

***A Dancer's Virtue:* Human Life in Light of Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence**

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A primary assumption of this paper is that Friedrich Nietzsche's texts—in particular *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*—employ artistic metaphors in order (among other purposes, of course) to demonstrate the human being's fundamental relationship with life and earth. Based upon that premise, I shall argue that Nietzsche's experience of the thought of the eternal recurrence brings about a shift in his understanding of life and earth, and that the figure of the dancer in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* serves as a metaphor for the highest mode of human life-activity in light of that shift.

I. Introduction: “I would believe only in a god who could dance.”¹

Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871) and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1884) are full of metaphors, aphorisms, and parables which suggest that human existence is and ought to be an artistic practice—i.e. that for human beings, the very act of living is an act of artistic creation. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, we find that the life forces characterized by the gods Apollo and Dionysus are artistic impulses which belong to “nature herself”² and which find their outlet in human artistic creation: from the Apollinian issues idealized sculpture; from the Dionysian, orgiastic music; and from the union of the two, tragedy. Through these forms of art, which spring out of “nature herself,” human beings express their relationship to life and to the earth. The Apollinian sculptor fixes for eternity the beautiful forms that are revealed to him in his dreams: “the higher truth, the perfection of these states in contrast to the incompletely intelligible every day world, this deep consciousness of nature...make life possible

¹ TSZI, “On Reading and Writing,” p. 153

² *The Birth of Tragedy* (Hereafter *BT*), §2, p. 38

and worth living.”³ In opposition to the Apollinian exaltation of form and of measured, ordered beauty, is the figure of the Dionysian reveler. In the throes of Dionysian ecstasy, one surrenders one’s will to the experience of what Nietzsche refers to as a “primal unity,” which reveals itself in the frenzied singing and dancing of the reveler:

Under the charm of the Dionysian not only is the union between man and man reaffirmed, but nature which has become alienated, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her lost son, man...In song and in dance man expresses himself as a member of a higher community.... He is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: in these paroxysms of intoxication the artistic power of all nature reveals itself.⁴

Finally, when the primal ecstasy of Dionysus is channeled through the Apollinian capacity for ordered illusion, the result is Greek tragedy, which Nietzsche lauds as the highest achievement of human art.

In each of these fundamental art forms—sculpture, music, and tragedy—human beings express their relationship with each other—and more importantly for my purposes, their relationship to life and to the earth. The questions of precisely what Nietzsche means by “life” and “earth” are not easily solved—or even approached—but I think that we can at least say with some confidence that there is a shift in the meaning of these concepts between *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. We might say very simply that in *The Birth of Tragedy*, “life” is characterized as a “primal unity” which expresses itself in the actions of—and relations between—particular creatures, and the “earth” is the site—and perhaps also the material—of life’s perpetual artistic creation. Although these basic characterizations seem also to hold true of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a subtle but crucial shift has taken place, because in that later work, “life” and “earth” must be understood in light of Nietzsche’s notion of the eternal recurrence.⁵

The eternal recurrence is a highly complicated concept which will become clearer in the following discussion. Nevertheless, it will be helpful to begin with at least a preliminary understanding of it. In its most basic form—which I present in an admittedly simplified manner—Nietzsche’s “eternal recurrence” refers to a new

³ *BT*, §1, p. 35

⁴ *BT*, §1, p. 37

⁵ See *Beyond Good and Evil*, §56, p. 258. There, in a manner which accords quite well with the characterization of human activity as an aesthetically sensitive response to the cyclical movement of life and earth which I shall offer below, Nietzsche alludes to the eternal recurrence in musical terms, speaking of a “world-affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have *what was and is* repeated into all eternity, shouting insatiably *da capo*....” (NB: “*da capo*” is a musical direction which means “from the beginning.”)

understanding of temporality according to which time moves, not in a straight line, but rather in a cyclical fashion. What I wish to demonstrate is that this new conception of time results in a correspondingly new understanding of the concept of “life.” Whereas the conception of “life” exemplified in Nietzsche’s earlier text, *The Birth of Tragedy*, seems to refer to the generally linear process of nature’s perpetual striving and unfolding through artistic creation, that linear temporality has been made to “bite its own tail,” to turn back upon itself, in the eternal recurrence. Therefore, life is no longer a linear progression, but rather an eternal repetition⁶ which is also at every moment a complete expression of itself. Similarly, the notion of the “earth” must now be understood differently—if only in that it is now the site of a process, not of perpetual unfolding toward the future, but of recurrence, wherein past and future are mutually implicated in the present moment.

Given that the notions of “life” and “earth” (of which I have offered only rough characterizations, but will discuss in more detail below) have undergone a fundamental shift resulting from Nietzsche’s “discovery”⁷ of the eternal recurrence, it is not surprising that the artistic metaphors used to describe human conduct should also change radically in light of that idea, which is at once a new temporality and, as I shall argue, the framework of a new morality. In fact, Nietzsche himself presents the notion of the eternal recurrence as an idea which necessitates a new form of moral agency:

If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you, as you are, or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, ‘Do you want this once more and innumerable times more?’ would weigh upon your actions as the greatest weight.⁸

In this paper I shall argue that the notion of art as a primordial expression of our fundamental relation to the earth and to life is carried over into *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and ultimately, that dance in particular reveals itself as the fundamental form which this relationship takes in light of the thought of the eternal recurrence. I have two primary reasons for making this claim: first, as I have indicated, I understand the experience of the thought of the eternal recurrence as an experience with unavoidable moral implications. In other words, the experience of

⁶ See Deleuze (1977) and my notes below on that essay.

