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The Life of the Party: a Brief Note on Nietzsche's Ethics

So vertue giv'n for lost,
Deprest, and overthrown, as seem'd,
Like that self-begott'n bird
In the *Arabian* woods embost,
That no second knows nor third,
And lay e're while a Holocaust,
From out her ashie womb now teem'd
Revives, reflourishes, then vigorous most
When most unactive deem'd,
And though her body die, her fame survives,
A secular bird ages of lives.

— John Milton, *Samson Agonistes*

The greatest thoughts are the greatest events.

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

The English phrase “This is the life!” is the sort of thing you are meant to exclaim when enjoying the goods of life in an extraordinary setting. Drinking champagne on a yacht in Sydney harbour while the sun glitters from a perfect blue sky, lying on a beach with attractive friends while the surf crashes against pure yellow sands, sitting on the balcony of a large country house while eating prime beef cooked by an inventive chef, or celebrating at a party where everyone is dressed only in the most elegant and expensive season's fashions — you get the picture.

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This picture is precisely one to which any self-respecting philosopher would immediately respond: “Now that is *not* the life!” But why? What could possibly be wrong with the democratic drive to make such utopian experiences accessible in principle to everyone?

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Precisely to the extent that such bucolic pleasures fail to touch on the immediacy of an idea — indeed, patently engage an idealised zero-degree media image of yuppie enjoyment from which all traces of physical pain, work, exploitation, competition, violence, murder, aging, ugliness and thought have been carefully purged — they constitute a rebarbative parody of living, a kind of rapacious materialism whose picturesque alibi dissimulates its repulsive truth. An exemplarily resentful truth, moreover, whose global circulation is merely one index of its intellectual bankruptcy, and whose alleged “life” should rather be called the epitome of “survival.” The insatiable human beast will be tamed by the promise of vacuous pleasures, at once entirely animal and entirely sublimated. On that yacht, for instance, “you’re there only to enjoy what is there to be enjoyed” as Nicholas Heron remarked to me.¹ Less pointedly, leisure itself has turned into something patently laborious, even violently exploitative: becoming-a-spectacle is almost a gladiatorial enterprise these days, not least given the number of yachts in the bay.

It’s clearly a problem of what Alain Badiou has recently termed “democratic materialism,” whose presuppositions involve something like the following.² We are materialists, that is, we know there is nothing except matter in this universe, no creator, no sense, no purpose. The only purposes there are are ones we give ourselves. We know we are all animals, mortal, fragile, transient, born to die. The only thing it’s clear we share is death, which isn’t shared anyway. So we need to squeeze life for all we can, without taking the slightest risk. Those who take risks are clearly fantasists, in the grip of dangerous ideas, and, not least, most likely curtailing their pleasures and shortening their lives. One cannot survive with ideals; as we know from the crimes of the twentieth century, every ideal too keenly pursued necessarily turns into its opposite, into totalitarian coercion, torture and death. The best, most democratic possible solution is to organise human life in such a way as to minimize its pain and maximize its pleasures. And that, precisely, is living. Against this, the embittered philosopher can only mutter impatiently: “Herd animals! Ultimate men!”

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A question, perhaps even a philosophical one, remains: why, against the bucolic dreams of commodity capital, do a range of contemporary philosophers routinely find themselves proselytising for an absolute value — “Life” — whose definition

¹ Personal correspondence. I would like to thank Jessica Whyte and Sigi Jottkandt for their comments on a draft of this paper.

² See A. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. A. Toscano (New York: Continuum, 2009).

must be more than merely negative, yet cannot, by definition, be given any particular content? The answer can be given as a proper name: Friedrich Nietzsche. Why? Because there is no philosophy of the future which does not still have to reckon with the “revaluation of all values” that Nietzsche undertakes, and for which the master-word remains that of “Life”. Moreover, Nietzsche’s program insists on linking the concept with the problem of ethics, at the most fundamental level.³

“Life”, for Nietzsche, is nonetheless not itself a value, for it has to be that which conditions the possibility of all values, as well as determining the necessity for their ceaseless revaluation. It is inconsistent yet absolute, transient yet indubitable. Moreover, and integrally connected with this, “Life” has to be a self-proclaimed paradoxical word, one which enjoins the necessity of its own destruction or supplantation. In order to truly live, as Nietzsche says, sometimes the organism has to be strong enough to die.

