seemingly at odds, into a complex whole.

The first notable tension is the contrast between freedom and fatalism. Nietzsche is neither a proto-Existentialist (Soloman), nor a pseudo-determinist (Leiter). Nietzsche champions 'free spirits,' those noble few who live dangerously and courageously, never judging themselves. In other passages, he delimits our capacity for basic self-knowledge, rejecting causality, intentionality, and purpose, ruthlessly criticizing the enlightenment credo of free-will. For Nietzsche, we have a managed freedom. We are situated in bodies and places which we have little control over. We recognize in ourselves and others the heavy baggage of our backgrounds. We engage in self-creation, while being subject to the recurring randomness of life. Our actions are original causes. Nietzsche rejects Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer's theories for their reliance upon a single sovereign will. Rather, our drives and internal force are in competition with each other. Nietzsche's conception of will-power is a theory of multiple wills (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*). The individual is not just one thing, but a competition of many dissimilar things, interconnected but foreign. Nietzsche's fatalism is not deterministic. Nietzsche is not beholden to a naturalistic conception, where life is

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ascribed in advance, individuals utterly incapable of manifesting their lot. Accepting one's fate *is a value* conducive for living life. Fatalism leads to love, and therefore joy. We should love fate, and in so doing, love what becomes of us. Nietzsche's maxim "*amor fati*" is a paean to the affirmation of life. "I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things... some day I wish to only be a Yes-sayer" (223).

The contrast between freedom and fatalism is correlated with the survival or demise of the species. Nietzsche writes that "death and deathly silence alone are certain and common to all in this future" (225), while also admitting that we have remarkable capacity for preservation. There is no superlative meaning or superhuman attributes attained by establishing an interstellar network. Humans would not become God-like doppelgangers, Promethean pretenders. The belief in a beyond, whether in a transcendental heaven or a perpetual peace, committing to an imaginary teleology, is a slave mentality. Posted in the contradiction between today and tomorrow, in the interim where the fate of the human species is undecided, we do not know how to live and this *not knowing* is a weight too heavy to bear. Either we resign ourselves to passive pessimism or joyfully affirm an unknown future. If the choice is between accepting or rejecting our fate, we can do neither. "We of the present day are only just beginning to form the chain of a very powerful future feeling, link for link – we hardly know what we are doing" (*The Gay Science* 268-269). Instead of reading the development of these ideas in Nietzsche's work as a cumulative sequence, I contend that we should read Nietzsche as maintaining multiple positions at once. Jean Granier classified Nietzsche's thought as an "ontological pluralism," inviting an "infinity of viewpoints." Nietzsche allows varying perspectives, one no better than the others. By highlighting Nietzsche's pluralism, we can recognize that there are multiple senses attached to his fluctuating discussions of the future fate of humanity. Nietzsche imagines numerous future trajectories, the most manifold of possibilities, all within a fleeting present. Human existence is infinite insofar as it contains a boundless series of choices and possibilities. "This godlike feeling would then be called – humaneness" (*The Gay Science* 269). Nietzsche's apocalyptic *style* of politics is one where we are free to lament, enjoy, and love our fate, but not one where we can cause or prevent it. "Like trees we grow... not in one place only but everywhere, not in one direction but equally upward and outward and inward and downward... we are no longer free to do only one particular thing, to *be* only one particular thing. This is our fate" (332).

#### § IV – The Gay Tragedy

The tension between freedom and fatalism is obliquely related to the affirmation of life and the pervasiveness of nihilism. We must love and affirm our fate, in spite of the nihilism resulting from our lack of control. The advent of nihilism is proclaimed with the death of God. Nietzsche's described his age, as we ought to do to ours, as a decadent place, full of vices masquerading as values. To kill God, to recognize his death and vanquish the remaining shadows of theology, is to admit these values are false. For Nietzsche, nihilism entails "[t]hat the highest values devalue themselves" (*Will to Power*, 9). Meaninglessness is demoralizing. Nihilism is not the belief that nothing is valuable, but that modern life and its civilized norms are a corrosive charade. Nihilism therefore demands a reappraisal and subsequent transformation of all values. Nihilistic ruin opens the world to profuse creation. Nihilism is useful for life by portending the coming revolution in ideals; the undoing of the past extends the opportunity for an unbounded future. *Gaiety* is how individuals overcome nihilism. Affirmation is redemptive: rejoice, it is no longer necessary to suffer!

