

Interpretation

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Volume 17 Number 3

- 323 Scott R. Hemmenway Philosophical Apology in the *Theaetetus*
- 347 Theodore A. Sumberg Reading Vico Three Times
- 355 Colleen A. Sheehan Madison's Party Press Essays
- 379 Robert Eden Tocqueville and the Problem of Natural Right
- 389 John C. Koritansky Civil Religion in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*
- 401 Peter A. Lawler Was Tocqueville a Philosopher?
- 415 Waller R. Newell Zarathustra's Dancing Dialectic
- Discussion*
- 433 Werner J. Dannhouser Leo Strauss as Citizen and Jew
- Review Essay*
- 449 Harvey Burstein Henry M. Rosenthal, *The Consolations of Philosophy*
- Book Reviews*
- 465 Will Morrisey *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin
- 465 *Rebirth of Classical Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle
- 469 William Faulkner, *The De Gaulle Story*

Interpretation

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Zarathustra's Dancing Dialectic

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Of all the interpretations of Nietzsche, none is more penetrating and questionable than Heidegger's. Its scope is vast, there are many ways of engaging it, and debate about it will continue for many years. In this essay, I want to explore it on the basis of just one section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*—but a very important section, I think, for understanding Nietzsche and assessing Heidegger's understanding of Nietzsche.

In Heidegger's view, the crisis of modern life at every level—political, cultural, philosophical—stems from our incapacity to “let Being be Being” (Heidegger, 1977b, p. 104). Being (*Sein*) reveals itself in, through and as finite beings (*Seienden*). Man, conscious of and anxious about his own finitude, would like to preserve those finite revelations including himself (Heidegger, 1977, pp. 12, 125–29, 168–78, 188–89). Out of this desire to freeze the interplay of infinite genesis and finite moment comes the “metaphysical” interpretation of the world according to which Being itself is a supersensible thing or producer of things—an essence, a form, a divine or human will. The “secession of *logos*” occurs when *logos* is no longer indissolubly linked with the coming-to-presence of *physis*, but hardens into “logic”—the rules for the adequate relation of the knower to the objects of representation (Heidegger, 1975, p. 179). In order to control the world and make it conform to its metaphysical essence, man must uproot all existence, opposing himself to Being as an object which can be isolated and subdued. As the core of life—communal, religious and traditional modes of existence closer to Being—is eaten away, modern man is driven on in a frenzy of appropriation, as if complete mastery could banish the unease and homelessness caused by the drive to mastery itself. For Heidegger, the essence of twentieth-century life, whether recognized or not, is this “struggle for the mastery of the earth” (Heidegger, 1977b, pp. 100–101).

Nietzsche, in Heidegger's view, had experienced with agonizing prescience the way in which all of Being was reducing to thinghood, and the realization that “within metaphysics”—that is to say, as the result of all previous history—“there is nothing to Being as such” (Heidegger, 1982, p. 202). The world is drained of meaning; reality becomes empirical; any conviction or faith that cannot be accounted for empirically floats off into a “vapor” of groundless abstraction or arbitrary preferences. The drive to reduce Being to thinghood

finally turns on the supersensible itself, which had first enabled Being to be drained from beings; consequently, “God is dead” (Heidegger, 1975, p. 36). But although Nietzsche experienced the incipient planetary alienation from Being that was to become our twentieth-century reality, he thought the solution lay in the conscious creation of values freed from the earlier metaphysical delusion of eternal permanence—the willing, not of an eternal truth, but of an eternal return of the chance to create “truth.” For Heidegger, this only radicalized the crisis by accepting the very schism between fact and value which is the deeper ground of nihilism (Heidegger, 1975, pp. 17, 199, 203; Heidegger, 1981, p. 149). Through Nietzsche, Heidegger argues, Being comes to be viewed as the will to power to create values. What this really means is that the will to power is erected over Being (Heidegger, 1982, pp. 203, 223). Although intended to free man from subjectivism—the degraded philistinism and materialism of the Last Man—it in reality completes his subjectivization, for to posit man’s will as the creator of all value is, in Heidegger’s view, the ultimate reification of Being into subject and object. Nietzsche, then, both foresaw and hastened the battle for planetary mastery, beside which all traditional meanings of justice and community dwindle into pathetic obsolescence:

When God and the gods are dead and when the will to power is deliberately willed as the principle of value-positing, then dominion over the earth passes to the new willing of man determined by the will to power. (Heidegger, 1977b, pp. 92–99. See also Heidegger, 1981, pp. 157–58.)