This might suggest that “Life” is a suicidal word. And indeed it is, as we’ll see in more detail below. Life is a suicidal act and “Life” is a suicidal word, although usually there aren’t any scare quotes to alert you to the resemblances.⁴ Nietzsche thoughtfully fails to provide any. Paradoxically enough, then, it is the spirit that kills for Nietzsche, while the letter delivers life — even if the life that is popped through the letterbox turns out to be some kind of time bomb. And the only agent able to deliver this life-bomb is an experimental, evolutionary, philological philosophy, one which destroys what it must presume, and relentlessly returns to what it must abandon, all the while negating itself as *the* word.⁵ Self-annihilat-

³ Nietzsche: “It has gradually become clearer to me what every great philosophy has hitherto been: a confession on the part of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; moreover, that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy have every time constituted the real germ of life out of which the entire plant has grown.” *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. with an intro. and commentary R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 19.

⁴ As such, Nietzsche’s later philosophy remains conditioned by his assertion that “Greek tragedy perished differently from all the other, older sister-arts: it died by suicide, as the result of an irresolvable conflict, which is to say tragically, while all the others died the most beautiful and peaceful deaths, fading away at a great age”. *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. R. Geuss and R. Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 54.

⁵ As Gilles Deleuze phrases this: “[L]ife goes beyond the limits that knowledge fixes for it, but thought goes beyond the limits that life fixes for it. Thought ceases to be a ratio, life ceases to be a reaction. The thinker thus expresses the noble affinity of thought and life: life making

ing vitality, it is not nothing even if it never quite attains being never simply not. Hardly ironical, though, its obliteration cannot not leave a residue.

To affirm an idea for Nietzsche means to actively place oneself in situations in which the absolute contingency of existence is patent; more precisely, to place oneself in situations in which one's own life is clearly at risk and, in doing so, to open oneself to affects that are keyed directly to the necessity of (self) destruction.⁶ In this sense, there is only one idea for Nietzsche, that of "eternal return", which literally means: since each must die, each moment is singular; each singularity has a claim; affirm the claim of that singularity; its temporality is by definition not that of a series, of number, or of order; to affirm it demands your distress; to embrace that distress is the definition of living, since living is itself only transient exposure to death.

Moreover, one is only properly individuated (perhaps "singularized" would be a better word) in this relation to the moment and to distress; otherwise, one is only "one", at best an "ultimate" or "last man", whose existence can only be denominated "survival" since no claim matters more than persistence in existence itself. To be a last man is to refuse transience and contingency; even worse, in doing so, to project a staid, stolid, resentful phantasm onto being and, in doing so, give being a meaning — itself.⁷ The boast of the last men is, as Nietzsche puts it, not "we live!" but "we survive!" (and then they of course "blink and cough"). The last man is the one who thinks that existence and meaning coincide, and that existence is self-supporting. This gives us the negative example of one kind of "nihilist", here in the full nihilistic blossoming at the arse-end of world history.⁸

thought active, thought making life affirmative." *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. H. Tomlinson (New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 95.

⁶ In this context, Robert Solomon's work is right to recognise that, beyond his maintenance of Aristotelian virtues such as "courage" and "generosity" as well as the "distinctively Nietzschean virtues" such as "exuberance" and "risk-taking," there are a range of "crypto-virtues" projected by Nietzsche's writings such as "health" and "strength" "which throw open again the entire question, 'What is a virtue?'" *Living with Nietzsche: What the Great "Immoralist" Has to Teach Us* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 167.

⁷ As Randall Havas notes of Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche, "Life is, in short, the unconditioned condition of itself. Nihilism is the result of our unwillingness to acknowledge this fact." "Who is Heidegger's Nietzsche? (On the Very Idea of the Present Age)" in H. Dreyfus and H. Hall (eds.), *Heidegger: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), p. 234.

⁸ For an account of the abiding influence of Nietzsche's analysis of the challenge of nihilism to

Existence, however, is properly meaningless, because meaning can only be the outcome of a process of interpretation, and there is no “project” that can counteract this situation without falsification. Or, rather, existence itself is the outcome of an interpretation. This is why Nietzsche’s self-proclaimed effort to “break the history of the world in two” is simply the effort to affirm the singularity of *this, here, now*, which must, by definition, have neither relation nor stability — nor, indeed, possible description. There can be no project or program for life. The idea is not an ideal. (The latter depends on the positing of another world, which is precisely what has been destroyed by nihilism). For *this-here-now* is appearing-disappearing itself, which is exactly why it returns eternally, if only as absolute difference, without consistency or coherence, without identity or number. To affirm it is to be destroyed as such. And the decision to affirm it is neither life nor death nor survival nor nothingness.