The death of God entails the death of man. "Nihilism, then, is the recognition of the long waste of strength, the agony of the 'in vain'" (12). Nietzsche equates nihilism with squandering. Without purpose, humanity risks suffering, but gains what? Nietzsche demands that we not shy away from meaninglessness by finding comfort in counterfeit values. Humanity is not transcendently valuable. "What we find here is still the *hyperbolic naiveté* of man: positing himself as the meaning and measure of the value of things" (14). We project ourselves into things, such that the sun only has meaning if it shines upon humans, the earth is redeemable only if inhabited, my individual life purposeful only if the species is preserved. Nihilism is the overcoming of this style of thought. "This long plentitude and sequence of breakdown, destruction, ruin, and cataclysm that is now impending – who could guess enough of it today to be compelled to play the teacher and advance proclaimer of this monstrous logic of terror, the prophet of gloom?" (*The Gay Science* 279). Nihilism is a *revelation!* Nihilism reveals the groundlessness of life: humans without earth or an earth without humans. Nietzsche seeks not only to overcome nihilism but also to affirm its necessity for realizing a truly groundless freedom. Nihilism clears away all that is false, so to begin the process of transfiguring humanity. Only then can we build anew, on shifting sands, in faraway galaxies, unchained from the sun and our cosmological rootedness on this earth.

We are weary of humanity because our choices risk squander. This precipitates a paralyzing experience. The preservation of the species does not redeem existence. "The sight of man is now a wearying sight – what is nihilism

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today, if not *this?*... We are weary of *man?*” (*Genealogy of Morals* 28). If, at first, species-extinction seems tragic, upon reflection, it is farcical. Even tragedies are exalted by the stories contained therein. Politics has entered an age of nihilism. As stated by Deleuze: “The kingdom of nihilism is powerful” (*Nietzsche and Philosophy* 171). The incapacity of humans, individually or collectively, to control our fate inhibits our capacity for action. However, inaction is an impossibility, and instead of not willing, humans will nothingness. The most alarming aspect of penetration of nihilism into political life is the triumph of passive or reactive forces. The last man is slavishly consumed by a purposeless happiness. As the world burns, they are content to casually eat their cake. If this exhibits the saying yes to life, affirming catastrophe, destruction, and extinction, it is a pitiful gaiety! The decadent and the hermits each stick their heads in the sand, resigned to fatal defeat and quiet sleep. The bitter and resentful lay blame and then scorn on a revolving litany of scapegoats. The preservation of life is touted as a political slogan justifying the sacrifice and destruction of life. The fascists, technocrats, and hopeful Sisyphians form an unholy alliance that delays extinction, extends suffering, and preaches shame.

### § V – Will to Non-extinction

The contrast between the experience of nihilism and the commandment to affirm life brings forth a final distinction: the will to power and the eternal return. The eternal return is a nihilistic experience, existence recurring inevitably without finale, meaning or aim, the same thing happening again and again without interruption. The eternal return is ambiguous because we have no way of knowing whether our present is at an ascending or descending moment in life. Nihilism is the half-way point of the eternal return. Responding at first passively then reactively, by affirming life we complete the loop.