This is a terrible vision. Is it a fair reading of Nietzsche? Some have objected that it exaggerates the importance of the formal doctrine of the will to power in Nietzsche’s thought and underrates the variegated and nuanced psychology and typologies which Nietzsche elaborated to provide content for his doctrine¹—a phenomenological richness which, it is arguable, Heidegger’s own philosophy would profit from (See, e.g., Marx, 1971, p. 255; Schrag, 1970, pp. 291–95; Hoy, 1978, pp. 340–45). Through my reading of “The Dancing Song,” a section of Part Two of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I will suggest that there is a dimension of “letting Being be” in Nietzsche’s thought that mitigates Heidegger’s emphasis on the unconditional will to will as its core. “The Dancing Song” is one of the most beautiful and elusive sections in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In it, Zarathustra sings a song to which Cupid and some girls dance in a meadow. The song tells of Zarathustra’s own experience with two women, Wisdom and Life, thereby exploring the relationship of Zarathustra the knower both to what he knows and to the world in which he seeks knowledge. Its details show, I believe, that Nietzsche did not conceive of willing to be its own ground, but understood it to be grounded in an interplay between man and Being in which Life solicits man to will her interpretation in order that Life can come to presence as the manifold values exhibited throughout history.²

THE CONTEXT

"The Dancing Song" is the central of five sections which appear to form a distinct group: (1) "On the Famous Wise Men," (2) "The Night Song," (3) "The Dancing Song," (4) "The Tomb Song," (5) "On Self-Overcoming." The first and fifth sections deal with wisdom. The first, however, deals with those who have merely been popularly acclaimed as wise (p. 214). The fifth section addresses "the wisest," those who are more authentically wise than the "famous" wise men. This section also gives the fullest elaboration so far in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* of the will to power. Zarathustra reveals that what takes itself to be love of the eternal truth is really a "lust" to bend all of life to one will's particular, transitory interpretation (p. 225). These rare thinkers can only properly be described in terms of the degree of will which they manifest, and not by their possession of some fixed, objective knowledge which makes them wise (p. 228).

Nietzsche describes the first and fifth sections as being spoken by Zarathustra (pp. 217, 228). Of the three intervening sections, Nietzsche describes the second and fourth as being sung by Zarathustra (pp. 219, 225). The central section, "The Dancing Song," is a song which accompanies a dance but is concluded by a speech (pp. 221, 222). Whereas the first and fifth sections have Zarathustra deal with the claims to wisdom of others, these central sections are all about Zarathustra's own thinking and wisdom. The first and fifth sections show Zarathustra confidently, sternly laying down the virtues and limitations of other wise men. In the central three sections, however, Zarathustra seems filled with misgivings or doubts about what he himself now knows and what he seeks for the future.

The second and fourth sections are songs pure and simple, and they seem quite melancholy. Both may be said to deal with the loneliness, the temptation to forlornness, with which Zarathustra must wrestle because of the wisdom he has already accumulated—in the first instance ("The Night Song"), because he has too much wisdom to feel a part of the rest of human life, and in the second ("The Tomb Song"), because he has already been forced to give up so many faiths which might have reconciled him to the rest of human life. In sum, whereas Zarathustra gives speeches, almost sermons, about the limitations of other wise men, he sings about his own limitations. The moodiness of song, rather than the didactic certainty of long speeches, seems to be appropriate to Zarathustra's dissatisfaction with what he has already achieved and his uncertainty about where his love of life will carry him next.

The progression of the five sections now seems more clear. After criticizing those who are acclaimed wise for serving and rationalizing the people's prejudices (p. 214), Zarathustra laments, by contrast, his radical detachment from

mankind. He is a lone and untouchable star as night falls (pp. 217, 218). In the narrative context linking “The Night Song” with “The Dancing Song,” night continues to fall, for “The Dancing Song” takes place in the evening, and Zarathustra feels the approach of night at its end (pp. 219, 221). In “The Night Song,” we learn of Zarathustra’s dissatisfaction with the satiation and completeness of his achieved wisdom. In “The Tomb Song,” Zarathustra seems to be taking leave of this wisdom in a gloomy retrospective (p. 222). The tomb image with which it begins continues the general mood of darkness and loneliness from “The Night Song,” but it ends with a stirring reaffirmation of Zarathustra’s will and the necessity of striking out on new paths:

You are still alive and your old self, most patient one. You have still broken out of every tomb. What in my youth was unredeemed lives on in you; and as life and youth you sit there, full of hope, on yellow ruins of tombs. Indeed, for me, you are still the shatterer of all tombs. Hail to thee, my will! (P. 225)

“On Self Overcoming” develops this reaffirmation into a triumphant-sounding lesson on the true source of all great philosophy. In sum, we have the impression, between the first and fifth sections, of the gradual death or darkening of Zarathustra’s achieved wisdom, and the beginning of its reemergence on a new level.