⁷ In his autobiographical work, *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche describes the eternal recurrence as a thought which he did not invent, but rather received or discovered. See p. 751: “It was then that this idea *came to me*.” (emphasis added) Also, p. 756: “...suddenly, with indescribably certainty and subtlety, something becomes *visible*, audible, something that shakes one to the last depths and throws one down...One hears, one does not seek; one accepts, one does not ask who gives; like lightning, a thought flashes up, with necessity, without hesitation regarding its form—I never had any choice.”

⁸ *The Gay Science*, §341, p. 274

this thought must bring about a new relationship with life and the earth. As we know, Zarathustra (and indeed Nietzsche himself) has had the experience of receiving this “most abysmal thought,”⁹ and his task—arguably—is to prepare humankind to receive it.

The second reason for my suggestion of the central importance of dance is that the artistic images and metaphors presented by Nietzsche have themselves undergone a shift in emphasis. Whereas *The Birth of Tragedy*, obviously, focused on the union of the Dionysian and Apollinian art impulses in the Greek tragic theater (and on the subsequent death of tragedy in the wake of the critical rationality of Socrates), in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, tragedy—indeed writing and drama in general, apart from a few brief references—have largely disappeared from Nietzsche’s discussion and have been replaced primarily by metaphors of song and dance.¹⁰ I do not believe that this shift in language is accidental, nor the result of stylistic whim; on the contrary, it is quite significant, and I believe it supports my thesis that the human being’s fundamental relationship to life and earth—in light of the new temporality and morality brought about by Nietzsche’s epiphany—is best represented by metaphors of dance.

II. Zarathustra’s Virtue: Earth, Life, Body

In the speech¹¹ entitled “On the Gift-Giving Virtue,” Zarathustra counsels his disciples: “Remain faithful to the earth with the power of your virtue...Lead back to the earth the virtue that flew away...—back to the body, back to life, that it may give the earth a meaning, a human meaning.”¹² There are several elements of Zarathustra’s command which deserve close attention, and which will dominate this section of my discussion: “back to the earth,” “back to life,” “back to the body.” Given that my interest in this paper deals specifically with the metaphorical significance of dance—a bodily activity—clearly we must seek to understand Zarathustra’s claim that virtue must be returned to the body. But in order to do this, we must first consider the other two highlighted aspects of Zarathustra’s command—“back to the earth” and “back to life”—because, as I will argue below, I believe that the virtue of the body lies in its responsiveness and attunement to life and earth.

⁹ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Hereafter *TSZ*).III, “The Convalescent, §1,” p. 328

¹⁰ Recall the passage from *Beyond Good and Evil* (§56, p. 258), in which the eternal recurrence is characterized as a “*da capo*.” See my note 5 on p. 2, above.

One might object here that tragedy itself is rooted in the song and dance of the chorus, and therefore that my claim regarding the shift in artistic metaphors is overstated. However, I think it is still fair to say that metaphors of song and dance are more *explicitly* present in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* than in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

¹¹ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* consists primarily of a series of speeches by Nietzsche’s fictional character, Zarathustra. Therefore most of my references to the text will be references to one or more “speech(es).”

¹² *TSZ*.I, “On the Gift-Giving Virtue,” §2, p. 188

As I have said, the notions of “life” and “earth” have undergone a radical transformation in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as a result of Nietzsche’s experience of the thought of the eternal recurrence, and this transformation marks a shift away from both traditional (meta)physical understandings and from Nietzsche’s earlier views in *The Birth of Tragedy*. I will discuss “life” and “earth” jointly, because I believe that the two notions are ultimately inseparable in Nietzsche and cannot be adequately discussed independent of each other.

A. Life and Earth

We are advised to return our virtue to the “earth.” But this does not only mean that we must cut ourselves loose from all afterworldly chains which hold us paralyzed, waiting passively for a truth and a justification of life from beyond. Of course, as we know, so much is true: Zarathustra certainly means to free us from metaphysics and from religious devotion. Note, for example, his refusal to become an object of worship for his disciples.¹³ However, he also intends something more than this—something more specific—for he does not simply tell us that we must lead our virtue away from heaven; rather we are told precisely to lead our virtue back to the earth. That is, our virtue will not only be cut free from the beyond, but it will in some sense derive from the earth itself. In leading our virtue back to the earth, we also allow ourselves to be led by the earth—in other words, our existence must somehow receive its principles and inspiration from the earth.¹⁴ As I shall argue below, this sensitivity to the earth will culminate in the form of affectivity exemplified by the dancer.

The notion of “earth” for which Zarathustra is preparing his disciples is of course vastly different from that to which they have been previously accustomed. Prior to our escape from afterworldly hopes and metaphysical bondage, the earth is disparaged as the less-than-heaven. But for Zarathustra, the “earth” is the site of the eternal recurrence, the temporal movement by which life cuts into itself and overcomes itself. (Note the intertwining of life and earth in this definition.) The earth is the site of perpetual birth, death, and rebirth—but, as Zarathustra counsels us, we ought not to look upon this movement of life and death with despair.

