
Affective Aporetics: Complementary Contradictions in the Interpretation of Friedrich Nietzsche

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The counter-thrust brings together, and from tones at variance comes perfect attunement, and all things come to pass through conflict. (Heraclitus, Fragment §8)

In 1971, Wolfgang Müller-Lauter introduced his study of Nietzsche as an investigation into the history of modern nihilism in which “contradiction” forms the central thread of the argument.¹ While there are indeed significant contradictions in Nietzsche’s work as a whole, Müller-Lauter claimed, these tensions relate to and reflect what Nietzsche believes is “contradictory” in the modern experience of existence. For Müller-Lauter, the interpretive task, as such, is not to demonstrate the overall coherence or incoherence of Nietzsche’s philosophy, but rather to examine Nietzsche’s “philosophy of contradiction” (5). Against those such as Karl Jaspers, Karl Löwith, and Martin Heidegger, Müller-Lauter argued that contradiction is the foundation of Nietzsche’s thought, and not a problem to be corrected or cast aside for exegetical or political purposes. For Müller-Lauter, contradiction *qua* incompatibility (not just mere opposition) holds a key to Nietzsche’s affective vision of philosophy; contradiction becomes a vital theatre of operation by providing the violent tension of forces necessary for growth and generation.

For Nietzsche, the whole of reality is determined from the outset by the ‘struggle’ of opposites ... His goal, to be sure, is to synthesize things that stand in a peculiar relation by

their very opposition. But again and again what Nietzsche tries to articulate into a unity ultimately breaks apart. (5)

Oppositions, in other words, “belong together as complementary”; the task of a Nietzschean philosophy of contradiction would be to promote contradiction “toward emergence of the *highest man*” (Müller-Lauter 7).

In this paper, beginning with the relationship between will to power and eternal recurrence, I examine aspects of Müller-Lauter’s account of Nietzsche’s philosophy of contradiction specifically in relation to the counter-interpretations offered by two other German commentators of Nietzsche—Leo Strauss and Karl Löwith—in order to confirm Müller-Lauter’s suggestion that contradiction is indeed an operative engine of Nietzsche’s thought.² Indeed, contradiction is a key Nietzschean theme and an important dynamic of becoming that enables the subject to be revealed as a “multiplicity” (*BGE* §12) and a “fiction” (*KSA* 12:9[91]). Following Müller-Lauter’s assertion that for Nietzsche the problem of nihilism is fundamentally synonymous with the struggle of contradiction experienced by will to power (5), this paper interprets Nietzsche’s philosophy of contradiction in terms of subjective, bodily life, rather than in terms of logical incoherencies or ontological inconsistencies. I will argue that against the backdrop of nihilism, the “self” (and its related placeholder the “subject”) becomes the psycho-physiological battle-space for the struggle and articulation of contradiction in Nietzsche’s thought.

As I will attempt to chart in the following pages, the intensification of nihilism (a process of decadence and degeneration) will be forced to play out on the plane of the subject, which Nietzsche, broadly speaking, conceptualizes as the deployment of “instincts” in the physical and metaphysical evolution of the human willing animal. The body—and “soul” for that matter—

becomes the landscape and theatre of the war both of and for the instincts. The affirmation and *not* the resolution of contradiction at all levels of reality both dissolves and transforms the human organism in fundamental ways, translating it anew. In this process of “translation” (*BGE* §230), the “self” is played out to its finality and overcome, becoming the battleground for the dramatization and exhaustion of the human animal and its ideals. For Nietzsche, the problem of nihilism becomes inextricably intertwined with the problem of willing to such an extent that the overcoming of nihilism will require the vigilant and violent dissolution of the willing ego *and* the affirmation of non-willing. “Let us think this thought in its most terrible form: existence as it is, without sense or aim, but inevitably returning, without a finale in nothingness: ‘the eternal return’” (*TNR* 386, see also *KSA* 12:5[71]).

For interpreters such as Karl Löwith, the paradox of willing the non-willed could not be made coherent in Nietzsche’s thought; the contradiction is, in the final analysis, too contradictory. Yet, if we agree with Müller-Lauter that contradiction must be affirmed rather than annulled or resolved in Nietzsche’s thought, then it becomes possible to re-interpret this seeming impasse as, for example, interpreted by Löwith. Through the dramatization of contradiction *qua* strife at the level of bodily, organic, psycho-physiological existence, Nietzsche prepares the political and philosophical “prelude” for a “philosophy of the future” which initializes the metamorphosis of the animal human into the Overhuman (*Übermensch*). I conclude with the idea that contradiction is in fact the operative dynamic of Nietzsche’s thought and far from being a return to some authentic or original state, the eternal recurrence can be understood as a dynamic and violent process of individuation in which the human animal literally undergoes a psycho-physiological mutation, a playing-out that leads both to the death of

one form of existence, and to what Nietzsche hopes is the genesis of a new *übermenschlich* configuration of self-organization.

