Nietzsche as Ecological Thinker
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With the temperature rising and icecaps melting and storms raging in seemingly unprecedented force, the signs of a potentially catastrophic global climate change seem everyday more obvious and impossible to discount. It is in the context of such times that it is perhaps all the more relevant that we come here to discuss the import of Nietzsche's thought for ecocritism. How convincing are recent "green" readings of Nietzsche? Nietzsche's project of a "revaluation of all values" involved an overturning or overcoming of the other-worldly values that have shaped the Western tradition since Plato, most dramatically expressed in the exhortation of Nietzsche's Zarathustra to "stay true to the earth and do not believe those who talk of over-earthly hopes" (Z 'Prologue', 3). One of the reasons Nietzsche brings back Zarathustra as his literary mouthpiece is that the historical Persian prophet was the one who first spoke of a judgment day and an eternal other-worldly reward. Thus Nietzsche brings Zarathustra back to atone for his mistakes and issue what might perhaps be taken as a call for an awakening of an ecological consciousness. Graham Parkes certainly understands it this way arguing that Nietzsche's 'philosophy of nature, his understanding of the natural world and human existence as interdependent processes and dynamic configurations of will to power, can contribute to grounding a realistic, global ecology that in its loyalty to the earth may be capable of saving it.'
Nevertheless, despite the "green" readings by contemporary Nietzsche scholars, Greg Garrard, in his indispensable introduction to the field of ecocriticism, concludes that though Nietzsche seeks a biocentric perspective like deep ecologists, he finds, unlike them, 'only nihilism in the process.' I wish here to merely suggest how Nietzsche's thought perhaps does not end in nihilism.

The conclusion that Nietzsche's thought ends in nihilism is, of course, a familiar one. Nietzsche has often been thought of as a nihilist philosopher. His writings from the early to the last take up an extended reflection on the problem of nihilism. Nietzsche often portrayed the crisis of nihilism through various streams of imagery, the most famous and perhaps most powerful being the "madman's" announcement in The Joyful Science of the 'death of God' (GS 125). What Nietzsche meant by this event was the end of a certain history, which he later calls the 'History of an Error' (TI 'How the "Real World" Finally Became a Fable'). It is a history that begins with Plato's conception of an absolute, universal truth, a truth that would provide a solid ground which could establish a foundation for knowledge. As Plato represented this conception
of truth with the metaphor of the sun, and as this notion of truth was incorporated into the Christian conception of God, the madman understands the consequences of the "death of God" involve "unchaining the earth from its sun" and thus plunging into the "infinite nothing" and "empty space" of nihilism (GS 125).

Plato's conception of truth implied a completely objective view of reality, reality viewed when the veils of appearance are stripped away. As the Greek word for 'truth,' aletheia, is feminine in gender, Nietzsche often refers to truth as a woman. In the preface to *The Joyful Science* he mocks the "youthful madness in the love of truth" which indecently sought to reveal the naked woman-truth (GS 'Preface', 4). The preface to *Beyond Good and Evil* begins with the supposition that if truth is a woman then philosophers, lovers of wisdom, are like love-sick suitors all discouraged and depressed as the woman-truth has not and will not be won (BGE 'Preface', 1). Here the implication is that the overcoming of the nihilism is perhaps a little like getting over love-sickness.

The problem, Nietzsche goes on to suggest, begins with Plato's invention of an absolute truth, the truth without veils which 'meant standing truth on her head and denying perspective, the basic condition of all life' (BGE ibid). This perspectivism is one of the major themes in Nietzsche's writings. The Platonic view of truth implied seeing reality from a God's eye perspective, or rather from no perspective at all. Against this, Nietzsche continually emphasizes that we can only see reality from limited human perspectives and this entails a more modest conception of philosophy.

In the notebooks Nietzsche seems to suggest that perspectivism implies that there are no facts, but rather only interpretations of the world: 'In so far as the word "knowledge" has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is interpretable otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings.—"Perspectivism"' (WP 481). Often Nietzsche's perspectivism is understood simply as resulting in a pernicious relativism which ends in nihilism. Nietzsche understood the consequences of his critique of the notion of truth. The nihilist doctrine is expressed most succinctly by Zarathustra's own shadow: 'Nothing is true, all is permitted' (Z IV: 9).

Nietzsche's critique of the traditional notion of truth has been so influential on postmodern theorists such as Derrida and Baudrillard that Nietzsche has often been thought of as something of a postmodern prophet. Derrida's famous phrase 'There is nothing outside the text' (*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*) as well as Baudrillard's notion of the 'hyberreal' where the distinction
between the real and simulated collapse into the hall of mirrors of 'simulacra' both have precedence in Nietzsche's perspectivism. It is clear that it is, at least in part, this connection which leads Garrard to conclude the Nietzsche's thought ends in nihilism. For Garrard, 'Baudrillard's scepticism towards the "real" diametrically opposes him, and his theoretical conception of postmodernity, to most ecocritics'. The reason for this opposition is that these postmodern theories 'disable the possibility of activism'. Garrard thus recommends that ecocritics distinguish between the postmodern 'enervating scepticism toward truth in general' and a 'revitalising scepticism toward certain supposed "truths" of popular ecological discourse'.