¹³ See *TSZI*, “On the Gift-Giving Virtue,” §3, p. 190: “Now I go alone, my disciples. You too go now, alone. Thus I want it. Verily, I counsel you: go away from me and resist Zarathustra! And even better: be ashamed of him! Perhaps he deceived you... You revere me; but what if your reverence tumbles one day? Beware lest a statue slay you. You say you believe in Zarathustra? But what matters Zarathustra. You are my believers—but what matter all believers? You had not yet sought yourselves: and you found me. Thus do all believers; therefore all faith amounts to so little.”

¹⁴ As I will demonstrate below, the “voluntary beggar” has attempted to follow Zarathustra’s teaching “back to the earth,” but he has not succeeded. The manner and cause of his failure, as we shall see, lie in direct contrast to the mode of existence exemplified by the dancer.

Gripped by what Zarathustra calls his “devil, the spirit of gravity,” we are accustomed to regard life with pious solemnity and to seek our own preservation at all costs, all the while clinging to our hopes for redemption in the beyond. For the one who has not yet “become light,” “the earth and life seem grave”¹⁵: they take an inordinate seriousness. The grave spirit clings fearfully to life, regarding death as the greatest loss—despite the priests’ reminders to look forward to death as the release from the suffering of life.

According to Nietzsche, both the pious, grave spirits—with their rejection of death—and the priests—with their rejection of life—are misguided: for each in their own way impoverish life by holding it separate from death. Rather, it is the very going-under¹⁶ of life which is the necessary condition for life. Life is only possible if it cuts into itself, if it enters into the eternal cycle of living and dying, and for Zarathustra, the best life is that which wills its own going-under: “I love those who do not know how to live, except by going under, for they are those who cross over...I love him who loves his virtue, for virtue is the will to go under.”¹⁷ To overcome both our ambivalent fear of death and our denial of life is to overcome the spirit of gravity and to open ourselves to the true joy of earthly life.

The earth, I have suggested, is best to be understood as the site of the eternal recurrence. It is the space in which life cuts into itself, and in which all will to life is also the will to go under, to perish. Therefore, I believe we are justified in saying that the earth itself is implicated in the eternal recurrence—not simply in the naïve sense, that the plants and animals and physical objects of the earth grow and decay, but rather in a stronger sense: that the earth itself, as the site of all action and life, undergoes its own overcoming. Indeed in a prophecy mentioned in the section entitled “On Old and New Tablets,” Zarathustra describes the world as “fleeing back to itself—as an eternal fleeing and seeking each other again of many gods.”¹⁸

I would like to say that the earth is the “ground” of life—and I will explain what I mean by this, for this phrase requires clarification. Indeed, one might object that such a description grants the earth a stability which is not valid within Nietzsche’s thinking. But I believe that I am justified in saying that the earth is indeed a “ground,” not only in the naïve sense, and also not in the traditional metaphysical sense of stability and certainty. Clearly, the site of a perpetual cycle of self-overcoming could not be regarded as stable. Indeed, many readers of Nietzsche assert that for Nietzsche, life has no real ground, suggesting instead that

¹⁵ *TSZ*.III, “On the Spirit of Gravity, §1” p. 304

¹⁶ The German word *Untergehen* plays a significant role in *TSZ*, and I shall make frequent use of the English rendering “going under.”

¹⁷ *TSZ*.I, “Prologue,” p. 127

¹⁸ *TSZ*.III, “On Old and New Tablets,” §2, p. 309

beneath the phenomenal world there is only an abyss.¹⁹ And one can find in Nietzsche's texts—particularly of *The Birth of Tragedy*—the suggestion that life is in a sense groundless. One might point in particular to the end of Section 7 of that work, where the Dionysian man who has “looked truly into the essence of things...sees everywhere only the horror and absurdity of existence.”²⁰ If life is groundless, and if the earth is the site of life, it would seem that the earth itself could only be regarded as an “abysmally deep ground”²¹—or as no ground at all. But in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, life is not groundless, although we see that such a conclusion is tempting even to Zarathustra himself, of whom a great effort is required in order to overcome the soothsayer's prophecy that “all is empty.”²² I believe that Zarathustra's command to return virtue to the earth, along with his overcoming of nausea and the soothsayer's nihilism, represents a declaration that life does indeed have a ground and is indeed justified: life justifies itself by virtue of its rootedness in the earth—the earth, not simply as the physical earth, but rather as the ground of life.

As the ground of life, the earth contains within itself the weight of life and of the past. It carries the density accumulated by the eternal movement of life. In undergoing—and subsequently overcoming—nausea and nihilism, Zarathustra takes on the weight of the past and simultaneously gives a basis to life: life is not groundless; it is grounded in its own self-overcoming. Life is not, then, a perpetual creation *ex nihilo*; nor can the past bind Zarathustra. I would rather plot for the “ground” a middle course between stability and nothingness, for as Zarathustra asks his disciples: “must there not be that over which one dances and dances away?”²³ The ground of history and traditional morality against which Zarathustra the dancer²⁴ thrusts is certainly not a nothingness. And as we know, the child—the third stage of Zarathustra's metamorphosis—cannot exist on its own. There can be no forgetting, no free relation to past and future without the camel—i.e. without the willingness to take upon one's back the weight of the past.²⁵ The key to

¹⁹ See, for example, Lingis (1977).

