THE THREE STIGMATA OF FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE:

Great Politics, Eternal Return, and The Philosopher of the Future

Nandita Biswas Mellamphy
for Dan
for ever
In Hindu mythology [...] 
The entire cycle of human evolution is figured [...] in the form of a cow, symbolizing Virtue, each of whose four feet rests on one of the sectors representing the four ages of the world. In the first age, corresponding to the Greek age of gold and called the Creda Yuga or age of innocence, Virtue is firmly established on earth: the cow stands squarely on four legs. In the Treda Yuga, or second age, corresponding to the age of silver, it is weakened and stands only on three legs. During the Dwapara Yuga, or third age, which is the age of bronze, it is reduced to two legs. Finally, in the age of iron, our own age, the cyclical cow or human virtue reaches the utmost degree of feebleness and senility: it is scarcely able to stand, balancing only on one leg. It is the fourth and last age, the Kali Yuga, the age of misery, misfortune and decrepitude. The age of iron has no other seal than that of Death. Its hieroglyph is the skeleton bearing [...] the empty hourglass, symbol of time run out, and the scythe, reproduced in the figure seven, which is the number of transformation, of destruction, and of annihilation. The Gospel of this fatal age is the one written under the inspiration of Saint Matthew, Matthaeus, the Greek Ματθαίος, comes from Μάθημα and Μάθηματος, which means Science. [...] It is the Gospel according to Science, the last of all but for us the first, because it teaches us that, save for a small number of the élite, we must all perish.

Fulcanelli, Le mystère des cathédrales
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## POLITICAL PHYSIOLOGY IN THE AGE OF NIHILISM: THE THREE STIGMATA  6

Nietzsche as Political Physiologist  6

The Subject as Prosthesis: The Subjective Problem of Production  10

Nihilism as a Pathological Condition  18

## THE MNEMOTECHNICS OF NIHILISM AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE ‘HUMAN’  25

The Political Physiology of Eternal Return  30

Mapping the Argument  41

## THE DISPLACED ‘ORIGIN’ OF POLITICAL THOUGHT  50

The Psycho-Physiological Basis of Will to Power  51

Political Ontology and the Pre-Platonic Physiologists  58

The Political Physiology of Power: Hobbes vs. Nietzsche  69

The Nomothetic Activity of Political Physiology  74

## THE PROBLEM OF PRODUCTION: NATURE, CULTURE, LIFE  84

General Economy and the Genesis of the Philosopher  85

The Structural Economy of ‘Great Politics’  91

## THE PROBLEM OF METAMORPHOSIS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE ÜBERMENSCH  103

Double Vision: Contradictions in the Concept of the Overman  104

The Harmony of Opposites: The ‘Complementary Man’  110

The Teaching of the Overman  120
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ETERNAL RETURN AS THE METAMORPHOSIS OF NIHILISM</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Overcoming of Christian Nihilism: Socrates, Jesus, Zarathustra</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metamorphosis and the Willing of Death</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eternal Return as Metamorphosis</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOVUM ORGANUM: THE OVERMANIFOLD</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE TRANSMIGRATION OF HOMO NATURA</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I am still waiting for a philosophical physician in the exceptional sense of that word -- one who has to pursue the problem of the total health of a people, time, race or of humanity -- to muster the courage to push my suspicion to its limits and to risk the proposition: what was at stake in all philosophizing hitherto was not at all ‘truth’ but something else -- let us say, health, future, growth, power, life.

You ought to be the one that knows; you remember what you saw. All three stigmata: the dead, artificial hand, the slits for eyes, and the radically deranged jaw. Symbols of its inhabitation, he thought. In our midst. But not asked for. Not intentionally summoned.

And we have no mediating sacraments through which to protect ourselves; we can’t compel it, by our careful, time-honored, clever, painstaking rituals, to confine itself to specific elements such as bread and water or bread and wine.

It is out in the open, ranging in every direction.

It looks into our eyes, and it looks out of our eyes.