The central section itself, however, does not share in the gloomy mood of the second and fourth, though it, too, takes place as night falls. “The Dancing Song” interrupts Zarathustra’s progression from dissatisfaction with his achieved wisdom in “The Night Song” to a farewell retrospective on his old achievements in “The Tomb Song,” and does not seem to be about either of these. Its theme seems to be *how* Zarathustra achieves wisdom, whatever its particular content may be. We will turn to it now in detail, and this should further substantiate the preceding sketch of the group of sections in which it is embedded.

THE SETTING

One evening Zarathustra walked through a forest with his disciples; and as he sought a well, behold, he came upon a green meadow, silently surrounded by trees and shrubs, and upon it girls were dancing with each other. As soon as the girls recognized Zarathustra they ceased dancing. But Zarathustra walked up to them with a friendly gesture and spoke these words. (P. 219)

It is evening. By the end, Zarathustra tells us the sun has long since set. Hence, the sun may be sinking away as “The Dancing Song” takes place. In the previous section, Zarathustra has compared himself, in the completeness and self-sufficiency of his achieved wisdom, to a sun. As the sole source of his own light or wisdom, he stands in absolute contrast to the dark, to those who learn

from him or adopt his values. The fact that the sun is setting in “The Dancing Song” may mean, then, that Zarathustra’s current wisdom begins to pass away just after it attains perfect fullness and isolation from the rest of life.

We should note that, unlike the surrounding four sections, this section is explicitly introduced and given its setting by Nietzsche. It is conceivable that, in the narrative time frame of Zarathustra’s wanderings, Zarathustra himself passed without interruption from the night song to the tomb song. As we shall see presently, Nietzsche’s setting integrates a number of images from the two preceding sections, as if he wishes to link this section with them, yet none of these images recurs in Zarathustra’s dancing song proper. Nietzsche may have deliberately inserted an event from an altogether different time than the surrounding two songs so as to imply an “interpretation” of Zarathustra: Zarathustra can explore how he philosophizes or, so to speak, regenerates his wisdom only when his old wisdom is declining. This also reminds us of the simple but important fact that Nietzsche is not—does not conceive himself to be—Zarathustra.

The theme of philosophic regeneration is borne out by other details of the setting. Zarathustra and his disciples are walking through a forest. Zarathustra is looking for a well when they come upon a meadow where some girls are dancing. These details remind us of some earlier imagery. In “On the Famous Wise Men,” Zarathustra compares the seeker of truth to a lion who roams in a desert, under the blistering sun of critical knowledge, free of the gods and other values by which people ordinarily live. He is thirsty for the oasis full of trees and wells but will not submit to its idols, that is, he would like to believe in these idols, to live contentedly among other contented things, but his lonely pride resists obeying the “thou shalt” which organize human life (Cf. “The Three Metamorphoses” in Part 1, pp. 138–39).

Truthful I call him who goes into godless deserts, having broken his revering heart. In the yellow sands, burned by the sun, he squints thirstily at the islands abounding in wells, where living things rest under dark trees. Yet his thirst does not persuade him to become like these, dwelling in comfort; for where there are oases there are also idols. Hungry, violent, lonely, godless: thus the lion-will wants itself. Free from the happiness of slaves, redeemed from gods and adorations, fearless and fear-inspiring, great and lonely: such is the will of the truthful. (P. 215)

Yet life seems to gather itself around, to teem and thrive, only where some such idol or value is worshipped unjustifiably and in ignorance of the fact that “truth” is value.

Toward the end of the section, Zarathustra speaks of the truth-seeker having wells in himself (p. 217: “the inmost wells of the spirit”). This seems to mean that the “lion will” begins to mature his own new values, and that, once matured, they become a source of life, a potential fertilizer of new oases with new

idols. The truth-seeker's wisdom does not seem to be worth anything unless it can become a value for the unwise, for those who thrive in the coolness and darkness. This all seems to be a variation on the beginning of Part Two of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where Zarathustra's wisdom is so full that it overflows and must be shared. He compares himself there to a lion who has given birth and needs friends or "turf" on which to rest his cub (p. 197). This seems to parallel the truth-seeker's gestation, so to speak, of wells within himself which might fertilize new oases.