²⁰ *BT*, §7, p. 60

²¹ *Beyond Good and Evil*, §289, p. 419

²² *TSZ*.II, “The Soothsayer,” p. 245

²³ *TSZ*.III, “On the Old and New Tablets,” §2, p. 309

²⁴ As I shall mention below, Zarathustra himself is often portrayed as a dancer: for this reason, I will at times use masculine pronouns in my discussion of the dancer.

²⁵ For those who are not familiar with Nietzsche's parable of “The Three Metamorphoses” of the spirit, I provide the following (highly abridged) summary, for we shall see that the theme of the metamorphoses plays a significant role both in *TSZ* and in my paper. In order for the human spirit to become a creator of new values—which is the ostensible purpose of the narrative of *TSZ*—it must undergo a series of changes which Zarathustra presents in metaphorical fashion. First, Zarathustra says, the spirit must become a *camel*, a beast of burden: the camel willfully submits to the burden which is placed upon its back. In this phase, the human spirit takes upon itself the burden of the past and, in a sense, makes itself responsible for the whole of human history. In the second metamorphosis, the spirit must become a *lion*: in this phase, the spirit rages against the ossified rules of tradition and breaks the stone

understanding Zarathustra's maxim that the only redemption for mankind will be in the recreation of all "it was" into "thus I willed it"²⁶ lies in recognizing that the weight of the past is real, but not stable. With this recognition, we arrive at a proper conception of the "earth" as a "ground": it is a foundation which has real weight and density, but which is not stable, but rather constantly shifting and turning over upon itself. In this notion of ground, the earth and the past are intertwined, and both must be constantly overcome in the movement of life. The dancer, who "has his ear in his toes,"²⁷ as Zarathustra says, is attuned to the turbulent, uneven density of the earth and the movement of life.

With all the references to dance in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, it should come as little surprise that at times Nietzsche presents Zarathustra himself as a dancer—perhaps most significantly in Part 3's "The Other Dancing Song." Zarathustra's song relates to us the story of his dance with Life, and as the song tells us, Life incites Zarathustra to dance precisely by dancing herself, leaping away from Zarathustra, only to leap back to him when he retreats. I do not wish to dwell at any great length on this passage, but it is crucial to note that Zarathustra's dancing is attuned, responsive, to the movement and character of Life. Life leaps away from Zarathustra and then toward him again, in a circular pattern of flight and return, and Zarathustra mirrors those movements, engaging himself in a playful relation to Life. What I would like to highlight is the manner in which the cyclical, rhythmic movement of Zarathustra's dance offers itself as a response to the movement of Life. (Recall Zarathustra's prophecy, in which the world is similarly described as a "fleeing and seeking again.") Here Life itself is presented as dancing, moving in what I have described as a circular pattern of flight and return. I want to thematize this metaphorical presentation and to suggest that Life's dance here is precisely its willful entry into the eternal recurrence. As Zarathustra teaches in his speech "On the Tarantulas," "life must overcome itself again and again...Life wants to climb and to overcome itself climbing."²⁸ As I have mentioned above, life's overcoming of itself is the condition for life. Life must will its own going-under that it might reach for something higher than itself. Zarathustra's dance mirrors life's dance and the earth's dance, as does his will to self-overcoming.

tablets of traditional morality. By effecting this break with the burden of the past, the lion frees itself from the constraints of tradition. But, as Zarathustra points out, the lion cannot yet create new values. In order to do so, the spirit must undergo the final metamorphosis: it must become a *child*. Only when it has become a child is the spirit able to see things anew, unfettered by the rigid distinctions and principles which have grown stale, and thus to create new values. For a fuller presentation of the preceding movement, see *TSZ.I*, "On the Three Metamorphoses," pp. 137-140.

²⁶ *TSZ.II*, "On Redemption," p. 251

²⁷ *TSZ.III*, "The Other Dancing Song," §1, p. 336

²⁸ *TSZ.II*, "On the Tarantulas," p. 213

With this understanding of life and earth, let us recall that Zarathustra also urges us to return our virtue to the body. As we shall see, it is precisely through the sensitivity and agency of his body that Zarathustra—as the dancer—is able to attune his activity to that of life and earth. Let us now consider the movements of the dancer, so that the analogy with life and earth—which has, I hope, begun to become evident—might be made more explicit.

B. Body

The dancer (Zarathustra) begins on the ground, his weight is borne fully by the earth, and he is sensitive to the density and contours of the earth—in touch with it. “The dancer has his ear in his toes.”²⁹ His movements, his conduct, will be derived from those of the earth and life. Alluding briefly to Zarathustra’s “On the Three Metamorphoses,” we might here draw a parallel to the camel, which takes the weight and burden of the past and tradition upon itself. By acknowledging and celebrating his intimate contact with the earth, the dancer in a sense takes upon himself the responsibility for the earth. He makes the weight of the earth his own.