Another factor that perhaps leads to Garrard's conclusion regarding Nietzsche is Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche. The gist of Heidegger's reading is that despite Nietzsche's attempt to overcome nihilism and the 'History of an Error,' Nietzsche's thought does not quite succeed, and the way is thus left for Heidegger to pioneer a new pathway of thinking beyond nihilism and this history. Basically Heidegger reads Nietzsche's philosophy as still caught up in the subjectivism of modern philosophy and the development of technological thinking. The main characteristic of this technological thinking is that everything is interpreted in terms of what it can be for a subject. In this thinking all of nature is leveled according to what it can be as economic resource. As Heidegger puts it: 'The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such'. Like trees counting only as timber waiting to be cut down, all of nature is rendered only as a 'standing-reserve' (Garrard points out that Heidegger's term for 'standing-reserve' (Bestand) is a forestry term). Heidegger tries to show how Nietzsche's perspectivism is still a representational thinking, a reckoning of worth from a point of view originating in the will, in which 'a stable reserve is now already being preserved as secure'. Thus, according to Heidegger, in Nietzsche's thought 'Being has been transformed into a value' where it is 'degraded to a condition posited by the will to power itself'. Heidegger tries to find a way out of the en-framing grasp of this technological thinking and a way beyond the nihilism that is the destiny of the history of Western thought in exploring a more passive and poetic mode of thinking that listens to the call of Being and lets beings be.

Much recent scholarship has called into question Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche. Laurence Lampert, for example, finds in Nietzsche what Heidegger sought in his own thinking: 'a human way of being on the earth that permits all beings to be what they are; in Nietzsche's language, the will to eternalize out of love and gratitude'. Parkes locates Nietzsche's thought
within a countercurrent to the dominant Platonic Judaeo-Christian thought that leads to our present environmental crisis. Parkes traces the development of Nietzsche's thought from an early Romanticist view which finds a mystical union with the natural world to his late writings which emphasize a loyalty to the earth, a reverence for the ultimately enigmatic nature of things, and 'a profound and comprehensive vision of humanity and the natural cosmos as dynamic and interpenetrating configurations of what he called "will to power"'.

The first mention of will to power (Wille zur Macht) in Nietzsche's writings is through Zarathustra's teaching: 'A tablet of things held to be good hangs over every people. Behold, it is the tablet of its overcomings; behold, it is the voice of its will to power' (Z I: 15). Zarathustra's main point here is that our values, our 'tablets of good and evil', do not come to us from some transcendent source. They come out of us; they are the product of that driving force that shapes who we have become, the outcome of a long history of evolutionary development. This is not to say that they are simply the result of a choice made by a conscious willing subject. As Parkes explains in his translation of Zarathustra, the common understanding of this idea, that it is a desire or will for power with "will" a 'kind of willpower exerted by the human "I" or ego' and "power" a 'kind of brute force exercised by human beings' is simply a misconception. For one thing, the will to power is not something one could choose to have or not have, as if one could choose, for example, a will to love instead of a will to power. As Macht can also mean "force" it might be more accurate to understand the "will to power" as "life force" as Life herself tells Zarathustra that all of life is 'will to power—the unexhausted procreative life-will' (Z II: 12). It is not, however, a single force pervading all things, as even within the individual psyche there is a continuously shifting, often conflicting, assortment of drives, which collectively Nietzsche refers to as 'will to power.'

After Zarathustra Nietzsche experiments with the thought that the whole of existence might be thought of as will to power: 'The world seen from within, the world determined and defined in its 'intelligible character', would be precisely 'will to power' and nothing besides' (BGE 36). This thought experiment is further developed in a selection from the unpublished notebooks from the same period in which the world is described as 'a monster of energy, without beginning, without end, a firm, iron magnitude of force . . . a play of forces and waves of forces, at the same time one and many, increasing here and at the same time decreasing there; a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing. . .' (WP1067).
Thus, in this thought of will to power the human being is not separate from nature, but is merely a small part of this monstrous sea of forces. Nietzsche's conception of the world as an eternally changing sea of forces stands in sharp contrast to the dominant modern conception of nature as a machine as well as the Gaia hypothesis which considers the earth to be a living organism. In an important passage Nietzsche suggests we should beware of considering the world as a living being or as a machine (GS 109).

Nietzsche's conception of the world as an eternally changing sea of forces devoid of both divine purpose and human conceptions of order bears a striking similarity to the conception of nature in Daniel Botkin's *Discordant Harmonies*, a view Garrard refers to as the 'new postmodern ecology'. Botkin presents a strong case that the environmentalism that developed in the 60s and 70s proceeded from assumptions which recent ecology has shown to be outmoded. The conceptions of nature as machine, or as a live creature, or as the product of divine design, all lead to the view that if nature were left undisturbed by human hands it would return to a constant stable state. Botkin argues that our perception of nature must change: 'the changes that must take place in our perspectives are twofold: the recognition of the dynamic rather than the static properties of the Earth and its life-support system, and the acceptance of a global view of life on the Earth'. Nietzsche's anticipation of this postmodern ecological view might be explained by the fact that early on he sided with Heraclitus, the preSocratic thinker who held that reality is constantly changing, rather than Parmenides who influenced Plato and the subsequent history of Western thought with his arguments that change is an illusion and reality must be constant.