"The Night Song" deals with Zarathustra as the dispenser of the wealth of his achieved knowledge. His soul flows over like a fountain, and it is tempting to regard this as the flowing forth of the wells within the truth-seeker just mentioned. The problem is that Zarathustra never gets to drink and feel pleasure in the "water" or life-affirming values which he gives others. He does not need what others get from him—binding faiths and objects of reverence. Yet, as the "lion will" or critic, he thirsted for the oasis. He needs to feel the same life which others experience with the help of idols, for his own thinking is directed solely toward the enhancement of human life through new idols or values (Cf. *Beyond Good and Evil* 257 [Nietzsche, 1966, p. 201]). How can he provide values for mankind if he does not know what it is to need them?

Light am I; ah, that I were night! But this is my loneliness that I am girt with light. Ah, that I were dark and nocturnal! How I would suck at the breasts of light! . . .

But I live in my own light; I drink back into myself the flames that break out of me. I do not know the happiness of those who receive. . . . This is my poverty, that my hand never rests from giving; this is my envy, that I see waiting eyes and the lit-up nights of longing. Oh, wretchedness of all givers! Oh, darkening of my sun! Oh, craving to crave! Oh, ravenous hunger in satiation! . . .

Oh, it is only you, you dark ones, you nocturnal ones, who create warmth out of that which shines. It is only you who drink milk and refreshment out of the udders of light. (Pp. 217–19)

Does not Zarathustra need to have the needs of those he satisfies, so as to stay in touch with life and man? In being only a giver and not a receiver, he ceases to feel ashamed for those who depend on him. This is because he cannot imagine, and therefore feel the disgrace of, depending on anyone himself. Yet Zarathustra above all others must not be inured to shame. Shame is the measure man takes of himself against the freedom and independence he has not yet attained, and which his pride revolts at not attaining. This pride or "lion will" enables one to overcome the constricting, shaming "thou shalt" of the past. Zarathustra cannot struggle for the advancement of man if he cannot feel ashamed for him (Cf. p. 195).

The danger of those who always give is that they lose their sense of shame; and the heart and hand of those who always mete out become callous from always

meting out. My eye no longer wells over at the shame of those who beg; my hand has grown too hard for the trembling of filled hands. Where have the tears of my eyes gone and the down of my heart? Oh, the loneliness of all givers! (P. 218)

Zarathustra is so rich that he cannot share in the satisfaction of those who are fertilized by his water and rest by the wells and trees which his interpretation of life gives them. Nietzsche observed at the beginning of Part Two that the “hardest” thing was to restrain one’s outpouring of love for others in order to preserve one’s sense of shame over their dependence. Zarathustra, however, did not so restrain himself, and the first seven sections of Part Two seem to comprise the outpouring. Now, however, Zarathustra seems to be disgusted at his shameless generosity, his inability to thirst after values as his dependents “suck at the breasts” of his light. He turns away from his beneficiaries to examine himself.

That Zarathustra is seeking a well in “The Dancing Song” (p. 219) seems to be a continuation of his thirst for the thirsts of the rest of humanity in “The Night Song” (“Night has come: now my craving breaks out of me like a well”). He never finds the well, though, which suggests that, however Zarathustra makes himself needy again, it cannot be in quite the same way that his dependents are needy. The green meadow surrounded by trees and shrubs reminds us of the oasis mentioned earlier. The girls dancing seem to stand for the unwise, who enjoy life innocently, accepting their oasis as natural. They never dream that their green island sprang up only after some creator forsook previous oases to wander in the desert and eventually fertilize a new one.

The girls cease dancing when Zarathustra approaches, as if intimidated by his presence. Does he look too grave for them to go on enjoying themselves without feeling shamed, without feeling summoned to some new and unpalatable duty? Thinking of the two surrounding songs, we are again struck by the inability of the creator to need or rest contented with the idols he creates for others. As for those who are not even disciples, but merely receive their opinions from “nowhere,” they, like the girls, would probably feel a positive revulsion for the originator of their beliefs if they met him face to face. How many of us who like to believe, for example, that “reason” is the criterion for what we do would not find Socrates intimidating or repulsive?

Zarathustra’s sun, his wisdom, the source of his absolute alienation, is declining. He can now go to the oasis, as if his isolation is lessening with that decline. He is trying to go back to where people live, and share in their needs and delights. Zarathustra calls the girls “lovely,” denies being their enemy and asks them to go on dancing. His friendliness to the girls seems to contrast with what we learned of him in “On Little Old and Young Women.” There, he understood woman’s ability to summon the “child,” the pure desire or will, out of man, as her own desire to be possessed and fulfilled by a strong will. But Zarathustra showed no inclination to give himself over to this desire and pos-

sessing. He speaks to an old woman, one presumably out of the running, and perhaps therefore a more “rational” interlocutor for the cold Zarathustra than a girl would have been. He was only concerned about how others must procreate with their sights on the overman. Now Zarathustra is willing to approach young girls, as if he is willing to hazard such an erotic longing within himself.