Let us begin by posing the problem of will to power and eternal recurrence. Among modern German interpreters of Nietzsche—in particular, Leo Strauss, Karl Löwith, and Wolfgang Müller-Lauter—the question of contradiction (and the extent to which it compromises Nietzsche’s philosophy as a whole) has revolved around reconciling the logical tension between the two central concepts of Nietzsche’s thought: will to power and eternal recurrence. For Strauss, Löwith, and Müller-Lauter (to name only a few of the German interpreters interested in this question), the tension between these two concepts mirrors the tension, more broadly, between Nietzsche’s “negative” or “critical” philosophy on the one hand which requires the smashing of idols (e.g., the devaluation of all current ideals and values), and his “affirmative” philosophy on the other which necessarily entails the acceptance of all ideals and values. Articulated within this overarching framework, Strauss, Löwith, and Müller-Lauter all examined the extent to which the project and path of “nay-saying” could be reconciled with its opposite, the eternal affirmation of all things. As I will show, each interpreter gave a different answer.

Recall that for Nietzsche every form of morality places restrictions and constraints on a culture insofar as the cultivation of a new perspective of life requires an organized and organizing system of behaviour. Essential to the task of legislating, then, is the imposition and usurpation of one perspective over others, which necessarily involves selection and exclusion. If, however, all perspectives are selections that necessarily include and exclude material, then how can we understand Nietzsche’s claim that the highest type is one who says “Yes” to all things? The problematic to emerge from Nietzsche’s perspectivism concerns the seeming antithesis between the equally important projects of critical or negative philosophy (“nay-saying”) and of

affirmative philosophy (“yes-saying”). For all three German commentators—despite their interpretive agreements and disagreements—a key to uncovering the relationship between will to power and eternal recurrence involves understanding the correspondence between negation and affirmation, and even more importantly in coming to terms with how the highest type engages in both “nay-saying” and “yes-saying.”

According to Strauss, there is a danger inherent in Nietzsche’s definition of will to power itself which leads to an explicit renunciation of the very notion of eternity. Understood within the important context and role played by “nihilism” in Nietzsche’s thought (e.g., the devaluation of current historical values), Strauss (following Heidegger) maintains that will to power becomes interpretable almost entirely within the terms of Nietzsche’s “negative” or “critical” philosophy, which privileges the capacity and imperative of human willing to negate decadent and nihilistic values through a historical process in which man seeks to become “master and owner of nature” (*WIPP* 55). Negation and negative philosophy involve primarily mastering nature and, “as the act of the highest form of man’s will to power, the *Vernatürlichung* of man, is at the same time the peak of the anthropomorphization of the non-human, for the most spiritual will to power consists in prescribing to nature what or how it ought to be” (Strauss, *SPPP* 189). Hence, “modern thought reaches its culmination, its highest self-consciousness, in the most radical historicisms, i.e., in explicitly condemning to oblivion the notion of eternity” (Strauss, *WIPP* 55). As I will explain below, Strauss’s corrective to this seeming anti-thesis between the radical historicity entailed by will to power and “eternity” will consist in his attempt to argue that the doctrine of eternal recurrence emerges naturally from the historical devaluation undertaken by the will to power.³

According to Karl Löwith, the inherent meaninglessness of Nietzsche's cosmological view of eternal recurrence clashes with the imperative of will to power to create meaning in the world. On the one hand, Nietzsche conceives of eternal recurrence from a physical and cosmological perspective in which eternity is characterized as the relation of forces inherent in nature (Dionysian "flux," in other words). From this cosmological perspective, all activities of *anthropos* are ultimately returned to the goal-less, valueless, and meaningless recursivity of all phenomena. On the other hand, Nietzsche conceives of eternal recurrence as a superabundant act of the will that gives to humanity a new goal, a "new categorical imperative": "live in every moment so that you *could* will that moment back over and over endlessly" (Löwith xxv). Löwith contends that a dualism emerges in Nietzsche's work which poses the following quandary: how can (and why should) one will what must necessarily happen anyway? He asserts that the question remains speculatively (and therefore logically) unanswerable, and thus locates an irreconcilable paradox between Nietzsche's elaboration of the will to power and eternal recurrence, one that ultimately destroys any possible unity between the two concepts.⁴

According to Müller-Lauter, whose interpretation is both distinct from that of Strauss (e.g., will to power and eternal recurrence are unified) and of Löwith (e.g., will to power and eternal recurrence, despite Nietzsche's intentions, are irreconcilable), the impulsional body is the nexus or complex of hidden events of which the historical conflict between various states of will to power are configurations and dramatizations:

The resulting conflict of the drives or forces is thus the condition of all events. This conflict can never come to a standstill, "for every drive also incites its counterdrive" ... Each of these drives feels itself impeded or promoted, flattered, with regard to every other one; each has its own law of development (its rise and decline, its tempo, etc.) ... In their "For or Against" (*WP* §481), in "the competition between affects" (*WP* §618), alliances form and break apart again; rulers replace one another; the subject-point leaps around. (13)⁵

Müller-Lauter here focuses on what French interpreters of Nietzsche (Bataille, Klossowski, Foucault, Deleuze, to name a few) have tended to emphasize most vigorously: subjectivity, identity, self-consciousness are all epiphenomena of a more fundamental, “pre-individual” procession of disparate events held together by “the antagonism of a multiplicity of forces” (12-13). In this sense, the body is already a kind of “social structure composed of many souls” (*BGE* §19), and always an ongoing procedure of contestation and codification: it is a conflict between impulses that impose themselves on other impulses and out of which emerges a feeling of the “self” that becomes conscious and then codified and communicated through language. This “body politic” is the material upon which the various expressions of self-organizing organic processes coalesce, including the organization of the differing intensities of drives, and their multiform translation in cultural, social, historical values and institutions.