³⁰ But Zarathustra the dancer does not remain on the earth. He thrusts against the earth with all the strength of his will, breaking the hold which the earth and the spirit of gravity have had upon him. He has now taken on the character of the lion—the frenzied breaking of the rigidified tablets of morality, the overcoming of his own clinging to the preservation of life.³¹ Finally, having thrust against the weight of the earth, he leaps into the air in a gesture which is at once pure kinetic freedom and creative morality. He has become the child, free to act and create anew, unbound by the past.³² As Nietzsche writes, “the child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning...a sacred ‘Yes.’”³³ Free from the ground, the dancer’s very movement is an act of creativity. But let us be careful not to see in the Zarathustrian dancer’s activity the chaotic, unbridled frenzy of the Dionysian reveler. Rather, his movements, although no longer dictated by the ground, are a response to the ground; they arise precisely out of the dancer’s sensitivity to the earth.³⁴

²⁹ *TSZ*.III, “The Other Dancing Song,” §1, p. 336

³⁰ We might also point out that Zarathustra performs the camel’s task in the early parts of *TSZ*. For a fuller account of the way in which the character and text of Zarathustra themselves enact the three metamorphoses, see Gooding-Williams (1990).

³¹ Zarathustra carries out this task in the middle of *TSZ*, when he confronts the stagnant solidity of traditional morality.

³² Zarathustra assumes the figure of the child (especially) in Part III.

³³ *TSZ*.I, “On the Three Metamorphoses,” p. 139

³⁴ The difference between the two dancing figures of Zarathustra and Dionysus will be examined below. While one might object that the Dionysian reveler also dances due to her sensitivity to life and earth, I shall argue below that the particular modes of affectivity and agency exemplified by the Dionysian dancer are inferior to those of the Zarathustrian dancer.

Of course the dancer does not simply remain in the air, floating above the earth, cut loose from the ground of history and morality. Every leap into the air is followed by a return to the earth: the cycle is resumed. It is in this sense that Zarathustra's dancing mirrors the movement of the eternal recurrence. The dancer's creative, expressive virtue takes its cues from the movement of life and earth in the eternal recurrence. As Zarathustra asks in "The Seven Seals (Or: The Yes and Amen Song)," "If my virtue is a dancer's virtue...how should I not lust after eternity and...the ring of recurrence?"³⁵

We are now in a position to reformulate the original question of this paper by asking: "What is a dancer's virtue?" I believe we can answer this question by saying that, for Zarathustra, the dancer's virtue lies in her peculiar modes of affectivity and agency. This conclusion has begun, I hope, to become apparent in the preceding discussion, but it still requires elucidation and justification. In order to arrive at a clearer picture of the affectivity and agency of the dancer in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, let us compare the Zarathustrian dancer to another dancing figure which plays a significant role in Nietzsche's thinking: the Dionysian reveler. By identifying certain crucial differences between the Zarathustrian and Dionysian dancers, we will begin to see quite clearly the way in which the dancer in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* emerges as the paradigmatic expression of human virtue in light of the eternal recurrence.

III. Body Continued: Dionysus and Zarathustra

It is wise, I think, to broaden our consideration of the dancer somewhat, for of course, metaphors of dance in Nietzsche's works are not exclusive to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.³⁶ Indeed, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche makes several references to dance, which he pairs with music under the heading of Dionysian art. But as I shall argue, Dionysian and Zarathustrian dance are substantially different modes of activity, and the difference between these two types of dance corresponds to the evolution of Nietzsche's understanding of life and earth, which as I have said, is altered by his experience of the eternal recurrence. Let us now examine the shift in Nietzsche's characterizations of dance between *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, so that we might further illuminate the significance of dance in the latter text.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, song and dance are offered as exemplars of Dionysian art. Grippled by the energy of a primitive life force, the Dionysian reveler experiences what Nietzsche calls the "primal unity" of all life—the chaotic

³⁵ *TSZ*, III, "The Seven Seals (Or: The Yes and Amen Song)," §6, pp. 342-343

³⁶ See, for example, *The Gay Science*, §381: "I would not know what the spirit of a philosopher might wish more to be than a good dancer. For the dance is his ideal, also his art, and finally also his only piety, his 'service of God.'"

oneness which underlies all particularity prior to the discriminating and individuating power of Apollo:

In song and dance man expresses himself as a member of a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and speak and is on the way toward flying into the air, dancing...he feels himself a god, he himself now walks about enchanted, in ecstasy, like the gods he saw walking in his dreams.³⁷

The experience of Dionysian revelry, as I have suggested, is analogous to the activity of the dancer in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, but there is a significant difference between the two. The analogy, which I presented provisionally at the beginning of this paper, lies in the fact that Dionysian song and dance on the one hand, and Zarathustrian dance on the other, each represent for Nietzsche, at different points in his thinking, the human being's most intimate contact with life and earth. Let us now extend the analogy and say that in each case, this relationship is characterized by specific forms of agency and affectivity. It is precisely in their differing modes of agency and affectivity that Dionysian and Zarathustrian dance differ—both as forms of art and, more significantly, as expressions of the human being's fundamental relationship to life and earth. Allow me now to elucidate what I mean by these claims about agency and affectivity.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, the human being's relationship to life and earth is not characterized in terms of individual agency or will, but rather as a sort of mystical possession. The reveler does not willfully enact or express, but rather receives, the experience of the Dionysian primal unity; although she may indeed drink wine or perform certain rites—or, indeed, go to the theater!—in order to invoke the spirit of Dionysus, ultimately she can only make herself ready to be overtaken. The reveler is receptive, but in a wholly passive way. Nietzsche writes, she “is no longer an artist, [s]he has become a work of art: in these paroxysms of intoxication the artistic power of all nature reveals itself.”³⁸ It is not the reveler, but rather the “power of nature”—i.e. of life and earth—that expresses itself; the dancer is but the instrument of the Dionysian life force. She is the work of art, not the artist.