Philip K. Dick, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1964)

**Nietzsche as Political Physiologist**

In the following study, I examine three concepts found in the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, but which are not usually treated together in the secondary scholarship: first, in the domain of his political thought, Nietzsche’s concept of ‘great politics;’ second, in the phenomenological domain, his concept of ‘eternal return;’ and finally, set against the backdrop of his materialist theory of the ‘self’, the concept of ‘the philosopher of the future’. Each of these so-called ‘concepts’ is veiled, each one ‘stigma’ of something else; none are given explicit or systematic definition, and yet each one is unequivocally a crucial strand of Nietzsche’s thought. In drawing together these three concepts and attempting to examine them explicitly in light of one another, what emerges is a thought that conjoins political epistemology,
philosophical ontology and psycho-physiological explanations for the production of individuality. One fundamental assumption of this thought is that the engine of individuation that drives the formation of individual personality, identity and values in the human realm can also be found in other living forms. Humans, in this regard, are like other organism and animals; but in having striven to forget and overcome their animality, humans have become sick organisms. Going back to the historical source of western thought, Nietzsche would find the illness of European culture at the speculative root of western civilization: “indeed, one may ask as a physician: ‘how could such a malady attack this loveliest product of antiquity, Plato?’” (BGE Preface). What were considered by most to be the signs of human flourishing -- Platonic philosophy, Christianity, and parliamentary democracy -- Nietzsche saw as signs of degeneration of a collective organism. Nietzsche would thus approach the fundamental political question of human beings -- who rules and over whom? -- as a malady to be diagnosed and treated. As pathological as Nietzsche’s writings became over the course of his fertile but fragile thinking life, they are nonetheless exemplary in their attention to the particularly pathological nature of modern human existence.

The aim of this book is to bring Nietzsche’s ‘physiological perspective’ to the question of the political, the anti-political and the over-political in Nietzsche’s work itself. ¹ When considering Nietzsche’s work, we can -- and perhaps more forcefully, we should -- read these three terms as stigmata that mark all of his late thought. I invoke the definition of ‘stigmata’ as Nietzsche himself did, that is in a psycho-physiological sense: first, as bodily marks that

¹ For a snapshot of the current debate in Nietzsche scholarship, see the recent volume, Nietzsche, Power, and Politics, eds. Herman W. Siemans and Vasti Roodt (Berlin, De Gruyter: 2008).
resemble or mimic another condition; and second, stigmata as that which enable the diagnosis of that condition. Therefore, it is not simply that in reading Nietzsche, we must decide which of the three positions we find more compelling; rather, it is a question of forcing these three together to determine whether they form a field of information, perhaps even what Félix Guattari has called an unconscious machine of desire\(^2\). It is a question, as such, of espousing the perspective of the philosopher-physician, as Nietzsche himself had urged: to see these three stigmata as mutually implicated symptoms that aid in identifying the pathology of a hidden and collective condition that Nietzsche had already diagnosed in his own age -- the illness known as *nihilism*. In the following pages, I present what I consider to be a theory of political physiology in Nietzsche's thought.\(^3\)

*Political, Anti-Political, Überpolitical* -- these are the three generic standpoints that continue to circulate in the economy of Nietzsche studies today. In the recent volume, *Nietzsche, Power and Politics: Rethinking Nietzsche's Legacy for Political Thought*, the aim of which is to give a snap-shot of the current interpretive landscape on this issue in the English-speaking world, these three terms are taken as *mutually exclusive* positions:

“Is Nietzsche a political thinker at all -- or an anti-political philosopher of values and culture? Is he an aristocratic political thinker who damns democracy as an expression of herd mentality -- or can his thought, especially his thought of the Greek *agon*, be fruitfully appropriated for democratic theory... Is Nietzsche a

---


\(^3\) The term ‘political physiology’ will no doubt bring to mind the work of John Protevi who has also been working on this concept specifically in relation to the work of Deleuze and Guattari. Protevi has defined ‘political physiology’ in the following way: “It is the study of the construction of “bodies politic,” that is, the interlocking of emergent processes that link the patterns, thresholds and triggers of affective and cognitive responses of somatic bodies to the patterns, thresholds and triggers of actions of social bodies.” http://www.protevi.com/john/Geophilosophy.pdf (2005). See also, J. Protevi, *Political Physics: Deleuze, Derrida and the Body Politic* (2001).
political philosopher at all, or rather an anti-political -- even a supra-political -- thinker?” (Siemens and Roodt, 1, 2).