My interpretation of the will to power and the eternal return is uncommon. And as Tracy Strong warns: “The will to power and eternal return traditionally represent the greatest stumbling blocks in any interpretation of Nietzsche” (218). The will to power is pure vitality, a confluence of differential forces competing with each other, impelling the forward thrust of existence. The will to power is the movement of life. Vitality is a theory of life different from that of the organic: vitality is force, the organic is a substance. Thus, when Nietzsche claims that “[t]he fact is that will to power rules even in the inorganic world, or, rather, that there is no inorganic world” (quoted in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* 62), he is positing that nature, even that which appears dead and inert, is a living composite of forces. The will to power conceives of being as dynamic, always-already in a state of becoming. The will of the will to power is not intentional nor singular, but

multiple. The will to power is more power than will-power, like flowing water slowly eroding a canyon over several millennia. The will feeds off of the energy of its own power. One will does not subsume another but is propelled by an internal momentum. The will intensifies, forces are compounded. The will to power flows, strives, aspires, commands, but is never fulfilled. Force is not extinguishable. Nature does not know extinction, only transformation. Alphonso Lingis succinctly asserts that will to power “is the chaos, the primal fund of the unformed – not matter, but force beneath the cosmos” (38). The will to power reveals an abyss, a groundless chaos.

The eternal return is the Apollonian order to the Dionysian madness of the will to power. “The Eternal Return, then, is the synthesis that has the Will to Power as its principle” (*Nietzsche and Philosophy* 46). The eternal return is the organizing form of life. Beneath the chaos of forces lies an encompassing, far deeper, more impenetrable void: time. The eternal return arose out of a vision, one Nietzsche found inexpressible. It is unconvincing that the eternal return refers merely to a cyclical notion of time. This doctrine, deeply embedded in philosophy, mythology, and theology, is certainly not the hallucinatory thought that Nietzsche toils to purport. Nietzsche warns against thinking in terms of cyclical movements, referring to our astral order as an exception, fashioning instead a *style of thought* more fitting a universe of nonlinear, irregular chaos. “Those thinkers in whom all stars move in cyclic orbits are not the most profound. Whoever looks into himself as into vast space and carries galaxies in himself, also knows how irregular all galaxies are; they lead into the chaos and labyrinth of existence” (*The Gay Science* 254). Nietzsche’s riddle does not advance a theory of circular time, but multiple futures, overlapping, connected in a single present moment. When Jorge Luis Borges poetically remarks that “[t]ime forks perpetually toward innumerable futures” (29), he faithfully, accidentally, articulates the eternal return as a theory of infinite possible worlds.

Pierre Klossowski’s hypothesis is that the eternal return is the lived experience of all possible worlds. The eternal return is to live all possible experiences, to follow each divergent path produced by one’s choices. No longer do we make choices once and for all, but we live all of our choices infinitely, across multiple dimensions. “The feeling of vertigo results from the *once and for all* in which the subject is surprised by the dance of *innumerable times*: the *once-and-for-all* disappears” (72). Here, the eternal return of time moves both forward and backward, endlessly creating, destroying, and re-creating itself, like a labyrinth we have traveled through completely, every route and pathway traversed. Gilles Deleuze’s version is less esoteric and otherworldly. The eternal return displaces the three-dimensional model of time as a past, present, and future. The will cannot reverse

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the flow of time but is formed through an intensifying force. Deleuze echoes Klossowski's vertigo but offers an alternative reading: the nausea of the eternal return is experiencing all possible worlds, but only being able to choose one of them, that choice being unchangeable, decided for all time. Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche maintains an allegiance to freedom and fatalism, the once-and-for-all is the basis of the eternal return, not its disappearance. The central issue for Deleuze is the mischaracterization of the eternal return as the return of the same: the eternal return is recurring difference. "Eternal return cannot mean the return of the Identical because it presupposes a world (that of the will to power) in which all previous identities have been abolished and dissolved ... Repetition in the eternal return, therefore, consists in conceiving the same on the basis of the different" (*Difference and Repetition* 41). The metaphysics of the will to power undermines the uniformity of a recurring cycle. The eternal return is the repetition of our metaphysical reality, and our metaphysical reality is pure chaos. If "[r]eturn is the being of that which becomes" (*Nietzsche and Philosophy* 24), chaos and cycle are not in diametric opposition, but chaos, transformation, ceaseless becoming is naturalized as an eternal law. What we are becoming, we who are constantly choosing, is a one-of-a-kind endless fluctuation. Deleuze purports a repetitive present. Individuals have to decide, choosing one option, among many alternatives, forever.