Müller-Lauter goes on to make an observation concerning the tension between Nietzsche’s philosophies of negation and affirmation. According to him, Nietzsche’s description of the most extreme form of nihilism contains two incompatible goals and thus reflects two incompatible human natures, leading to two distinctly separate lines of development for the highest type: on the one hand, greatness consists in “philosophizing with a hammer,” which is constituted primarily by the absolutization of one’s perspective against all other ideals. On the other hand, greatness consists in the unrestricted acceptance of all ideals; far from requiring negation (that is, selection and exclusion), this affirmation necessitates the unmitigated recognition of all perspectives. The tension between both visions of the Overhuman is expressly characterized as the antithesis between two subjective dispositions: one, in its preoccupation with achieving and maintaining strength, wants not to acknowledge ideals different from its own; the

other, in its ability to assimilate all counter-ideals, does not resist any knowledge. The strong type is characterized by negation, and the wise type by affirmation.⁶

Müller-Lauter's examination tackles the tension between Nietzsche's philosophies of negation and affirmation with an examination of will to power, understood as the subjective characteristics or dispositions necessary to accomplish the overcoming of nihilism. He argues that Nietzsche's emphasis on "perspectivism" as the basic condition of all life (*BGE* Preface) establishes that will to power in all existence—not simply in that of man—perceives the world from its own viewpoint: "there is nothing beyond 'the totality' of the differently construing power-centers" (Müller-Lauter 62).⁷ Once this perspectivism is connected to the idea that there are "many kinds of 'truths'," and consequently that there is "no truth" (*KSA* 11:34[230]), the history of morality turns against itself and leads to nihilism (while simultaneously discovering that nihilism was always at the heart of the moral impulse). The result, contends Müller-Lauter, is that all values and ideals associated with morality are devaluated and ultimately destroyed. Thus the overcoming of nihilism and of morality overturn the historical conquest of the weak and inaugurate the dominion of the strong individual (Müller-Lauter 64-5). The strong individual exerts his power as a "breeding agent"; his will effects the "strengthening of the strong," while simultaneously shows itself to be "paralyzing and destructive for the world-weary" (*KSA* 11:25[211]).⁸ By living through the "whole of nihilism to the end," the strong willed individual—"the perfect nihilist"—will leave nihilism behind, "outside himself" (*KSA* 12:10[192]). Müller-Lauter points to Nietzsche's claim that the overcoming of nihilism will lead to the condition in which "pleasure in saying No and doing No" will emanate from "a tremendous strength and tension derived from saying Yes" (*KSA* 13:11[228]). Ultimately,

Müller-Lauter finds a fundamental and necessary tension between the two versions or visions of the Nietzschean Overhuman:

Neither the multiplicity of names intended to suggest that there are *many forms* of ascendant humanity, nor the unity of the goal aspired to of producing the Overman, can hide the fact that in Nietzsche's portrayals *two different tendencies* are locked in conflict, mirroring the incompatibility of their contradictory natures. (73)

To "philosophize with a hammer" connotes the subjective disposition of the commander-legislator who must direct "the will of millennia by giving direction to the highest natures" (KSA 11:25[355]) and determine the frontier of possibilities within which his own ideals will exist and rule. Yet the other subjective disposition oriented toward wisdom consists in the unrestricted acceptance of all that is and was; far from requiring negation, this affirmation necessitates the recognition of all other ideals. While both types are concerned with power, the wise type necessarily loses power the more he affirms and absorbs conflicting counter-ideals, rendering him "terribly delicate and fragile" (KSA 10:39[7]). The more manifold he is, the more fragmented and precarious his self-integration becomes (Müller-Lauter 75, 77). The ramification of this tension for Nietzsche's vision of the "future philosopher" is that "if one of the two modes of behavior overcomes the other, the result is either rigidity or the loss of self in the multiplicity of what could become real" (Müller-Lauter 70).

Although Müller-Lauter acknowledges that Nietzsche intends these two antithetical dispositions to be constitutive of the highest type, the solution to the question of exactly how both strength and wisdom can simultaneously lead to the increase of power remains unanswered. Müller-Lauter therefore concludes that it is not possible to bring these two antithetical elements of will to power into successive historical sequence. "The fact remains that the great man is strong or wise. Only *alternation* of the two types of greatness could perhaps be made plausible in

this way, but not their approximation, not to mention their amalgamation” (Müller-Lauter 78). From this, he reasons that the doctrine of eternal recurrence cannot be obtained from the characteristics of the violent or strong Overhuman but rather follows logically from the manifoldness and “radical self-understanding” of the synthesizing wise type (Müller-Lauter 86). In the final analysis, he acknowledges that although Nietzsche’s belief is that when pushed to the extreme, both forms of Overhuman will converge into one, both remain irretrievably separate to the extent that the meaning of the eternal recurrence “remains insurmountably split into a duality” (Müller-Lauter 121).