He professes to work for God against the devil—the spirit of gravity. He acts as if the girls’ pretty dancing will help him drive away that spirit.

Do not cease dancing, you lovely girls! No killjoy has come to you with evil eyes, no enemy of girls. God’s advocate am I before the devil: but he is the spirit of gravity. How could I, you lightfooted ones, be an enemy of godlike dances? Or of girls’ feet with pretty ankles? (Pp. 219–20)

Earlier in Part Two, Zarathustra taught that what we call “God” is really the highest degree of independence and mastery to which man’s pride can aspire at any given time. In advocating “God,” therefore, Zarathustra is urging man to the extreme limit of his self-assertion within the flux of life. As we learn here, the spirit of gravity seems to be an attendant risk of this continuing will to mastery. Is this because, having destroyed old values, we become too attached to our new ones? If we love our new values too dearly, we will forget the ongoing battle for mastery from which they sprang. We will forget that the values are not ends, but really only means, springboards for the continuation and enrichment of the battle, which is itself the only “end.” To fall prey to the spirit of gravity is to delude ourselves as to the importance and permanence of our current values because we cannot bear to part with what we love.

Our unwillingness to lose our present values may eventually turn from love to despair, a sense of oppression under their weight, a fear that nothing new can ever be done. This despair is itself a clue life gives us that we are satisfied only in desiring, not in satiation. This seems to accord with Zarathustra’s misgivings about his own matured wisdom in the surrounding two songs: He despairs of no longer needing anything (“The Night Song”), then wonders what could possibly be left to achieve anyway after so many apparent solutions to life have turned into chimeras (“The Tomb Song”). His willingness in “The Dancing Song” to meet pretty girls and enjoy their dance may represent Zarathustra’s struggle not to be weighed down by past wisdom and regrets over it. It would be giving in to the spirit of gravity to believe that one’s old wisdom was so important, so lasting, or so tragic in failing to last, as to be able to paralyze further efforts at self-overcoming.

Zarathustra unfolds this conclusion more didactically toward the end of “The Tomb Song” and in “On Self Overcoming.” Nietzsche’s insertion of “The Dancing Song,” however, may be meant to let us grasp metaphorically and poetically the inner transformation which Zarathustra had to undergo before he could sum up the lesson in “On Self Overcoming.” Here we may see Zarathustra desiring desire in himself so as to escape the deadweight of “com-

pleted” wisdom. Perhaps it is not enough for Zarathustra to lay down a finished teaching—like the “overman”—and direct the desire of others toward it, as he did in “On Little Old and Young Women.” Zarathustra may have to achieve a wisdom which explains and incorporates his own ongoing desire for wisdom.

Zarathustra goes on to compare himself to a forest at night with a well.

Indeed, I am a forest and a night of dark trees: but he who is not afraid of my darkness will also find rose slopes under my cypresses. And he will also find the little god whom girls love best: beside the well he lies, still, with his eyes shut. (P. 220)

He seems to have absorbed into himself the setting of “The Dancing Song,” including the well he was looking for but did not find in the actual meadow. We might say he has also absorbed into himself the night which was absolutely distinct from the subjective “sun” of his matured wisdom in “The Night Song.” Because his old wisdom is dying, Zarathustra seems able to achieve a reconciliation with the world of darkness and fertility—the world where life is actually lived by the unwise who believe in the idols of the creators. This striking imagery seems to suggest that, his old wisdom having died, Zarathustra once again feels the need to interpret life completely afresh, and has become within himself a breeding ground, an oasis, for potential new values. Within him grow cypresses, trees which, fertilized by the dead, allow new flowers to bloom.

What is the exact character of Zarathustra’s revived need? Before he saw the girls, Zarathustra seemed to be seeking the well-water which he himself formerly provided for others, as if he wanted the needs of those others (“O craving to crave!”). Now he seems content to let this well stay within himself. The dance and the song which it inspires in him seem to take the place of that satisfaction he originally thought would come from being able to drink from his own well—from feeling and gratifying the needs which others felt for what he gave them. Does he not, after all, need so much to feel the needs of others as to feel again the need to provide for their needs—to sink a new well in himself, as it were? Zarathustra now seems to be embarking on an account of how he acquires that wisdom which, once acquired, he dispenses so magnanimously.