Briefly, the ‘political’ standpoint claims that Nietzsche was either a proponent of a certain type of political perspective (be it ‘democratic’ or ‘aristocratic,’ often connectable to a position that supports the goal of human ‘perfectionism’ as we see, for example, in Daniel Conway’s argument); the ‘anti-political’ points to Nietzsche’s explicit statement about being the ‘last anti-political German’ and a critic of the German Reich in favor of the superiority of the German cultural spirit; and finally the ‘supra-political’ view points to the many instances in which Nietzsche’s philosophy aims beyond any form of co-existence, in so far as it dissolves any kind of human relationship between distinct entities. Now anyone who has read Nietzsche with these questions in mind faces the dilemma of finding all three positions in -- perhaps ‘ unholy’ (unheilig) but definitely ‘ unhomely’ (unheimlich) -- co-existence in Nietzsche’s published and unpublished works. They are all there and consequently, neither one can finally dispense with the others without some form of interpretive maneuvering. They appear, sometimes less obviously sometimes more so, but always together. From the perspective of a physiologist, one could say that the three stigmata form a pathology of effects; the task of the political physiologist is to decipher and translate this pathology with the goal of restoring conditions of health. But in the condition of nihilism, health and illness are not so easy to distinguish and may lead to many misunderstandings, as we shall see. For as Nietzsche reminds us in the preface to The Genealogy of Morals, “An aphorism, properly stamped and poured, has not yet been “deciphered” simply by being read” (GM Preface 8).
The title of this book — The Three Stigmata of Friedrich Nietzsche — alludes to a novel, The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, first published in 1964 by the American Science Fiction author Philip K. Dick. The novel, I would argue, is evocative of not only our contemporary cultural situation but also of the critical applicability of a Nietzschean perspective — the perspective of political physiology I would argue — for a diagnosis of our present.

Dick’s story is set in the recent future in which the scarcity of resources on Earth no longer makes it possible to support the terrestrial population, and so a lottery draft sends colonists to Mars to live in bleak underground hovels. The colonists can no longer feel authentically (let’s say, in a phenomenological sense) and so they must manufacture affects by literally ingesting them. The colonists survive psychologically by taking the drug Can-D which allows them to communicate with each other in a simulated but shared virtual reality (and we later find out that the drug itself is a communication technology linked to information hubs that relay messages to manufacturer and marketers of Can-D). Dick describes the psycho-technological effect of Can-D clearly in both political and psychological terms: colonists collectively project their consciousness onto miniature dolls; women undergo “translation” as ‘Perky Pat’ — a buxom, Barbie-like fabulous gal — and men become ‘Walt,’ the debonair owner of a Jaguar XXB sports ship and wearer of Italian shirts and English shoes (1975, 41). The drug is primarily used in couples or in groups whereby all the women are projected into ‘Perky Pat’ and the men into ‘Walt.’ Based on the desire of the majority, the drug operates via a kind of

---

4 I am grateful to Dan Mellamphy for this title and for the suggestive correlation of Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and Philip Kindred Dick — a correlation first articulated (after Mellamphy 1998) in an undergraduate course he taught at Western: ENG 2071, “Speculative Fiction I — Science Fiction and the ‘Modern Prometheus’.”
collective mechanics whereby if two out of three people occupying Perky Pat want to go
golfing, then Pat goes golfing.

Consumption of this drug induces and eventually functions a kind of prosthetic ‘self’, one
that permits the consumer to live a simulated existence, but one that nonetheless preserves the
essential properties of modern subjectivity: despite its hallucinogenic properties, the users are
reminded by the makers of Can-D that they are in an illusory world, and thus they retain the
essence of their real individual identities at all times. This is a very important detail: it is crucial
in the narrative unfolding that the users of Can-D can distinguish when they are and when they
are not within the simulated world of Perky Pat and Walt. The demand for Can-D on Mars
depends on creating desire in the inhabitants to continuously return to the Perky Pat world. The
distinction, in other words, between a ‘real’ and an ‘illusory’ world is precisely established by the
presence of a ‘self’ that travels between two bodily states. But while the essential self toggles
between these two worlds, the narrative makes clear that the virtual promise of the Can-D world
and the bleak reality of everyday life on Mars are part of the same apparatus of production:
“based in laws of conservation and corresponding systemic inequalities” the high standard of
living on earth requires the continuation of deprivation on Mars; in this way, the draft that forces
some people to move to Mars clears up surplus population on Earth while assuring a strong
market for commodities such as Can D on Mars (Hayles, 72). The continuity of the self is
guaranteed by the necessary gap between the ideal -- the dream of the Perky Pat world -- and
the dreary reality of everyday life on Mars. As Nietzsche remarks (particularly in BGE and TI), this
“faith in opposites” -- in this case the ontological distinction between the ‘illusory’ and the ‘true’
worlds -- is a necessary ingredient for the continued production of a subject endowed with
and exercising agency.