As distinct from Löwith’s critical conclusion that duality irremediably splits Nietzsche’s thought in two (which he considers a kind failure and perhaps a sign of “willing abdication” on Nietzsche’s part),⁹ in Müller-Lauter’s framework (which concludes with a study of experimental embryologist Wilhelm Roux’s influence on Nietzsche), we see that Nietzsche’s “philosophy of contradiction” becomes emblematic of an inner psycho-physiological struggle which is continuously ongoing in the developmental mechanics of all organic life. Contradiction becomes the necessary motor of “nature” (or becoming) not only at the cellular level of organic evolution (i.e., Roux’s work aimed to demonstrate that Darwinian evolution operated at the cellular level), but also on the pre-individual, bodily, proto-subjective plane of what I have here called a war of and for the instincts. Müller-Lauter’s conclusion that “two different tendencies” are “locked in conflict, mirroring the incompatibility of their contradictory natures” and consigned to “alternation” rather than “approximation” or “amalgamation,”¹⁰ helps to establish that not only are will to power and eternal recurrence mutually implicative concepts, but also intensive and immanent ones¹¹ in that their contradiction produces tensions that are actively embodied by

subjects that are in the process of becoming.¹² In this sense, the dynamics of ongoing contradiction would be necessary to this metamorphosis of bodily states.

Of the contemporary interpreters that acknowledge the centrality of bodily metamorphosis in Nietzsche's thought, Robert Gooding-Williams clearly articulates the connection between the philosopher's ability to create new values and the crucial experience of bodily transformation that is a precondition for the transvaluation of values.¹³ Pointing to Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* and *Untimely Meditations*, Gooding-Williams argues that although Nietzsche had envisioned in these earlier works the possibility of a Dionysian renewal in modernity through various media, for example the German nation, the later philosophy confronts a contradiction between the identity-less, boundary-less ephemerality of the Dionysian experience as outlined in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and the necessary national delineation of a German identity required to reclaim modern European culture (as developed in *Beyond Good and Evil* and later; 104). As a result, a conceptual shift takes place and Nietzsche comes to believe that new-values creation finds its origin in the bodily Dionysian experience of "going-under" in *Zarathustra*.

The body's psycho-physiological dynamics become the emblem for Nietzsche's polemics of contradiction, as well as the will to power's dramatization of conflict, destruction, and generation in the theatre of life. Cultural innovation in modernity—the path through which Dionysus can enter the modern world—is now rooted in the body that "goes under" rather than in the German nation.¹⁴ Zarathustra regards all values as narrative interpretations or "parables" that record the history of bodily states of elevation (Gooding-Williams 118-9); in particular, Platonic-Christian values represent the bodily history of the ascetic ideal (the extirpation of passions).¹⁵ Gooding-Williams' point is that the possibility of the creation of new values—and

therefore the overcoming of Platonic-Christian values—will require the transformation of the states of the body: the creation of new values cannot be effected apart from self-overcoming as the creation of new selves, that is, of new bodily states of elevation (Gooding-Williams 119). The paramount importance of *Zarathustra* emerges from this presumption: that the eternal recurrence becomes the crucible of all Nietzsche's hopes for genuine philosophy; more pointedly, the eternal recurrence holds the key to what Nietzsche considers to be the only possibility for creating (and thus redeeming) the future of humanity.

When read in tandem with the "Three Metamorphoses" in *Zarathustra*, the Overhuman's task does seem to include both negation and affirmation, namely in terms of the metamorphosis from the bodily states or stages of the "Thou shalt," to the "I will," and finally to the "I am" (Part I). The three metamorphoses refer to the three states or stages that must be crossed on the way to the Overhuman: the camel, the lion, and the child. The camel represents the stage of asceticism in which the spirit is sufficiently free to be dissatisfied with the present conditions of the world. In the second stage, the lion represents the overcoming of the camel's dependence on moral values; but the lion, in its attempt to say "I will," must still contend with the dragon "Thou shalt," the moral law. The lion overcomes the camel not only by seeking freedom, but also by creating a freedom of the spirit through the exercise of that scepticism necessary for the devaluation of all previous moral values (the sacred "No"). The lion is not yet capable of transvaluation, and must himself be overcome by the third and final stage, the sacred "Yes-saying" of the child.

The various stages of this philosophical (psycho-physiological) metamorphosis may help to elucidate the philosopher's relationship to the seemingly antithetical tasks of negation and affirmation. In the first camel-dragon stage, the devaluation of current historical values will

entail that the philosopher engage in a nomothetic political project in which the highest values of society are selected, bred, and reproduced. But by itself, negation only involves the exercise of the nay-saying hammer by the strong and mighty type; therefore to reach the final stage of affirmation (the sacred “Yes”), the strong man must also become the wise man. Müller-Lauter admits that Nietzsche intends for this transformation to occur:

The two incompatible factors rely on each other. The strong man can only remain strong and become stronger if he becomes the wise man who not only has the multifarious contradictions outside himself but assimilates them into himself. And the wise man will be lost in the perspectival contradictions and suffer losses in form and strength, if he does not commit himself to the exclusive guidance of the *one* ideal. (77)