On the contrary, the metaphors of dance in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* demonstrate new modes of agency and affectivity which express the human being's new relationship to life and earth. As I have said, the notions of life and earth have undergone a fundamental shift based upon Nietzsche's experience of the thought of the eternal recurrence. Life and earth themselves have entered willfully

³⁷ *BT*, §1, p. 37

³⁸ *BT*, §1, p. 37 (emphasis added)

into the eternal cycle of becoming,³⁹ and human activity must enact a corresponding evolution. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the dancer is not possessed by a life force, but rather attunes herself to the movement of life and earth in the eternal recurrence. The Zarathustrian dancer is still characterized by her affectivity, but her affectivity is of a much different sort than that of the Dionysian dancer.

The Zarathustrian dancer's affectivity—unlike the pure passivity of the Dionysian reveler, which requires the agency of a primal life force—is characterized by her willful submission to life and earth. The Dionysian reveler too submits to life, but she does so with the aim of rendering herself a mere instrument of life's activity. Life as primal unity—strictly speaking—is the agent; the Dionysian dancer is only the medium through which life expresses itself. Activity and passivity are strictly divided: “life” is the active force, and the reveler is passively employed by life's self-expressive impulses.

This is not true of the Zarathustrian dancer. Whereas in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the reveler ceases to be an agent to the extent that her body and will are commandeered by the artistic impulses of life itself, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the dancer expresses a new form of agency—an agency which contains within itself a certain affectivity. Affectivity and agency are intertwined in a unique way in the figure of the Zarathustrian dancer, for she is neither wholly passive nor wholly active. Rather, her activity and passivity are united, and they are united precisely in her body. Her body is attuned to the movements of life and earth and she actively—i.e. willfully—perceives the movements of life and earth in the eternal recurrence, with the express purpose of mimicking and responding to those movements. Like the camel, the Zarathustrian dancer willfully assumes responsibility for the earth. Aware of the intimate contact between her body and the earth, the dancer draws her guidance from the movement of life and earth in the eternal recurrence and willfully submits to the cycle of becoming.

The virtue of the dancer, then, is rooted in a particular mode of bodily existence—in a dynamic union of affectivity and agency. Let us now examine in more detail one particular form of affectivity which I find to be especially crucial, so that we might see more clearly the way in which the dancer's mode of existence emerges as superior to that which Zarathustra finds among mankind hitherto—

³⁹ My characterization of the eternal recurrence as a movement of pure becoming, rather than the repetition of identical events, owes much to Deleuze (1977): “We misconstrue the expression ‘eternal return’ when we take it as the return of the same. It is not being that recurs, but, rather, that recurrence itself constitutes being insofar as it affirms becoming and passing. It is not some one thing that recurs, but that recurrence is itself affirmed by the passage of diversity or multiplicity. In other words, identity in the Eternal Return does not designate the nature of what recurs, but, to the contrary, the fact of recurring difference... We can only understand the Eternal Return as the expression of a principle that serves to explain diversity and the reproduction of diversity, or difference and its repetition” (pp. 86-87).

even among the so-called “higher men.” For, as we shall see, the shortcomings of the higher men are largely due to their failure to adopt the sophisticated mode of affectivity and agency which I find to be exemplified by the dancer.

IV. “The dancer has his ear in his toes.”⁴⁰

I have been arguing that in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche advocates a new form of affectivity—specifically a bodily sensitivity to the movements of life and earth. Contained within the call for this bodily sensitivity is also a special emphasis on listening—as evidenced by the passage from “The Other Dancing Song” which I have chosen as the title of this section and which I have quoted several times earlier as well. Zarathustra frequently laments the fact that the men to whom he speaks are not suited to hear him. “I am not the mouth for these ears,” he says.⁴¹ “The heedful ear is lacking in their limbs.”⁴² In order for Zarathustra the speaker to be effective, what is required of his students is a proper form of hearing, a hearing which he does not find even among the “higher men.” For these higher men—despite their faithful adherence to Zarathustra’s doctrines—have failed to listen properly to their teacher. They have tried to embody Zarathustra’s teachings, but there is something wrong with the way in which they have listened to him. The problem, simply put, is that they have attempted to be guided by what we might call the “letter” of Zarathustra’s speeches; the higher men have listened too literally and too superficially to Zarathustra, and consequently they have failed to understand him. Perhaps the best example is the voluntary beggar, who has allowed himself to be guided by the literal content of Zarathustra’s dictum, “back to the earth,” but has failed to grasp his teacher’s deeper meaning. Rather than pursuing the only possible redemption for mankind by deriving his virtue from the movement of the earth in the eternal recurrence, the voluntary beggar has abandoned mankind altogether, electing instead to preach to cattle.⁴³