There is within him, he says, a god. Nietzsche shortly interrupts Zarathustra to identify this god as Cupid, that is, Desire (p. 220). Desire falls asleep in the daytime by a well. In other words, Zarathustra’s desire to know is dormant when he has achieved a temporary fullness of knowledge, a fullness like the daylight to which he earlier compared himself, and which, like a well, can quench the thirst of those who depend on him and cultivate their oases around his teaching. Zarathustra compares active Desire to a chaser of butterflies who has now fallen asleep from exhaustion. He seems in this way to make light of the objects or achieved content of philosophic desire, to give them the status of fragile, pretty things. That Zarathustra can speak this way may further indicate his determination not to treat those objects as grave and permanent, but as perishable ornaments of the will to power.³

Zarathustra's Desire is happy to remain asleep by the well. Zarathustra has to rouse him. There is a certain temptation, it seems, to lapse into contentment with our horizon once it has been created and settled. The little god parts with his sleep weeping crankily, and Zarathustra holds this up to mockery.

Verily, in bright daylight he fell asleep, the idler! Did he chase after butterflies too much? Do not be angry with me, you beautiful dancers, if I chastise the little god a bit. He may cry and weep—but he is laughable even when he weeps. (P. 220)

In this way he may be holding up to mockery the seriousness with which he himself takes his old, dying wisdom in the two surrounding songs. Their heavy melancholy suggests that Zarathustra overvalues that old wisdom even as he prepares to shed it. The reduction here of that achieved wisdom to happy slumber and of that melancholy to a silly pout shows that Zarathustra is recovering the lighthearted selfishness and playfulness of philosophic desire stripped of its encumbering, "serious" achievements. Even as his tears are still falling, the god wants to dance and have fun.

And with tears in his eyes he shall ask you for a dance, and I myself will sing a song for his dance: a dancing and mocking song on the spirit of gravity, my supreme and most powerful devil. (P. 220).

The gambolling joy of new, reawakened philosophizing prevents us from taking seriously any tears shed over the old.

Remarkably, Desire, who began as a part of Zarathustra's soul, springs forth into the external setting to dance with the girls actually present. ("And this is the song Zarathustra sang while Cupid and the girls danced together.") This bit of magic may mean that the girls themselves are just as much within Zarathustra as outside of him. It may also mean that Zarathustra is really dancing with them, that the dancing god in him has taken control of his actions. It is Nietzsche's interjection between the beginning of the dance and the song proper which hardens our impression that the god, whom he gives a distinct identity, has somehow leapt forth into external reality. The very ambiguity of this transition heightens our awareness that Zarathustra's desire as a knower is not directed at a supersensible, ideal realm, but is actively engaged with the erotic and other forces of life around him. Hence, the distinction between inner thought and external reality becomes highly questionable if not meaningless. The Dancing Song goes on both within and around Zarathustra.

The dancing girls seem to parallel the wild and whimsical Life to whom Zarathustra speaks in his song, and whom he identifies as a woman. They may also stand for his wisdom, who is also a woman and hard to distinguish from life. In general, the content of the song seems to mirror the dance and vice versa. Zarathustra sings while his own Desire and the girls dance. Their dancing may be likened to a kind of coquetry or forestalled consummation. We can imagine them looking into each other's eyes greedily, just as Zarathustra looks

into Life's eyes before they overwhelm him. The dance of forestalled consummation is an appropriate enactment of philosophizing itself as described in the song. Philosophic Desire longs to possess Life and create new offspring or values in her shifting midst, but as yet only gazes longingly on her. This puts us in a position to examine the process of philosophizing or creating itself, in abstraction from any particular values to be overcome or created. There is a temporary equipoise, symbolized in the dance, between the Desire to know and Life, the shifting, womanly object of Desire. They hold each other at arms' length, as it were. The ambiguities of the dance and its setting which we just mentioned mirror those which come out in the song: Is Zarathustra only singing, or is he dancing too? Is his description of Life anything different from a description of his own particular wisdom, the woman he keeps at his side?

THE SONG

Zarathustra recounts having gazed into Life's eyes and begun to sink into her. Life herself pulls Zarathustra out of this torpor and mocks him for thinking she cannot be fathomed or understood.