Decidedly contrary to the positions of both Löwith and Müller-Lauter, Strauss, by juxtaposing Nietzsche and Plato, suggests that at the peak, affirmation emerges naturally from out of negation through the philosopher’s love for eternity, the source out of which affirmation necessarily arises found in the innermost depths of the philosopher’s soul. Love vindicates negation and again becomes the guiding light of philosophy: the negation of life that was a by-product of critical philosophy is ultimately vindicated by the philosopher’s most profound love. Strauss concludes from this that the notion of eternal recurrence emerges naturally from the doctrine of will to power. According to Strauss’s *Note to A Plan of Good and Evil*, love of eternity as the tragic *fatum* of man unifies negation and affirmation, such that “the doctrine of the will to power is a vindication of God, if a decidedly non-theistic vindication of God” (195). Thus, as Lampert claims in his reading of Strauss,

eternal return belongs to Nietzsche’s thought as its affirmative culmination: life is lovable as it is. Strauss’s little essay depicts that inner logic of love in his own chosen sobriety, with constant reference to philosophy’s other great erotic, Plato. Is Nietzsche’s thought a relapse into Platonism? Philosophy cannot avoid such a relapse. Philosophy is a lover’s passion for the greatest of beloveds. (56)

Love, of the Nietzschean kind (which Strauss in this essay juxtaposes with Platonic love), embodied in the philosopher of the future *qua* “complementary man” (the one in whom contradiction and cruelty is spiritualized), in whom the rest of existence is justified (*BGE* §207), reconciles the negation of nature and its highest affirmation.

But unlike Müller-Lauter’s suggestion that even this synthesis must necessarily break apart, the emphasis of Strauss’s interpretation is on elucidating Nietzsche’s claim that “noble nature replaces divine nature” (190-1).¹⁶ While Strauss admits that “the philosopher as philosopher belongs to the future and was therefore at all times in contradiction to his Today,” the philosopher as “complementary man” is one in whom the tension between the radical scepticism of will to power and the affirmation of eternity is reconciled (Strauss, *SPPP* 200). As a culmination of the historical process, the innermost nature of the philosopher is also revealed to be, in itself, an affirmation of nature.¹⁷ We might understand the process by which this happens as follows: the ascent up the pyramid of social existence necessitates a complete abjection of all matters related to eternity in order for the philosopher to free his will from all dogma. And yet, once the will has rid itself of all faith in dogma, in order not to fall back into a nihilism of the will (willing nothingness), the will must show its ultimate strength in an act of willing in the absence of all negation and negatives: willing as affirmation. In other words, the will for the first time wills actively rather than reactively (that is to say, against other counter-ideals): “the *Vernatürlichung* of man presupposes and bring to its conclusion the whole historical process—a completion which is by no means necessary but requires a new, free creative act. Still, in this way history can be said to be integrated into nature” (Strauss, *SPPP* 189).

Although Strauss takes pains to distinguish Nietzsche's conception of love and truth from that of Plato, his argument hinges on the suggestion that it is indeed Platonic love that may be the ghost in the Nietzschean machine (so to speak):

Is beloved eternity divine merely because it is beloved? If we were to say that it must be in itself lovable, in order to deserve to be loved, would we not become guilty of a relapse into Platonism, into the teaching of the "good in itself"? But can we avoid such a relapse altogether? (*SPPP* 195)

Strauss will show in his reading that if the entirety of *Beyond Good and Evil* was, as Nietzsche stated, a great project of "nay-saying," that in the final moment, as man stands at and embodies the peak of the pyramid, he will have to finally say "Yes"—an "unbounded Yes to everything that was and is, i.e., the affirmation of eternal return" (*SPPP* 199, 203). The "complementary" nature of the philosopher reflects Strauss's conclusion that it is in the philosopher's willing of eternal recurrence that the rift between philosophy and religion is healed. According to Strauss then, Nietzsche rightly reveals that in the nobility of the philosopher—the complementary man—"philosophy and religion, it seems belong together—belong more closely than philosophy and the city" (*SPPP* 190).

What Strauss misses between his account of the radical historicity required by the ascent of the philosopher (which amounts to an oblivion of eternity) and the teaching of the eternal recurrence that emerges from it, is an explanation of the crucial role of self-sacrifice in the teaching of the Overhuman. Quite contrary to Strauss's assertion that "Nietzsche does not mean to sacrifice God for the sake of the Nothing" (*SPPP* 194) the willing of nothingness is the precondition for the teaching of eternal recurrence because, as Löwith remarks, "only the man who has overcome himself can also will the eternal recurrence of all that is" (55). The thought of the eternal recurrence that arises from thinking pessimism to the depths leads to the most life-

denying possibility thus envisaged by the philosopher: the temptation to self-destruction; “[t]he search for self-eternalization is in a perverse way at one with the temptation to self-destruction” (Löwith 58). The completion of the project of nihilism as such seems to require the self-sacrifice of the philosopher to the most extreme form of nihilism, a bodily battle in which the instincts struggle against one another to the threshold of transmutation.