Enter Palmer Eldritch. Eldritch, an elusive tycoon, introduces a new rival drug on the Martian market -- Chew Z. No one really knows who Palmer Eldritch is; all that is known about him is that, due to his dangerous dealings with traders outside the galaxy, parts of his body have become replaced by three prostheses by which he can be identified: a robotic arm, an implanted set of eyes and a distended metal jaw. Despite the rumours that Palmer Eldritch has gone mad, the Martian population welcomes the opportunity given by the interstellar market to try a new drug, which is cheaper and claims to last longer. What users discover, however, is that Chew Z differs from Can D in a major way -- in the subjective experience produced by the ingestion of the drug, the user can no longer distinguish between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the drug experience; one can no longer know for sure when one is in the ‘illusory’ world or in the ‘real’ world. The only indications, as the protagonist Barney Mayerson discovers, are the three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch. Just when users think that everything is normal, that they are back in their everyday reality, they begin to see the three stigmata appear on others and sometimes even on their own bodies: the robotic arm, the prosthetic eyes and the metal jaw characteristic of Palmer Eldritch:

Palmer Eldritch had once more thought rings around him, demonstrated his power over everyone who used Chew-Z; Eldritch had done something and he could not even tell what, but anyhow it was not what he had said. Not what had been promised. ... “Leave me something, Palmer,” he thought to himself. “Please.”... No? “Then I’ll go ahead with litigation,” Barney said to himself; “I’ll ... spend the rest of my life in the interplan courts fighting you -- and winning.” ... He heard, then, a laugh. It was Palmer Eldritch’s laugh, but it was emerging from -- Himself.

Looking down at his hands, he distinguished the left one, pink, pale, made of flesh, covered with skin and tiny, almost invisible hair, and then the right one, bright, glowing, spotless in its mechanical perfection, a hand infinitely superior to
the original one, long since gone. Now he knew what had been done to him. A great translation -- from his standpoint anyhow -- had been accomplished and possibly everything up to now had worked with this end in mind ... Now I am Palmer Eldritch (Dick, 167-8).

As Dick’s book unfolds, the ontological stability that depends on the congruence of subjective experience and sequential time can no longer be sustained. Which world is authentic, which world is a simulation? The consequences of the infiltration of Palmer Eldritch’s stigmata into Barney’s world stands in stark contrast to the narrative’s earlier clean division between ‘ideal’ and ‘real’ worlds (the worlds produced by the use of Can-D). What we are left with by the end is an ontological destabilization that enacts a complete breakdown of the distinctions that enabled the ‘ideal but illusory’ domain and ‘everyday reality’ to be experienced and conceptualized as distinct domains.

The breakdown itself reveals what Nietzsche had hypothesized toward the end of his life: that the subject is a “fiction”:

“The subject” is a fiction that many similar states in us are the effect of one substratum: but it is we who first created the 'similarity' of these states; our adjusting them and making them similar is the fact, not their similarity (which ought rather to be denied)’ (WP 485).

What Philip K Dick (who also suffered from mental illness) shows is the ‘individual’ is not an inviolable substratum but an artificial extension or prosthesis governed by an unknown forces, forces that have generative powers but that cannot be recuperated or represented within the constructed apparati of human volition. Nietzsche had already speculated about these forces and he hypothesized that they formed a wider organic process in which ‘consciousness’ and ‘unconscious’ elements emerge corporeally as ‘body’:
Perhaps the entire evolution of the spirit is a question of the body; it is the *history* of the development of *a higher body* that emerges into our *sensibility*. The organic is rising to yet higher levels. Our lust for knowledge of nature is a means through which the body desires to perfect itself. Or rather: hundreds of thousands of experiments are made to change the nourishment, the mode of living and the dwelling of the body, all kinds of pleasure and displeasure, are *signs of these changes and experiments* (WP §676).