What unites these two interpretations is their shared contention that Nietzsche's concept signifies the existential supposition of multiple life trajectories simultaneously. The eternal return is the culmination of Nietzsche's apocalyptic eschatology, what is to-come is a multiplicity of possible worlds, each as unthinkable as the next, the eventual survival or extinction of the species each being one variant amongst an infinite diversity of alternatives. The most important derivable lesson is ethical: whatever you will, will it in such a way that you also will its return. The eternal return of never-the-same is a disjointed cycle of chaotic forces: (1) an initial ascension, (2) pulled back down by gravity, (3) descending into a dark underworld, (4) precipitating a final ascension into a qualitatively new and different repetition of the same process. "*A thought only rises by falling, it progresses only by regressing*" (Klossowski xvii). Every ascent necessitates a subsequent descent. Escaping gravity's rainbow, requires we unchain the earth from its star, untether humanity from the galaxy. "This ascent will be betrayed to Gravity... The victim, in bondage to falling, rises on a promise, a prophecy, of Escape..." (Pynchon 774).

## § VI – A Dismal Politics for All, a Future for None

Nietzsche prefaces his philosophical system with a parable that mocks the vainglory of human achievement by invoking the inevitability of their extinction. Humanity is constituted by finitude; on a long enough time-line we are all dead. This becomes a guiding thought which is reiterated throughout the rest of Nietzsche's writings. This parable foreshadows Nietzsche's most novel concepts and focal themes. By rereading Nietzsche's philosophy in terms of his apocalyptic prophecies we gain a greater understanding of his political thought. By evoking the politics of climate change we can observe that Nietzsche provided a *style of thought* more appropriate for our contemporary moment than the political theories of his precursors or contemporaries. Humans have an invincible drive for deception. Nietzsche believed himself to be the sole representative capable of grasping and expressing a forbidden terrain. More than any other political thinker, Nietzsche establishes the stakes of a politics where the survival of the species is in question.

Nietzsche warned of the impermanence of human life. In later works, he considered the possibility that we might circumvent this tragic fate. Later still, he renounced the mere contemplation of species-extinction or preservation as a maddening thought. It is the tragedy of our day that this prophecy was heeded *too late*. Nietzsche's abject horror was the closing shut of possible horizons and the preclusion of the future. Now that the inevitability of a *coming planetary apocalypse* becomes more certain, we cannot help but welcome delusion of recovery, rescue, or escape. As the latter becomes less likely, and the former more adjacent, the futility of politics will indeed become increasingly maddening.

Industrial capitalism is the cause of the impending ecological collapse. Regrettably, as businesses have intensified their destruction of vital non-renewable resources, undermining our capacity of sustainability, they have captured control of our political institutions and made social life structurally dependent upon their goods and services. Democracies have proven themselves incapable of solving collective action problems, informing or motivating publics, responding quickly or effectively, and, it is no stretch of the imagination, will represent the biggest obstacles to the immediate, large-scale transformations needed. Again, Nancy Rosenblum establishes the political problem quite pertinently:

The existential threat of global warming is too hard to grasp, emotionally and cognitively. We in high-consumption countries are warned of catastrophe if we just keep doing what have been doing, and that the changes required go beyond energy-saving lightbulbs. Global warming undercuts foundational assumptions

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of economic growth... And the method for addressing it— ‘discounting’ —is beyond our ken.

Given the current trajectory of world history, preventing species-extinction would entail a massive transformation of values, a reconfiguration of the most basic habits of individual, social, and political life. Our enlightened liberal values (equality, democracy, liberty, the free market, bodily sovereignty, scientific progress, technological reliance, etc.) must be upended, all in the name of a nobler cause: species-preservation. Humans are incapable of the collective response necessary to prevent planetary destruction. In an avalanche every snowflake pleads not guilty! A trans-valuation of our cultural practices is a practical impossibility. Some argue that those without hope will succumb to anti-politics. This argument relies upon crude, unsubstantiated psychological assumptions and is not a political solution. The arguments summoned to combat pessimism belie the inefficacy of present-day post-democratic institutions. Our political institutions are more demons than saviors. Nietzsche’s sage Zarathustra once evoked: “On earth there is nothing greater than I: it is I who am the regulating finger of God’ – thus roareth the monster... the state, where the slow suicide of all – is called ‘life’” (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 49-50).