Nietzsche’s fundamental equation is thus the following: *Life = this-here-now-yes*. But to *choose* life is itself a syncopation, the necessary preliminary to life, without itself being life. Nothing *in* life is able to function as a guide to the decision, since life is what is *attained* by or through such a decision; into the bargain, since each singularity is indeed that, singular, no pre-existing code can function as guidance, only as restraint and curb on life. Each achieved decision changes the very meaning of life, which means that life is what escapes meaning. (This is why Badiou is right, against Deleuze, to hold that Nietzsche is not aiming at sense, but at the unevaluable.⁹) It is in the wake of the decisions of others that the limits of the meaning of life are set and, hence, the limits upon which succeeding generations must decide to dispense with. The decision for life is the decision to dispense with the past, at the limits that that past — that is, the life-affirming decisions of others — has itself set. So, don’t be resentful, affirm the past that you had to suffer, because it is a sequence of life-scars; just don’t think that’s it, either. You will just have to say *yes* backwards, and *yes* forwards, and this *yes, yes* will be linked by the truncated twist of a comma or a minimal gap that is the asignifying trace of the vanished decision itself. As such, no-one will survive the decision. No-one can survive life, only attain it in an “untimely” fashion, the dimensionless hinge that binds the double-faces of Janus.

thought, see my own *The Romanticism of Contemporary Theory: Institution, Aesthetics, Nihilism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), esp. pp. 81–96; also J. Clemens and J. Roffe, “Philosophy as Anti-Religion in the Work of Alain Badiou,” *Sophia*, Vol. 47 (2008), pp. 345–358.

⁹ See A. Badiou, “Who is Nietzsche?” in *Pli*, Vol. 11 (2001), pp. 1–11.

This is why Nietzsche is not, *pace* Heidegger, the last metaphysician, nor, *pace* Badiou, an exemplary anti-philosopher (though he is indeed an “anti-metaphysician” on his own terms).¹⁰ On the contrary, he is an existentialist philosopher, one for whom singular affect-decision-affirmations deserve the name of “Life”. Being is nothing other than what is attained by such decisions, and such being must be given the name of “life”, because it is not survival, nor persistence, nor diligence, nor existence, nor truth, nor... Life is the hole of the whole.

But to know at which point a decision must be made requires a genealogy — whether of morals or whatever — precisely because otherwise one’s decision will be arbitrary or useless. One needs to localise oneself with accuracy, otherwise there is no living. Go to the limit of the decisions of the past, and then find oneself on the edge of the abyss. Decide to jump. Whether you survive or die is of no philosophical nor political interest at that point; that you have lived in the leap, by leaping, must be affirmed as *the* philosophico-political moment. Glancing backwards, a successfully-affirmed decision will have been the establishment of a new limit; in the present, it projects something entirely other, something dead and deadening to be overcome, and a future that is a chaos to be cut into. Life will have been an experiment, not an experience.

Nietzsche, as Laurence Lampert reminds us, was a scientist, trained in one of the most important and rigorous university disciplines of his day: philology.¹¹ This has four immediate consequences. It is because he was scientist of letters — and a professor, too, although not such a good one under many descriptions — that Nietzsche became a radically materialist philosopher. An immanent, material basis must be offered for all claims. Second, those materials must be literal, literally literal. It is in terms of letters — their emergence, disposition, reproduction, transmission, mutation and destruction — that the world must be conceived. Third, as a materialist, one must track the combinations, permutations and mutations of letters if one is to track the becoming of beings. Fourth, one must affirm that every transformative event must be a literal one; or, more pre-

¹⁰ See M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche. Volume IV: Nihilism*, trans. F.A. Capuzzi, edited, with notes and an analysis. D.F. Krell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), as well as various other essays, such as “The Word of Nietzsche: ‘God is Dead,’” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. with intro. W. Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977); Badiou, *op. cit.*

¹¹ See L. Lampert, *Nietzsche and Modern Times: A Study of Bacon, Descartes, and Nietzsche* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

cisely, leave its traces in the forms and dispositions of the letters that the letters themselves cannot say.