What happens to thought when the body itself becomes a prosthesis of communication between aleatory and unknown interlocutors? What happens when the properties of bodies are seen to be the *stigmate* of something, which while conditioning bodily matter, cannot itself be represented as a *constitutive* property of this matter but only as an *effect* of a certain configuration of relations between properties? After the ‘death of God’, the body can no longer be the guarantor of identity, a ‘natural’ physical presence inhabited by an essential self within. Nietzsche had already intuited this, perhaps because of the phantasms he had experienced as a result of his own illness. The breakdown of secure ontological divisions between ‘real’ and ‘illusory’ worlds produces the untenability of a stable body-self. Of all the published interpreters of Nietzsche, no one has developed the political implications of this idea better than Pierre Klossowski in his monumental work *Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux*. As Klossowski argues, Nietzsche was besieged by a double preoccupation:

first, to find a mode of behaviour, in the organic and inorganic world, that was analogous to his own valetudinary state; and second, based on this mode of behaviour, to find the arguments and resources that would allow him to re-create himself, beyond his own self. Physiology, as he understood it, would thus provide him with the premises of a liberatory conception of the forces that lay subjacent not only to his own condition, but also to the various situations he was living through in the context of his epoch (Klossowski 1997, 32).

Like the eventual infiltration of Barney Mayerson by Palmer Eldritch’s stigmata in Dick’s story, Klossowski shows how Nietzsche’s thought becomes preoccupied with the problem of
production in which the ‘Self’ that produces is indistinguishable from the ‘Self’ that is produced. All of Nietzsche’s researches into Aesthetics, Geography, Politics, Physiology, Biology stem from this problematic of subjective production. The question of the political, as such, is always also a psycho-physiological phenomenon in Nietzsche thought -- precisely by dint of the fundamental problem of what I have here outlined as the prosthetic problem of subjectivity.

It is the argument of this book that Nietzsche’s political physiology charts the pathology of the subject as prosthesis. Well before he has begun to theorize the widespread civilizational problem of ‘nihilism’ in the 1880s, Nietzsche was trying to understand ‘individuality’ as a conjunction of the speculative and the material. Even in Nietzsche’s early notebooks of 1868, he was preoccupied with how, at the generic levels of organic processes, ‘becoming’ generates form but itself cannot be represented within the order of being. Influenced of by Friedrich Lange’s *History of Materialism* and Schopenhauer’s critical idealism, Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* examines this problematic as a relation between the *principium individuationis*, ‘the principle of individuation’ (the Apollonian function), and the Dionysian borders of individuation that allow for the formation of individuality but which, in themselves, are not definable. “This is the real problem of philosophy” Nietzsche says, “the unending purposiveness of organisms and the unconsciousness in their coming to be” (Nietzsche, *On the Origins of Language*, quoted in Toscano 36).

During this period, Nietzsche was also giving his lectures on the Pre-Platonic philosophers at the University of Basel. In what has been published under the title of *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers* (PP 2001), Nietzsche brings together his thoughts on the organic problem of individuation and his philosophical and philological study of the Greeks. Nietzsche’s
interpretation centers on ‘the riddle of defining the philosopher,’ which he explores in terms of a psycho-physiological spectrum of typologies. We see Nietzsche’s fascination for the idea that in the ancient Greek speaking-world prior to Plato there appears archetypal figures that pursue self-investigation ceaselessly, and who, in so doing, create their very persona or character (ethos) precisely in accordance with what is discovered as the vital principles of the natural world. “The human beings themselves who became pre-Platonic philosophers are formal incarnations of Philosophia and her various forms” (KSA, VII:14[28]; Whitlock 178). For Nietzsche, the philosopher is the physiological process and generative formation of an unprecedented kind of being, a being that, like all manifestations of physis\(^5\) (‘growth’), is subject to the formative forces of emergence.

It is in relation to these early physiologists or physiologoi wherein lies an important but overlooked source for elucidating Nietzsche’s formulation of ‘will to power’ as a “physiological process” (e.g. BGE 242), as a “pathology” and a “sign of health” (BGE 154). Nietzsche’s analysis of the pre-Platonic philosopher-physiologists also gives an important clue for interpreting the status that the concept of ‘culture’ will come to occupy in Nietzsche’s thought after his explicit theorization of the concept of ‘nihilism’ in the 1880s. With Plato, philosophy becomes separated from culture, and perceived more and more as antithetical to the goals of culture. For Nietzsche, Plato is not an ‘original’ type of philosopher like Pythagoras, Heraclitus or even Socrates (the three archetypes of the pre-Platonic world), but a “mixed” type; from Plato onwards, all philosophy and all philosophers are recombinations of these earlier incarnations (PP, 5):

\(^5\) The word refers to what can loosely be called ‘nature’, also meaning ‘origin’ and ‘appearance’. Greek Lexicon, Liddell-Scott, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3D%23112721
“I am speaking of the pre-Platonics, because open hostility to, the negation of, culture begins with Plato. I want to know, though, how philosophy which is not an enemy, behaves toward a culture at hand or in development: here [Plato] is the poison-mixer to culture” (KSA, VII: 23[16] quoted in Whitlock 168).