Is the oblivion into which Zarathustra slips comparable to the sleep of Desire after an exhausting time chasing butterflies? If so, then Life's chastisement of Zarathustra would parallel Zarathustra's chastisement of Desire. Life may previously have had to rouse Zarathustra to confront and stalk her the way Zarathustra has just roused the god to make him dance again. We should bear in mind that the events recounted in the song take place prior to the setting Nietzsche provides for it. ("Into your eyes I looked recently," Zarathustra sings as Cupid and the girls dance.) Zarathustra may already have learned from his dialogue with Life how to deal with his own Desire—how to make it serve the demands of Life, rather than allowing it to take over and control one's access to Life through a particular, successfully achieved object of desire, putting one to sleep. As the rest of the song bears out, Zarathustra does not trust his desire for wisdom to carry him unerringly toward the goal of understanding life. Part of understanding life seems to be understanding the place and capacity of this desire within life as a whole.

Life, it appears here, does not want Zarathustra to be overwhelmed by the difficulty of knowing and defining her. Life wants us to try to dance with her. In defense of this, Life says she is "merely" changeable, easy to know, and does not possess the permanent virtues men ascribe to her.

"Thus runs the speech of all fish," you said; "what *they* do not fathom is unfathomable. But I am merely changeable and wild and a woman in every way, and not virtuous—even if you men call me profound, faithful, eternal, and mysterious. But you men always present us with your own virtues, O you virtuous men!" (P. 220)

These virtues seem to be nothing but various measuring sticks of how little men know: Life is not profound, but men ignorant; not eternal, but men mortal. Zarathustra reacts to this revelation like a man as Life describes man: He cannot believe Life's proclamation of her own meaninglessness. He needs to revere her.⁴

Life's behavior in denying her virtue is paradoxical. Zarathustra cannot pursue Life without looking for some virtue to revere in her. Life wants to be pursued in this way, it would seem. Yet the very pursuit results in the end of the pursuit: the achievement of "eternal" values. The impossibility that our values stay affirmed forever might be thought to anticipate Zarathustra's gloomy retrospective in "The Tomb Song," but the presentation here is gently bewitching, not melancholy. It abstracts from the deadweight of the content of Zarathustra's wisdom to date and leaves the process of acquiring wisdom in delicate outline. Life wants to be evaluated and yet cannot bend herself forever to any one evaluation.

In the next part of his song, Zarathustra recounts a conversation he had with his wisdom. She reproached him, evidently, because he had been praising life. Much like what he just said Life herself did, Wisdom tells Zarathustra that the things he praised in life are only names for ways of focussing and expending his own will: "'You will, you want, you love—that is the only reason why you praise life'" (p. 220). Perhaps she means that when Zarathustra calls life profound, for instance, and is thrilled by the contrast between her profundity and his shallowness, this thrill reveals that he is really carried away with the thought of his own profundity in understanding life. This would lead in turn to the conclusion that profundity is something he assigns to life precisely so that his will can then strive to plumb its depths and feel its own strength.

But whereas Life said this laughingly, perhaps seductively, so as to goad new efforts at possessing her, Zarathustra's wisdom speaks in "anger." She seems to be jealous of Zarathustra's praise for Life. Is this because he thereby fails to praise her, the wisdom he has already achieved and taken to himself? Is she jealous because Life seduces him to want to interpret her anew, casting off his old interpretation, his old wisdom?

Previously, Zarathustra had expected the girls in the meadow to be "angry" at his chastisement and rousing of Desire. Did he learn to expect this from the experience he now recounts of his wisdom's anger? Zarathustra chastised the god for being content to slumber at the well of already achieved wisdom. The girls, by contrast, "like him best" for his sleepiness, as if they securely possessed him in this docile state and, Zarathustra suggests, would resent losing possession. Perhaps Desire's slumber is really the result of previous dancing, or something even more daring, with the girls. Zarathustra's proposal of a dance certainly seems to assuage their anger. Perhaps Zarathustra learned from his earlier experience of Wisdom's anger at the thought of being dispossessed how to make his desire and his wisdom struggle or dance anew, thereby obeying Life's summons to reinterpret her.

Zarathustra, in recounting Wisdom's anger in the song, now calls her his "wild" wisdom. This may be because, since the outburst he is recounting here took place, he has taught her not to try to bind him and his Desire to any one interpretation of Life, but to respond flexibly to Life's own wild flexibility. Wisdom would perhaps like Desire to remain dormant, to fall asleep. But Zarathustra, regarding Life's summons to reinterpretation as more important and true than any one such interpretation or "wisdom," forces Desire to stay awake, pursuing Wisdom but resisting any final satisfaction. In this way, Zarathustra conquers the temptation to expend his desire on some one form of wisdom and then slumber, jealously possessed by that one wisdom. He resists that chimera of an eternal truth or end with which every temporary truth adorns itself, recognizing these truths as mere means to Life's ceaseless self-overcoming and redevelopment. Thus Zarathustra seems to stand very close to life, and his singing for the dance may be his articulation of an insight into life which permits him to govern Desire and Wisdom as an unfinished dance within his soul.