The kind of hearing required by Zarathustra’s speech is not a cognitive function through which the listener receives a concatenation of impressions which correspond to given ideas, and then translates those impressions into the meaningful expression which they were meant to represent. In such an event of what I might call cognitive perception, that which is spoken is self-contained, external to both the speaker and the listener. The content of the speaker’s speech is, in a sense, given—it is self-sufficient. It is an idea which exists on its own and which can be communicated via a precise employment of vocabulary and syntax. Neither the speaker nor the listener is essentially implicated in it. All that is

⁴⁰ *TSZ.III*, “The Other Dancing Song,” §1, p. 336

⁴¹ *TSZ.I*, “Prologue,” §5, p. 128

⁴² *TSZ.IV*, “The Sign,” p. 437

⁴³ *TSZ.IV*, “The Voluntary Beggar,” pp. 380-384

required for its effective transmission is that the speaker chooses the proper words and that the listener is able to understand (i.e. decode) those words. If such a description were true of Zarathustra's teachings, then we would have to attribute the inability of Zarathustra's disciples to understand him either to Zarathustra's failure to choose the proper expression of his ideas or to the disciples' insufficient linguistic abilities. However, neither of these is the case. Rather, the entire characterization of communication which I have just described is insufficient to account for the problem. This understanding of communication is itself flawed, and it fails to encompass the kind of hearing which Zarathustra requires of his disciples.

The problem with such a characterization of communication is that it relies upon an impoverished mode of perception, one which presupposes an external relationship between the perceiver and the thing perceived. In his speech "On Immaculate Perception," Zarathustra vehemently criticizes any such detached understanding of perception:

"This would be the highest to my mind"—thus says your lying spirit to itself—"to look at life without desire and not, like a dog, with my tongue hanging out. To be happy in looking, with a will that has died and without the grasping and greed of selfishness, the whole body cold and ashen, but with drunken moon eyes. This I should like best"—thus the seduced seduces himself—"to love the earth as the moon loves her, and to touch her beauty only with my eyes. And this is what the immaculate perception of all things shall mean to me: that I want nothing from them, except to be allowed to lie prostrate before them like a mirror with a hundred eyes."⁴⁴

This kind of perception, Nietzsche argues, is a fiction, for it denies the intimate connection between the perceiver and the world, and is therefore abstract and incomplete. We do not merely look upon the world; rather, we are invested in it. We are caught up in the world, bound to it by our desire, our will—our bodies.⁴⁵ We and the world are mutually implicated in the act of perception, and therefore our understanding of perception must take this mutual implication into account. We must recognize the intimate connection between perceiver and perceived, and we must recognize specifically that the will and desire of the perceiver inform every instance of perception.

⁴⁴ *TSZ*, II, "On Immaculate Perception," p. 234

⁴⁵ Nietzsche makes a similar point in *The Gay Science*: "As soon as we see a new image, we immediately construct it with the aid of all our previous experiences, *depending on the degree* of our honesty and justice. All experiences are moral experiences, even in the realm of sense perception" (§114, pp. 173-4).

The mistake of the higher men is that they attempt to listen to Zarathustra's words as if they were mere signs to be deciphered, internalized, and expressed again. What is necessary is not a detached, cognitive mode of listening, but rather an engaged—and what we can describe, although perhaps imperfectly, as a bodily—form of listening. The higher men, if they are ever to appreciate the fullness of Zarathustra's teaching, must surrender themselves to the full experience of Zarathustra's speeches. They must make themselves vulnerable in order to prepare themselves for the power of Zarathustra's doctrine. Such hearing cannot be a process of detached contemplation predicated upon an external relation between speaker, sign, and listener. The higher men cannot simply open their ears in preparation to receive the activity of Zarathustra's teaching (in the way that the reveler in *The Birth of Tragedy* prepares herself to receive passively the activity of the Dionysian life force); rather they must learn to attune their entire bodies that they might grasp the deeper meaning of Zarathustra's teaching. But, of course, they have not done so. They have tried simply to decipher and enact the literal meaning of Zarathustra's words, and they have failed to embody the truth of his teaching. Hence, Zarathustra concludes, “the heedful ear is lacking in their limbs.”⁴⁶

In their inability to listen to Zarathustra in the proper manner, the higher men betray the inadequacy of their mode of affectivity. What is required is precisely a bodily affectivity which is attuned to life and to the earth, in order that the movement and activity of life and earth might be perceived. At this point, it will likely come as little surprise to my reader when I suggest that the dancer typifies the mode of affectivity required by Zarathustra's teaching. Indeed Zarathustra pronounces explicitly the superiority of the dancer over the higher men: “You higher men, the worst about you is that all of you have not learned to dance as one must dance—dancing away over yourselves!”⁴⁷ The dancer “has his ear in his toes.” That is, the dancer—as both described and exemplified by Zarathustra—recognizes the intimacy by which he is bound to life and earth, and his body is willfully attuned to receive their teaching. Therefore the dancer's bodily affectivity is more properly suited to receive the full import of Zarathustra's teachings than the higher men's detached listening could ever be.