Nietzsche saw in the very existence of the pre-Platonic philosopher the incarnated conjunction of the speculative and the material, and the cultivation of this conjunction by the city-state. This early distinction between the pre-Platonic and Platonic sets the stage for the antithesis between modern ‘culture’ and ‘state’ that Nietzsche makes in his later published works⁶. After Nietzsche comes to see nihilism as a ‘normal condition’ (propagated as ‘slave morality’), however, he can no longer maintain the neat distinction between culture and state (or culture and politics). Why? Because if nihilism is the general condition that affects the species-body, then culture itself becomes the product of the ‘slave’ type. Again, it is Klossowski’s reading of Nietzsche that is most instructive:

Culture (the sum total of knowledge) - that is, the intention to teach and learn - is the obverse of the soul’s tonality, its intensity, which can be neither taught nor learnt. The more culture accumulates, however, the more it becomes enslaved to itself - and the more its obverse, the mute intensity of the tonality of the soul, grows (Klossowski 1997, xix).

The fact that modern society has merely formed a concept of culture is the proof of the disappearance of a lived culture (Klossowski 1997, 8).

Culture is the product of the Slave; and having produced culture, he is now its conscious Master -- this is what Hegel demonstrated’. Nietzsche is the incorrigible beneficiary of this culture. But for Nietzsche, the slave who has become the master of culture is nothing other than -- Christian morality. And because the latter will be prolonged in certain forms of ‘communality’ (first in the form of ‘bourgeois culture’, and then in the socializing form of industrialization) Nietzsche,

⁶ Marina Cominos takes this question up in “The Question of Nietzsche’s Anti-Politics and Human Transfiguration in Siemens and Roodt, 85-103.
out of his own ignorance, would attack the Hegelian dialectic at its roots (Klossowski 1997, 11-12).

For Klossowski, the concept of ‘culture’ becomes implicated in the very type of problematic instability that the ‘self’ undergoes in Nietzsche’s thought: the cohesiveness of the culture/state distinction, like the cohesiveness of the ‘self/other’ distinction disintegrates with the ontological instability produced by the annihilation of the ‘real’ as distinguishable from the ‘illusory’. “Though himself dependent on this concept [of ‘culture], Nietzsche would nonetheless destroy it” (Klossowski 1997, 9).

**Nihilism as a Pathological Condition**

It is, therefore, in Nietzsche’s analysis of nihilism that we can start to chart the pathology of the subject as prosthesis. This analysis occurs relatively late in his thought; he sets it out most fully in 1887 and 1888 in the last years before his complete mental breakdown, but he had already begun to think about it as early as 1883 (interestingly enough, also the year in which he coins the term *der Wille zur Macht* or ‘the will to power’). According to Nietzsche’s own description in the unpublished works (namely part one of Kaufmann’s redaction entitled *Will to Power*), nihilism (the typology of which is tripartite: passive, active and theoretical) is a historical, epistemological and psycho-physiological condition in which the introduction of an externality into a system first functions to *fortify* it, but then triggers a cannibalistic response *against* it. The pathology proceeds as follows: what is first introduced into a system as an antidote preserving the unity of a system turns against itself and results in the dissolution of that system (WP §4, §5).
This is precisely what modern immunology has characterized as disease of ‘auto-immunity’.\(^7\)

The effect and the affect of this process? Nietzsche says quite succinctly: “The highest values devaluate themselves” (WP §1). As The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch illustrates, in a society in which consumption becomes ubiquitous, nihilism consumes us, in all its voracity, until there is no way to distinguish ‘it’ from ‘us’. What we either boast about or bemoan today -- the destabilization of meaning, the triumph of secularism and the globalization of political systems and mass consumption culture -- Nietzsche would characterize precisely as nihilistic: “everything lacks meaning (the untenability of one interpretation of the world, upon which a tremendous amount of energy has been lavished, awakens the suspicion that all interpretations of the world are false” (WP Preface §3).