With the death of God, the devaluation of current historical values will lead the philosopher to a historical impasse: a moment will come in which the task of negation will itself require that the philosopher negate himself and his own ideal. At the “peak,” the philosopher’s transmutation from strong to wise necessitates a deadly experimentation with the most abysmal thought: “What Zarathustra ‘knows’ but cannot will is that one can voluntarily destroy one’s existence; whereas later, in the sight of life, he knows that life recurs precisely in sacrifice” (Löwith 67). This is the philosopher’s sacrifice, and it is consistent with Zarathustra’s explanation that in order to climb upward, the philosopher must necessarily experience “going under.”¹⁸ In his climb up the mountain, Zarathustra realizes that

in the end, one experiences only oneself ... I stand before my final peak now and before that which has been saved for me the longest. Alas, now I must face my hardest path! ... But whoever is of my kind cannot escape such an hour—the hour which says to him: “only now are you going your way to greatness! Peak and abyss—they are now joined together” ... “And if you now lack all ladders, then you must know how to climb on your own head” ... “Before my highest mountain I stand and before my longest wandering; to that end I must first go down deeper than ever I descended.” (Nietzsche, *TSZ II*)

Löwith contends that it is the sacrificial core of the teaching of the Overhuman that catalyzes the transformation between nihilism and the redemption of life. At the pinnacle, the “strong” type would need to will the dissolution of his own will to power. In this regard, Nietzsche, according to Löwith, thinks through the same existential question posed by those such as Kierkegaard (e.g. “to be or not to be,” 157). The general intention to kill oneself, however, is

not what Nietzsche means by “free death.” Freedom toward death as the necessary criteria for willing the overcoming of nihilism is only available to the one who has first travelled the path of negative philosophy, the one who has already destroyed all faith and belief in present human morality. In this terrifying prospect, the philosopher, by fulfilling the task of negation to its most extreme conclusion simultaneously affirms the nothingness left in its wake. Negation thus gives birth to the most profound affirmation of nihilism, through which, finally, the philosopher is able to overcome nihilism and thereby undergo the transformation from strong to wise. Nietzsche himself points to this inevitability:

Such an experimental philosophy as I live anticipates experimentally even the possibilities of the most fundamental nihilism; but this does not mean that it must halt at a negation, a No, a will to negation. It wants rather to cross over to the opposite of this—to a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception or selection—it wants the eternal circulation—the same things, the same logic and illogic of entanglements. The highest state a philosopher can attain: to stand in a Dionysian relationship to existence—my formula for this is *amor fati*. (KSA 12:10[3], 13:16[32])

But unlike Strauss for whom Nietzschean love converges with Platonic love, for Löwith, the sacrificial core of the teaching of the Overhuman ultimately confines Nietzsche’s conception of the will to the very Christian source he wishes to eliminate. Löwith ultimately finds Nietzsche’s thought of eternal recurrence unsuccessful because it splits “the world of becoming and the world of Being” into two extreme divergences that cannot be logically co-existent (170).

What is identified as an irreparable duality in Nietzsche’s thought by Löwith, when translated into the terms of Müller-Lauter’s framework of contradiction, can be interpreted as the necessary conflict between will to power and eternal recurrence that is fundamentally dramatized as the war of bodily, subjective instincts. As part of this violent playing-out, the most active expression of human will to power consists in the paradoxical affirmation of non-willing (and the concomitant assassination of the very will to power in question). From contradiction emerges the

possibility of metamorphosis which, on the one hand will entail the destruction (dissolution) of the present subject-point, and on the other hand will generate a new network of instincts and existents. The extent to which an organism can endure such metamorphosis will serve to distinguish the merely higher types from the highest, or more precisely, the “human-all-too-human,” from the “Overhuman.” In the final portion of this discussion, I will re-construct the process by which this metamorphosis might be initialized.

As Nietzsche recounts in *The Genealogy of Morals*, the political and historical problem of nihilism becomes intensified and reified in modernity as the problem of willing (*GM III* 28), which subsequently becomes the hallmark of the human, and in due course becomes a symptom of its decadence as well as the active battleground for its overcoming. If for Nietzsche nihilism is a situation in which the will is at its most decadent (the “unhealthy” body according to Zarathustra) and thereby unable to interpretively and sensuously orient or relate itself to the world, it is also the situation in which the will renders its ability to experience the world impotent by projecting its hopes into a “beyond” that cannot materially be experienced by the body. One of the most nihilistic features of Christian morality is the erroneous belief that “death” (tied to the belief in the resurrection of the body) can be experienced and can therefore redeem life. This metaphysical abstraction strips the will of its *raison d’être* and also deprives the active will of fulfilling its function of integrating the various drives that make up the healthy body. By placing all its hope in an abstract existence of life after death (the eternal life promised by the Christian god) which cannot possibly be an experience of will to power, the Christian will deprives itself of the very essence of human existence, that is, the will’s activity of experiencing and creating meaning in this world (*AC* §43).

The development and intensification of nihilism—because of its inherent contradictoriness—increases the tension between systems of valuation and modern lived experience to such an extent that it also potentially prepares the way for its own overcoming. Nietzsche suggests that the most spiritual men of this age—those “higher” types—will engage in the project of exposing the contradictions of nihilism precisely by carrying out the very impulses of nihilism, bringing the latter to its conclusion. Nietzsche here hints at the important connection between the development of nihilism, its overcoming, and the project of negation taken on by those individuals of rare spiritual strength. The strong type who engages in and perhaps even strives to complete the project of negative philosophy is still complicit with nihilism. But this implication with nihilism does not lessen the great task of the strongest type who must, in a real sense, complete the task of negative philosophy by finally completing the trajectory inaugurated by the Christian will to truth. The ramification is that the will to truth of Christian morality leads not only to the murder of God, but also necessitates the murder of the will itself. In this scenario, the dissolution of the decadent will reunites bodily existence with its instinctive and heterogeneous—hence Dionysian—vital force. For Nietzsche, this is precisely what the Christian, who would rather will nothingness than not will at all, is unable to will. The completion of Christian morality is, paradoxically, the death of the will itself; Nietzsche recognizes that the death of the will, the most extreme conclusion of the nihilistic Christian will to truth, is also the moment of consummation and purgation of nihilism (*KSA* 13:14[9]). Unless this is recognized as the fundamental contradiction of European nihilism (that the will to truth leads to the annihilation and purification of the will), no new values that are free from the effects of nihilism are possible.