The work of genealogy is, for Nietzsche, the necessary interval between ontology (the recognition of the necessary transient contingency of existence) and decision (the overcoming of limits through affirmation of existence), because it provides the trajectory of one's own herd, to the point where one can literally become head of the herd. At that point is power, the head of the herd that is the past as will-to-power, the world itself. Yet to decide necessarily takes you out of the world, beyond power and existence in the affirmation of both. If the artist or adventurer-killer is the preferred emblem for Nietzsche, this is only as a punctual dissimulating marker, not a memorial-stone or starry-pointing pyramid. If world is nothing except will-to-power, life is not world, is not a world. There are not and cannot be any memorials that abide, without themselves weighing the living down with the weight — not even of the dead — but of their inscriptions. What is there must be reconstructed. You have to reconstruct your ontogenesis in order to overgo it. Nothing demands (nor ensures) that any of it can or has to be true. It only has to be effective, and the only signature of that effectivity must be the untimely, getting it all wrong.

Camel, Lion, Child, says Nietzsche in *Zarathustra*.¹² This means: genealogy, negation, resurrection. Or: philology, profanation, creation. Or, again: persistence, obliteration, play. The procedure, then, is clear: 1) a genealogical reconstruction of the processes of emergence of our received ideas (the division of worlds, morality, nihilism); 2) an immanent destruction of received ideas (truth, history, God, being, all the idols of the tribe, etc.); 3) the affirmative production of new ideas (eternal return, will-to-power, etc.). Not that eternal return, will-to-power, the Over-Man, etc., can ever be the last word — although they are the self-assaulting traces of this process, which can expose itself only as misdirection.

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Not any species can achieve all three, perhaps on earth only those clever animals who once happened to invent cognition. Still, the clever animals will have to die, *tant pis*, no matter how puffed up like balloons they might be — and that's just the way it goes. In any case, a genealogy assaults both history and species-

¹² See F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. G. Parkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 23–24.

being. So, just like a very clever philologist, the Over-Man is the one who's prepared to read exceptionally closely, glancing forwards and backwards at once, rereading again, dwelling in the lines.¹³ Nietzsche is that philologist who recognises that even letters are evolutionary, that letters breed with each other, intermingle promiscuously, and in the vast orgy that is world literature, produce monsters which — if they are abhorrent from the point of view of any individual morality — may nevertheless prove indispensable for the continuation of the species. Littoral-monsters, whose footprints can be discerned upon the face of the species as a whole (as one says “genetic footprint” these days, as in “Genghis Khan has the biggest genetic footprint in history”).

To read is already to reproduce, and if one thinks one does it for edification, even merely for pleasure, one is rather being overtaken from behind, rammed in an unnatural hole from which may later, perhaps, issue more monsters. This isn't like being forced into mastery, as today, where everyone has the power to choose, or, to put it more bluntly, shows him- or herself incapable of refusing the position of the-one-who-chooses-within-life. This is at once why nihilism is very close to Nietzsche (“a perfected nihilist”), and also so distant: the one-who-must-choose-within-life is selecting from possibilities that life offers, not choosing for life. It's not for this or that that the Over-Man decides, nor is it for the whole. The Over-Man is the man who's prepared to take himself out, possibly quite literally, in becoming-other-than-man, in vanishing through the hole of the whole.

“Man is a herd animal”: this means, above all, that man is led by the tracks he has laid down *in his own past*. It is not simply a doctrine that holds that men are more willingly followers than leaders, although it is difficult to see how that isn't true for Nietzsche too. It is much rather a doctrine about the ways in which men are able to turn themselves into followers of their own established patterns of behaviour; that is, it is a question of memory, whether voluntary or not, which founds unthought repetition; and such a memory can only ultimately be founded in pain, the true educator.¹⁴ The pain is gone, if its traces remain; it is the dead

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¹³ As Nietzsche puts it in his “Preface” to *Daybreak*, “this art does not so easily get anything done, it teaches to read *well*, that is to say, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers...”, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, intro. M. Tanner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 5.

¹⁴ “Only great pain is the liberator of the spirit, as the teacher of *the great suspicion* that turns

traces of the pain in their own experience that lead men on, in all senses of that phrase, like sirens to the rocks or to the factories. To teach man to become other than a herd animal, other than through the whip or the knout — this is then Nietzsche's fundamental paradox. Zarathustra must be a "re-educator" through something other than purely physical pain; it must be by thought, by an event of thought.

This thought must therefore present itself as anti-metaphysical counter-seduction. It has to combat enemies on at least two fronts: first, the yuppies on the bay and their libidinous entertainments; next, the clumsy, ugly, charmless metaphysicians who couldn't seduce the proverbial village wench using all their lumpen fingers and tongues. Nietzsche berates, as usual, the Germans for their enthusiasm for clothes which take no intelligence to design, and no time to put on, for their sodden beeriness and good marching thighs. Yet he does generate a third enemy as a result of these polemical seductions: his own style. His style must fight against itself if it is not to fail its own re-educational test, on the one hand, or the tendency to become a self-annihilating string of pearls, on the other. If it causes too much pleasure or pain, it risks becoming merely aesthetic or moralistic, eminently ornamental or reactively power-hungry.