The three stigmata of Friedrich Nietzsche -- the pathology of the political, anti-political and over-political statements in the late works -- are the *symptoms* of a bodily thought that is both a *product of nihilism* and a theatre of production that seeks to *overcome nihilism* by *actively* thinking through nihilism:

> “Nihilism represents a pathological transitional stage...: whether the productive forces are not yet strong enough, or whether decadence still hesitates and has not yet invented its remedies. Presupposition of this hypothesis: that there is not truth, that there is no absolute nature of things nor a ‘thing-in-itself.’ This, too, is merely nihilism -- even the most extreme nihilism. It places the value of things precisely in the lack of any reality corresponding to these values and in their being merely symptom of strength on the part of the value-positers, a simplification for the sake of life” (WP §13).

And again:

\(^7\) “Autoimmunity is the failure of an organism to recognize its own constituent parts as *self*, which results in an immune response against its own cells and tissues.” See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autoimmune
“‘Nihilism’: an ideal of the highest degree of powerfulness of the spirit, the over‐richest life -- partly destructive, partly ironic” (WP §14).

This, I believe, is the active and operative principle of Nietzsche’s concept of Grossepolitik (or “great politics” as mentioned in Beyond Good and Evil), its reactive manifestation being “petty politics” which Nietzsche equates with the knee-jerk impulse to preserve and institutionalize a certain configuration of forces (this is why the Hobbesian origins of the liberal subject inevitably make it ‘slavish’ and ‘impotent’). As Nietzsche describes it, pessimism is the handmaid of affirmation in the sense that pessimism, “as an analytic” of forces (WP §10) can manifest both as strength and as decline -- actively as well as reactively -- and in this “critical tension” “extremes appear and become predominant” (WP §10). Affirmation must first work through negativity, through “negations” (WP §11), intensifying the process of devaluation that consists in “the smashing of idols” by the “hammer of philosophy” (Twilight of the Idols). But this tension is productive because it is a reticulation that may produce active effects. It is in this sense of the productive effect of pessimism that I interpret sections 55 and 56 of Beyond Good and Evil in which Nietzsche describes how cultivation of cruelty by slave morality (our culture) -- that is to say, how the intensification of nihilism -- may nonetheless lead to its overcoming:

There is a great ladder of religious cruelty with many rungs; but three of them are the most important. At one time one sacrificed human beings to one’s god, perhaps precisely those human beings one loved best -- ... Then, in the moral epoch of mankind, one sacrificed to one’s god the strongest instincts one possessed, one’s ‘nature’; the joy of thin festival glitters in the cruel glance of the ascetic ... Finally: what was left to be sacrificed? ... Did one not have to sacrifice God himself and out of cruelty against oneself worship stone, stupidity, gravity, fate, nothingness? To sacrifice God for nothingness -- this paradoxical mystery of the ultimate act of cruelty was reserved for the generation which is even now arising: we all know something of it already.
... he who has really gazed with an Asiatic and more than Asiatic eye down into the most world-denying of all possible modes of thought -- beyond good and evil and no longer, like Buddha and Schopenhauer, under the spell and illusion of morality -- perhaps by that very act, and without really intending to, may have had his eyes opened to the opposite ideal: to the ideal of the most exuberant, most living and most world-affirming man, who has not only learned to get on and treat with all that was and is but who wants to have it again as it was and is to all eternity ...

This is the trickiest and most disturbing aspect of the question of politics in the pathological condition of nihilism: that affirmation arises from the affirmation of nihilism. As I will argue, this is precisely what Leo Strauss resisted and denied in his analysis of Nietzsche’s concepts of will to power and eternal return: from the willing of nothingness emerges the possibility of overcoming nothingness because it is only at this point of contraction in which the last artifact of the human -- the will -- dissolves, that nihilism can transform itself from being a product of reactivity or negation, to becoming purely active and affirmative because it returns to its active state of becoming. In the absence of stasis the mechanisms of which impose limitations (I think this is precisely where Kant and Nietzsche part ways), the affirmation of nihilism becomes the curative force of the poison of nihilism. This is the operative difference between ‘passive’ and ‘active’ nihilism (WP §22). The force of active nihilism can be nothing other than pure violence, the transmutative force that is also the necessary catalyst for creation (the force that the medieval alchemists called ‘melanosis’ or putrefaction, a composting or decomposition which characterizes the Kaliyuga, or age of destruction, according to Vedic wisdom): “It reaches its maximum of relative strength as the violent force of destruction -- as active nihilism” (WP §23). Active force, according to Gilles Deleuze’s interpretation, is the force