How does the step to annihilate the will lead to a translation back into life (contrary to Löwith's assertion)? And how does contradiction bring about a metamorphosis? If we agree that Löwith is correct in his assertion that a crucial step would have to be to "will the dissolution of the will," then this step also reveals an antinomy: the completion of the project of negation—the last step of logical world-denial—would also require negation of the "will to the dissolution of the will."¹⁹ This is the paradoxical historical moment of correspondence between radical negation or scepticism (in the act of willing the eradication of the will) and the radical negation of negation (the last step of logical world-denial is the negation of the will to eradicate the will) that could catalyze metamorphosis. Precisely at the moment in which the philosopher makes the most fundamental existential commitment to "will the dissolution of his own will" as the necessary task to complete the project of negative philosophy, an antinomy surfaces that this self-sacrifice (this will to deny life) itself requires negation. The consequence of the antinomy is a psycho-physiological transmutation (rather than simply a "thought-experiment"). The experience of this antinomy is, I suggest, the experience of eternal recurrence.

According to many French interpretations of Nietzsche, the experience of eternal recurrence is not simply a releasing of the "pleasure principle" but the terrifying transgression of the boundary delimiting a "normal" state from a pathological one.²⁰ George Bataille calls this antinomic moment the experience of an "extreme limit" and an inner collapse, the moment in which the salvation (*qua* metaphysical solace) promised by self-sacrifice turns into its opposite, the profound recognition of the absence of salvation (27). According to Bataille,

the putting to death of God is a sacrifice which, making me tremble, allows me yet to laugh, for, in it, I succumb no less than the victim (whereas the sacrifice of Man saved). In fact, what succumbs with God, with me, is the bad conscience which those who sacrificed had in turning away from sacrifice. (154)

The experience of the emergent antinomy is suffered by the philosopher as a profound and abysmal moment of crisis. As Bataille understands it, it is fatal: it signals the “death” of ego identity (the “bad conscience”), but also the inevitability of life. This experience of the absence of salvation results in a justification that is at once an affirmation of the sacred and the profane. What is revealed in this crisis of will (both the negation and the negation of negation) is that life is eternally accepting in its infinite endurance: even when one has lost one’s “self” and one’s “God,” life is inexhaustibly affirmative, it exists, persists.

We might say that for Nietzsche, the love of eternity arises from this: life wills man. The man who experiences eternal recurrence loves life only because he experiences life’s love, the profoundly inexhaustible, heterogeneous, and dynamic forces of will to power. “‘Loving’ the absolute or fatal necessity is no longer a willing but—judged by willing—a willingness that no longer wills anything, in which willing as such is abolished” (Löwith 79). At the sacrificial altar (which is also a crossroad or crucifix), both Jesus and Zarathustra are engulfed by the terrible truth of the abyss; here, *eros* and *thanatos* (love and death) must collide resulting in the temporary dissipation of the personal will within the becoming of life. In the attempt to complete negative philosophy, the philosopher experiences the inexhaustibility of the will to power by way of the temptation to annihilation, thereby experiencing the inexhaustible flux of existing. The teaching of the Overhuman consists in the generative contradiction in which one wills one’s annihilation and is thereby shown that even beyond willing, the will to power—life itself—can never be annihilated. Nothingness can never triumph because something will always exist in opposition, and this something (which reveals itself as the negation of willing one’s death) is what Nietzsche calls will to power. Willing the dissolution of the will—that is, willing death—cannot be the antithesis of life, for life has no antithesis. This is the fundamentally new creative

moment to emerge in the post-nihilistic history of Western humanity: the overcoming of Christian morality is revealed in the affirmation of a new valuation of sensuous eternally-earthly existence. Willing death is revealed, for the first time, as practically and theoretically untenable because death cannot be experienced (it is a cessation of the individual's will to power, but not of the will to power of all life). Death is an abstraction because only life can be experienced.

For Nietzsche, I would conclude, this is the consequence of the experience of eternal recurrence that initiates the genesis of a truly new subjective disposition, the transmutation of the strong man into the wise (to use Müller-Lauter's categories) or the *Übermensch*. What is revealed in this experience of negating the "willing of the dissolution of the will" is Nietzsche's most profound faith in and hope for the possibility of affirming existence: nihilism—the belief in the "nothingness" of existence—is fundamentally and ultimately untenable. In the negation of the highest individual's last will to annihilate his own will (his own life) emerges the realization of the eternal inexhaustibility of life as will to power.

Notes

¹ The author would like to thank the editors of *PhaenEx*, especially Chloë Taylor, Tracey Nicholls, and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive and instructive comments, as well as Dan Mellamphy for his suggestions on the title and the fragment from Heraclitus found at the beginning of this paper.