Nietzsche's insistence that our values are 'the voice of the will to power' would seem to question the notion of "intrinsic values" in nature, and would thus seem to question the assumption that Nietzsche's is a biocentric view. Yet Nietzsche's view is also not the view Heidegger attributes to him where nature is reduced to standing timber ready for our exploitation. Zarathustra's exhortation is that we should take responsibility for the values we find in nature: 'Lead, as I do, the flown-away virtue back to the earth—yes, back to body and life: that it may give the earth its sense, a human sense!' (Z I: 22)

For Nietzsche, that our values are the product of the will to power does not mean that they are necessarily the result of a conscious choice. For the play of drives within us which is responsible for our 'tablets of good and evil' is most often the case largely unconscious within us, as it is the result of our own mostly forgotten inner development, as well as our whole evolutionary development which shapes what we have become. Thus to become responsible for
our values is the supreme task requiring the greatest courage in self-knowledge. This is perhaps why Nietzsche refers to philosophy as 'the most spiritual form of will to power' (BGE 9).

I would contend that Nietzsche's perspectivism does not necessitate a nihilistic relativism that would disable action. It does not deny that the carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere as measured from the summit of Mauna Loa have now risen above 390 parts per million, or the conclusions of the consensus of climate scientists that the safe upper limit for a stable climate is about 350 parts per million. What perspectivism asserts is that this data is always interpretable otherwise. It can be taken as a dire warning to change our current civilization, or as a sign that the end-times are at hand.

In anticipating of the 'advent of nihilism', an impending cataclysm and catastrophe which our whole culture is rushing toward 'restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river' (WP 'Preface', 2) Nietzsche understood he was something like a 'prophet of a gloom and an eclipse of the sun whose like has probably never yet occurred on earth' (GS 343). Here a solar eclipse, the eclipse of Plato's sun, is yet another powerful image for the crisis of nihilism. In being the prophet of this eclipse Nietzsche is a founding figure in the 'secular apocalypticism' that Garrard finds to be problematic for being perhaps too pessimistic and thus also undermining action. With the signs of catastrophic climate change everywhere upon us, and nuclear radiation pouring into the atmosphere and the sea, as well as so much else going on these days, I sometimes feel that if you are not really, really depressed, then you simply must not be paying attention.

Curiously, the passage in which Nietzsche speaks of an impending cataclysm and an eclipse of the sun is titled 'The meaning of our cheerfulness' and it ends with an anticipation of a new dawn shining. For Nietzsche this new dawn comes not with denying perspectivism and finding some stable truth, but only with the possibility of a further evolution of human beings and the transfiguration of the will to power that is expressed in our values.

Though time prevents a fuller exposition of this here, I would like to conclude with the observation that for Nietzsche the key to the overcoming of nihilism lies in his thinking about art, which takes us back to his first work, the Birth of Tragedy, and his appreciation, especially in the later works, of the importance of laughter. The reason Nietzsche thought Aeschylus and Sophocles, and not Socrates and Plato, were the high point of Greek culture is that he thought, in contrast to the naive optimism and other-worldly hopes of the philosophers, Greek tragedy enabled one to say 'yes' to life and this world despite the tragic character of existence. For
Nietzsche, the highest aim of art, which he thought Greek tragedy had achieved, is something akin to an alchemical transformation. Art, he thought, can change us.

This is perhaps why Nietzsche conceived of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as in some sense a tragedy. It aimed, through Zarathustra's call to stay loyal to the earth, and through its central thought of eternal recurrence, to challenge us to give up a nihilistic longing for another world and become capable of saying 'yes' to this life. And yet there is an important sense in which one does not even get *Zarathustra* unless one appreciates the laughter within it. At one point Nietzsche even suggests ranking philosophers 'depending on the rank of their laughter' (*BGE* 296). One might even conclude that the thought of eternal recurrence, the thought the drama of the text centers upon, Zarathustra's most abysmal thought that we might have to live this same life over and over again throughout eternity, is in the end something of joke. In one of the last, insane letters Nietzsche writes to a friend, and I like to think it is the last thing he ever wrote, that he will be 'whiling away eternity with bad jokes'. If the Western tradition can be described as a longing for eternity in the hopes of escaping this moment, this life, this earth, then Zarathustra offers another eternity—but this is one that will not allow one to escape our responsibility to the earth.
Notes

5 Garrard, 170.
6 Ibid., 171.
7 Ibid., 172.
10 Ibid., 102-103.
14 Garrard, 58.

Nietzsche Bibliography
(citations are to the section numbers in Nietzsche's texts)