---

of destruction/creation *qua* transformation. If we recall that for Nietzsche, reactive nihilism is a situation in which a system begins to eat itself by turning itself against itself, hanging onto itself in order preserve even a minuteness of its discharge, then active nihilism becomes the *transformative* activity of force that no longer turns back onto itself. It is the force of metamorphosis in which nothing is carried over. It affirms by dominating, by commanding a weaker force to obey (in this sense force is always relational), but its domination proceeds by expenditure not by recuperation (this is why the overcoming of nihilism for Nietzsche cannot ultimately proceed by dialectics or by Fascism). Nietzsche even has a name for this active process: the active and most extreme form of nihilism -- the process in which existence is lived and expended without limitation or recuperation: “Let us think this thought in its most terrible form: existence as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness: the *eternal recurrence*” (*WP* §55).

What kind of politics would be adequate to this? ‘What is to be done’ politically when nihilism has become a “normal condition”? The political physiological perspective is ever vigilant in remembering that what is a cure can also be a poison, and what is a poison can be a cure. The boundary separating values -- high/low, noble/base, good/evil, healthy/ill -- can no longer be securely differentiated and Nietzsche himself points to this fact:

It is the value of all morbid states that they show us under a magnifying glass certain states that are normal -- but not easily visible when normal. Health and sickness are not essentially different, as the ancient physicians and some practitioners even today suppose. One must not make of them distinct principles or entities that fight over the living organism and turn it into their arena ... In fact, there are only differences in degree between these two kinds of existence: the exaggeration, the disproportion, the nonharmony of the normal phenomena constitute the pathological state (*WP* §47).
As the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler has recently said\(^9\), the philosopher today must be a toxicologist; and this echoes something that I have recently also said in relation to Nietzsche’s call for a philosopher that is also a physician:\(^{10}\) in the politics conditioned by nihilism but which seeks to overcome nihilism by activating the potency of nihilism, the philosopher-physician must be a homeopathic toxicologist governed and guided by the principle of ‘like cures like’ (simili similibus curantur), the administering of the poison as the curative force itself. This kind of politics -- is there, truly, any alternative to this? -- is fraught with so many moral dilemmas precisely because its operative principle works without seeking to -- without having to -- ontologize the distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’, ‘good’ and ‘evil’. This is also why for Nietzsche, the question of power is not merely nor even primarily a question of property or territory and the negotiating of its representations; but rather, power is a question of production, of morphosis and its transformations, the process of formation that emerges as the result of a tension of forces, the process that imposes “upon becoming the character of being” (\(WP\) §617). Following Bernard Stiegler, the question of the ‘political’ must necessarily proceed via a pharmacological perspective: we must look for the signs of health in the very illnesses of the human condition, as well as be able to recognize signs of illness in what may be considered by the majority as signs of ‘health’.

It is against this backdrop that the three stigmata of Friedrich Nietzsche are evoked once again -- each stigmata is a poison and a cure; all three must be interpreted as forces whose collision -- speculative and material -- are necessary to Nietzsche’s account of the completion

---

\(^9\) “Questions About a General Pharmacology” Keynote address, New French Thought, conference in the Department of Philosophy, Villonova University, April 3, 2009.

\(^{10}\) Biswas Mellamphy, “Corporealizing Thought: Retranslating the Eternal Return Back into Politics”, Nietzsche, Power and Politics, 760.
and overcoming of nihilism. We can start to see why the politics of nihilism is so confounding, but for Nietzsche, the secret to the renewed health of our ever-ailing species depends on playing nihilism out, intensifying its forces. Nietzsche’s thought is thus the greatest example of nihilism - not the passive and thus incomplete nihilism of the forms of life he attacks, but the virulent and curative nihilism that unleashes those forces of life that will lead to the organism’s self-destruction, only in order to make way for a new form of life:

At this point nihilism is reached: all one has are the values that pass judgment -- nothing else. Here the problem of strength and weakness originates:
1. The weak perish of it;
2. those who are stronger destroy what does not perish;
3. those who are strongest overcome the values that pass judgment.

In sum, this constitutes the tragic age (WP §37).