² The present argument is part of a larger work in which I explore these questions in considerable detail. See *The Three Stigmata of Friedrich Nietzsche: Political Physiology in the Age of Nihilism*. Palgrave: Macmillan, 2011.

³ See Strauss and Lampert.

⁴ As Löwith notes "The tension and the contradiction within this postulated correspondence between the finite existence of the willing man and the eternal Being of the world that wills itself produce the problematic conflict in the willing of the eternal recurrence. Only within this *conflicting* correspondence can Nietzsche on the one hand think that man moves the whole of

nature if he is completely mankind, and on the other hand adhere to the view that in the whole of what is, man is a mere “accident” and altogether a natural fatality. Or, summarized in a single sentence of two words, “*ego-fate*,” namely the fate of the eternal recurrence. This sentence, too, on being unfolded, signifies something twofold, conflicting, and self-contradictory: ... Put in moral terms: I am responsible for everything’s being there and being as it is, and there is no being there that would be responsible for its being as it is and its being there. The contradiction between both sets of assertions could only be nullified and brought to a non-contradictory correspondence if Nietzsche succeeded in flying beyond all going, going over, and going under, into the innocence of heaven. (191-2)

⁵ The English translation of Müller-Lauter’s book makes use of the controversial *Will to Power* edition. The concordance respectively is: KSA 12:7[60] and KSA 11:36[34].

⁶ See especially chapters 6 and 7 of Müller-Lauter.

⁷ Cf. KSA 13:14[184].

⁸ Cf. Müller-Lauter 64-5.

⁹ Löwith ends his book with the following passage: “Nietzsche wanted to have no mere disciples for his questionable teaching of the eternal recurrence, which aimed at a ‘*kosmos anthropos*.’ He knew he was only a ‘railing by the stream,’ but no ‘crutch’ on which one could support oneself ... what Zarathustra says at the end of the first part of *Zarathustra* and also uses as the motto for the second Part: ‘One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil’ ... Nothing is more human in Nietzsche’s superhuman claim than this willing abdication for the benefit of a wiser and older man.” (192)

¹⁰ See Müller-Lauter 73, 78.

¹¹ Will to power is, as Gilles Deleuze says in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, “a plastic force,” “a force of metamorphosis” (42).

¹² “Subject-point,” as Müller-Lauter calls it (13). I would go so far as to suggest that the terminology of the “subject” cannot really adequately capture an important and necessary quality of “becoming subject,” the “pre-individual” aspect of this process.

¹³ “Through Zarathustra, Nietzsche conceptualizes values as esteemed passions and as features of the self and body. He conceptualizes new values as effects of bodily transformation and self-overcoming” (Gooding-Williams 117).

¹⁴ Gooding-Williams notes that this turn to the discourse of the healthy human body “both frees the idea of a Dionysian modernism from the contradictions that initially haunted it and expresses a conviction that the German nation has been corrupted by the forces of modernity” (102).

¹⁵ See the third essay of *Genealogy of Morals* for Nietzsche's elaboration of the ascetic impulse as a history of the body: "*the ascetic ideal springs from the protective instinct of a degenerating life* which tries by all means to sustain itself and to fight for existence; it indicates a partial physiological obstruction and exhaustion against which the deepest instincts of life, which have remained intact, continually struggle with new expedients and devices" (§13).

¹⁶ Cf. *BGE* §188.

¹⁷ "Instead of explaining why it is necessary to affirm the eternal return, Nietzsche indicates that the highest achievement, as all earlier achievements, is in the last analysis not the work of reason but of nature; in the last analysis all thought depends on something unteachable 'deep down'" (Strauss, *SPPP* 189-90).

¹⁸ "I love those who do not first seek behind the stars for a reason to go under and be a sacrifice, but who sacrifice themselves for the earth, that the earth may some day become the Overman's" (*TSZ* I: Zarathustra's Prologue §4).

¹⁹ This term is my own, not that of Nietzsche or Löwith.

²⁰ While modern German commentators have not tended to interpret Nietzsche along these lines, French interpreters of Nietzsche have taken this direction. Scholars have begun to cross the interpretive boundaries separating the German, French and Anglo-American schools in an effort to bridge the gap between them. Peter Sedgwick classifies the history of Nietzsche interpretation within three principal traditions or regimes of reading: the "German" tradition tends to locate Nietzsche within the context of modern aesthetics and social theory and includes the work of Marxists (i.e. Frankfurt School) and hermeneuticists (Heidegger and Gadamer); the "French" tradition which includes the interpretations of the existentialists, the postmodernists, and the poststructuralists (for example, Bataille, Klossowski, Deleuze, de Man, Foucault, Derrida, Kofman) emphasize questions of language, style, rhetoric in the context of literary, social and psychoanalytic themes; finally, the "Anglo-American" tradition epitomized by Danto, Kaufmann, Hollingdale and Rorty, highlight "more classically determined conceptions of truth, politics, and subjectivity" in the context of analytic philosophy (Sedgwick 2).

Key to Abbreviations

BGE *Beyond Good and Evil*
KSA *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*
SPPP *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*
TNR *The Nietzsche Reader*
WIPP *What is Political Philosophy?*
TSZ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

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