How else can Nietzsche's own war against himself then be properly expressed or rather disclosed, except in the terms drawn from sex? Life must mate with death, and man with woman. Nietzsche has to be both a man and a woman, and the "feminization of European culture" against which he rages is as much a sly admission of the necessity for him to be a cross-dresser, a hot transvestite driven to this fate by the sorry hand of history.¹⁵ His seduction must be universal in address, if only a very few will take up its challenge. He cannot by his own lights

every U into an X, a real, proper X, that is, the penultimate one before the final one." *The Gay Science*, ed. B. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 6. This is, of course, a corollary of Nietzsche's genealogy of morals, in which torture is the agent of world-historical mnemotechnics, ultimately interiorised as conscience and consecrated in the confessional.

¹⁵ An entirely typical example of Nietzschean ranting in this regard: "To be sure, there are sufficient idiotic friends and corrupters of woman among the learned asses of the male sex who advise woman to defeminize herself in this fashion and to imitate all the stupidities with which 'man' in Europe, European 'manliness', is sick — who would like to reduce woman to the level of 'general education', if not to that of newspaper reading and playing at politics." *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 149. Nietzsche needs this misogyny, as much a part of his esoteric confession of the necessity of radical self-estrangement, as for his own strategy of seductive counter-seduction.

identify this handful in advance, since to do so would be according to established routines of recognition; he must essay to seduce unknown men and women of all kinds into becoming who they are. *Zarathustra* is, notoriously, for “everyone and no-one”. The esoteric kernel of Nietzsche’s philosophy can be discerned in his staging of the war of thought as a struggle against desexualization.

Alenka Zupančič has noted that the comic aspect of Nietzsche’s style derives from life reflecting upon itself in an entirely immanent way.¹⁶ Life is in the irresolvable self-conflict of the style. Yet what else could exemplify the absolute humour of this immanent self-differentiation better than sex? Or, rather, by the exposure of the necessity of one sex to assume through polemical distortion the sex of the other as a strategy of style? Let’s not forget that “genealogy” is a word inseparable from the problematic of breeding stock, whether we’re talking animals or aristocracy.¹⁷ And let’s also not forget that Nietzsche’s “genealogies” must therefore finally be about the unintended, ungraspable, ambivalent consequences of *mat-ing with the other* (man with woman, the living with the dead, etc.), and not about purity of bloodlines. On the contrary, the inbreeding of blue blood spells haemophilia; true thought must first mate with the dead if it is to have any issue. Which is, once again, and according to Zeno’s interpretation of the Delphic Oracle, equivalent to reading books, *philo*-logy in the fullest sense of the word.¹⁸

Despite his well-deserved personal reputation for lowering the tone of social gatherings, Nietzsche remains the life of the party because he found he could only give birth to himself by fucking himself — and then fucking himself over. (One may have to conclude in a slightly embarrassed way by adding that whoever feels that words such as these are inappropriate in philosophy must have forgotten the founding writings of philosophy itself. Philosophy is a party, a symposium, and the main thing is to stick with it whether you’re a teetotaler, pissed

¹⁶ A. Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Two* (London & Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

¹⁷ On the problem of good breeding and humanism, see P. Sloterdijk’s *boutade*, only recently (and belatedly) translated into English, as “*Rules for the Human Zoo: a response to the Letter on Humanism*,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 27 (2009), pp. 12–28.

¹⁸ See J. Derrida’s brilliant reading of *Ecce Homo* in *The Ear of the Other: otobiography, transference, translation*, trans. A. Ronell et al. (University of Nebraska Press, 1988), esp. “Inasmuch as *I am and follow after my father*, I am the dead man and I am death. Inasmuch as *I am and follow after my mother*, I am life that perseveres, I am the living and the living feminine. I am my father, my mother, and me, death and life, the dead man and the living feminine, and so on.” p. 16.

as a newt or just badly hung-over, and keep on agonising about the dictates of Diotima). Here, then, at an end that is also a new beginning, we rediscover a radical variation on the eternal image of the phoenix, that sole Arabian bird that consumes itself in fire in order to be reborn from its own ashes. Just try doing that on Sydney Harbour.