Nietzsche once proclaimed his destiny as a political thinker by boasting that “only with me does the earth know great politics” (*Ecce Homo* 96). The next century will not be the return of great politics, but the advent of *dismal politics*. The politics of the future will involve the scramble for and hoarding of resources, a genocidal struggle for survival, and a global diffusion of shame, misery, and blame. Gaiety, life-affirmation, and illusions of freedom will become increasing rare, and passive and reactive forms of nihilism will envelope the earth.

The realization of the coming planetary apocalypse and the dawning of dismal politics will be slow and ceaselessly questioned. Upon arrival, the frenzy will be instantaneous, erratic, and overwhelming. In the interregnum, politics will consist of the coming to terms with our dismal fate. As is fitting Nietzsche’s essential pluralism, we can delineate a series of political *character-types* which correspond to political *ideology*: the fascists, the Sisyphians, and the hermits corresponding with eco-authoritarianism, eco-socialism, and eco-nihilism. There will be sub-types and intermixing of each. The fascists of the future will not necessarily demonstrate the same xenophobic zeal. Deleuze and Guattari describe fascism as a suicidal death-drive. “There is in fascism a realized nihilism” (230). Liberals will finally achieve the end of history they have been portending. Liberals will unite with accelerationists in managing civilizational collapse. The Marxists and splinter-cells of well-intentioned technocrats will struggle against the fascists to avert, delay, or



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ameliorate the effects of the coming climate catastrophe and the disintegration of our political and economic systems. Their efforts will be in vain and their only recompense will be that they tried and tried valiantly. Though they were born defeated, those heroic fools will forever cling to the audacious hope that life will endure. The hermits will ignore the approaching peril. Religious zealots will see upheavals as signs of divine punishment or God's return. The decadent capitalists will subsist in gated communities and gaudy yachts, inventing ever-more luxuries to enjoy as the dispossessed gather at the gates. A joyous few might retreat to mountains or forests in hopes that tight-knit communities and reuniting with nature will shield them from the worst of the downfall and offer a glimmer of hope for a sustainable future. Those that hide from the coming apocalypse will laugh exuberantly, embrace innocence and irresponsibility, in the belief that the value and meaning of their lives, the *squandering* of existence, the survival of the species is not in the balance!

Nietzsche's political philosophy was always illustrated by a revolving cast of characters. It is *apropos* that each of the contemporary character-types discussed, the fascist, the Sisyphian, and the hermit, are commonly associated with Nietzsche's political thought. These archetypes eternally recur in different *milieus*. We might also recall, by way of conclusion, the prophetic ending of and motley crew inhabiting Nietzsche's earliest essay "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense." The man of action binds himself to reason so as to not be swept away by his passions. The man of science builds his hut next to the towers of science as a bulwark against frightful powers. The scientist, equated with modern life, are conscious and aware of the world, diagnosing its patterns, but are no more woke or satisfied than those overcome by their fantasies. The intuitive man, associated with an ancient way of life, is filled with vigor, happiness, but also suffering. The rational man is indifferent and stoical. Nietzsche concluded his essay with the enigmatic parable: "When a real storm cloud thunders above him, he [the rational, stoic man] wraps himself in his cloak, and with slow steps he walks from beneath it" (46). A storm is blowing from paradise, there are no angels to witness, no Gods to save us, no cloaks to cover us, or paths where we might escape the coming catastrophe.

*There is a Hand to turn the time  
Though thy Glass today be run*

-Thomas Pynchon (*Gravity's Rainbow* 776)

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