V. Conclusion: Introductory Remarks on the Will to Power of the Dancer

The agency and affectivity which I have identified as constitutive of the “dancer's virtue” extolled by Zarathustra represent the new form which human life must take in light of Nietzsche's (and Zarathustra's) epiphany of the eternal

⁴⁶ *TSZ.IV*, “The Sign,” p. 437

⁴⁷ *TSZ.IV*, “On the Higher Man,” §20, p. 407

recurrence. Given that what I am suggesting is a new understanding of human life, and given that, for Nietzsche, “life” must be understood in terms of the highly complicated notion of the “will to power,” I would be remiss if I did not attempt to consider the dancer as an expression of the will to power. While the scope of this paper will not permit the kind of extensive discussion which would be necessary in order to give a full treatment of the will to power, we can at the very least give a preliminary indication of the dancer’s relationship to this crucial Nietzschean concept. Indeed, even a brief discussion will reveal in the agency and affectivity of the dancer a mode of life which expresses the will to power in its fullest form.

The will to power, Nietzsche writes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, is “the unexhausted procreative will of life.”⁴⁸ It is the will of life to go beyond itself, to create beyond itself. As his readers know quite well, Nietzsche’s descriptions of the will to power are often violent and tend to highlight its destructive aspect, and this is true indeed of many of the appearances of the will to power in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Note for example Zarathustra’s remarks that “life itself requires hostility,”⁴⁹ that “all creators are hard,”⁵⁰ and that “the lion-will wants itself...hungry, violent, lonely, godless.”⁵¹ However, as Zarathustra points out, the will to power—as the fundamental expression of life—is not only destructive and creative, but also possesses a yielding character, or what I have described as an “affectivity.”⁵² For as Zarathustra says, “even the strongest yields.” Life cannot be wholly destructive and aggressive; for indeed life must overcome itself. In order to overcome itself—to “climb over itself climbing”⁵³—life must yield to the eternal movement of becoming. Indeed the very movement of overcoming requires that life itself submit to its own overcoming, or in other words, that it willfully enter into its own surpassing in the eternal recurrence.

⁴⁸ *TSZ*.II, “On Self-Overcoming,” p. 226

⁴⁹ *TSZ*.II, “On the Rabble,” p. 209

⁵⁰ *TSZ*.II, “On the Pitying,” p. 202

⁵¹ *TSZ*.II, “On the Famous Wise Men,” p. 215

⁵² In his essay on the will to power, Alphonso Lingis addresses the affectivity which is inherent in Nietzsche’s conceptions of both *will* and *power*: “affectivity is contained in the Nietzschean concept of will, and power is measured by feeling rather than by the sovereignty of self-consciousness. Before Nietzsche had yet introduced his concept of Will to Power, he spoke of feeling of power; power was taken to be a matter of feeling rather than of will. But the final Nietzschean term ‘will’ does not merely replace, it incorporates that dimension of feeling; for Nietzsche, power—being not a solitary upsurge in being, but a differential element in a field of force—is essentially affective” (p. 51). Lingis’s point here is that the very notions of “will” and “power”—and consequently of “will to power”—contain within themselves an essential element of sensitivity. Another valuable discussion of the affectivity of the will to power is to be found in Deleuze (1977). “Inferior forces (as distinct from those that command) do not cease being forces even though they obey. To obey is a quality of force as such, and it is just as much tied to power as commanding is” (p. 81). “Will to Power belongs to the reactive or dominated force just as well as to the active or dominating force” (p. 90). See also Deleuze’s analysis of the complicated relationship between the will to power and the eternal recurrence, in the same essay.

⁵³ *TSZ*.II, “On the Tarantulas,” p. 213

From even this cursory discussion of the will to power, we can see quite clearly that the Zarathustrian dancer who is characterized by her specific modes of agency and affectivity exhibits the key features of the will to power—both in its active (i.e. creative) and yielding capacities. Although it is beyond the scope of this project to do so at any length, I would like at least to suggest provisionally that the three metamorphoses, which I earlier characterized as corresponding to the affectivity and agency of the dancer, can also be understood as an expression of the yielding (camel), destructive (lion), and creative (child) aspects of the will to power. Thus when the dancer senses—through her bodily affectivity—the movement and activity of life and earth, and when she thrusts against the weight of the earth and leaps into the air—in an act of creative agency—she also expresses, in a precisely bodily way, the will to power.

As Zarathustra teaches, the highest human virtue—“what is great” and “what can be loved in man”⁵⁴—is that the human being is a creature which overcomes itself in its very act of going under. In other words, “man” has a unique potential for virtue inasmuch as his most noble life-activity requires that he submit to the eternal movement of becoming which is life itself. Indeed, I suggest that “virtue” for Zarathustra is precisely the union in the will of self-overcoming and going-under, and that the dancer exemplifies human virtue precisely in her embodiment of these two characteristics. Zarathustra the dancer attunes his body to life and earth, senses their movements, and models his own activity after that which his body has perceived. Zarathustra has received the thought of the eternal recurrence; he has perceived the cyclical movement—the “fleeing and returning” of life and earth, and his virtue lies in his willful submission to that movement in becoming.

“We should consider every day lost on which we have not danced at least once.”
TSZ.III, “On Old and New Tablets,” §23, p. 322

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⁵⁴ TSZ.I, “Prologue,” p. 127

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