Zarathustra would not, he says, answer Wisdom's accusations. Being merely a servant of the knower's relationship with life, and not an end in herself, she evidently cannot grasp the full meaning of that relationship, but must be governed by it. He is willing now, however, to sum up that relationship in his song for the dancers. This willingness may confirm our interpretation of the dance now taking place as a symbol of Zarathustra's successful ordering of his ongoing desire and his achieved wisdom as a sort of dancing dialectic.

For thus matters stand among the three of us: Deeply I love only life—and verily, most of all when I hate life. But that I am well disposed toward wisdom, and often too well, that is because she reminds me so much of life! She has her eyes, her laugh, and even her little golden fishing rod: is it my fault that the two look so similar? (P. 221)

Zarathustra cannot, he implies, love the wisdom he has achieved at any given time as deeply as the life which seduces him to try to possess such wisdom. He loves life most when he hates her most, probably because it is then that he wants to reinterpret her completely, which is what Life wants him to do. Zarathustra is in harmony with Life because he reflects her own mutability.

But Zarathustra also feels affection for his wisdom, as he says, perhaps too much. Is this because there is a great temptation to mistake one's possessing a certain kind of wisdom for the final possession of the seductress Life? Zarathustra may only be loving his own achieved, temporary wisdom when he thinks he has possessed Life and cast a net around all of her forever. This error may lead to the spirit of gravity, to taking one's wisdom too seriously as the final truth.

Wisdom is very similar to Life, says Zarathustra. She too seduces one to lose oneself in her gaze, but then fishes one out so as to be loved anew. This

similarity to Life modifies our original understanding of Wisdom's anger. It seems she is jealous not only if Zarathustra desires another, but also if he does not actively desire her. Does this mean that even Wisdom is not ultimately satisfied with her own completeness and ability to be possessed, but in her desire to be freshly possessed, seduces the knower to look past the mere content of his present wisdom to the character of wisdom as a continuing process in relation to life as a whole? Does Wisdom herself tempt Zarathustra to throw her over?

This possibility is raised more explicitly in the third and final part of the song. This part ("And when life once asked me . . .") may have taken place prior to what we have just heard about wisdom, and may have enabled Zarathustra to understand the full range of wisdom's motives.

Zarathustra describes wisdom to Life as a seductress much like Life herself.

And when life once asked me, "Who is this wisdom?" I answered fervently, "Oh yes, wisdom! One thirsts after her and is never satisfied; one looks through veils, one grabs through nets. Is she beautiful? How should I know? But even the oldest carps are baited with her. (P. 221)

Wisdom, he says, is "changeable," often contradicts herself ("combs against the grain") and in these ways seems to seduce him to pursue her anew continually. Like Life as described in the first part of the song, Wisdom speaks ill of herself. But, whereas when Life did this, Zarathustra merely refused to believe her, he confesses here that he finds this the "most seductive" thing about Wisdom. At this, Life laughs and claims that Zarathustra has been speaking of her all along. She is sarcastic, as if she has caught Zarathustra in a lie about his attitude toward herself. She may mean by this that when Zarathustra objects to her denial of having any meaning, he really does this not so much because he reveres her, as because he loves the meanings—the "wisdom"—he has imposed on her. Zarathustra has admitted that he wants to make his wisdom a decent woman, as it were, by tying her down once and for all to the meaning he imposes. He wants to believe in, to possess, his own wisdom. According to Life, it seems, this is what he really wants to do to her, too, despite the respectful tone he adopts toward her.

In the light of this final part, the lines between Life and Wisdom seem to be blurring. Life closes her eyes before telling Zarathustra that, in describing wisdom, he has really been talking about her. Is this to preserve a brief moment of distinctness between herself and wisdom before letting Zarathustra sink back into absorption with her? (" . . . then you opened your eyes again, O beloved life. And again I seemed to myself to be sinking into the unfathomable.") The most important thing about wisdom in the end seems to be, not her capacity to settle into one solid interpretation of life, but her connection with the life that continually summons all such interpretations. She is the link between Zarathustra and life. Part of her, as we have seen, is willing to be possessed for

good, and can be jealous of a desire for new wisdom. This part of her, we may say, is on Zarathustra's side of the link to life—the side of the individual human knower who wants to appropriate life all at once and love her as his own. But Wisdom herself wants to be possessed and appreciated again and again, and this part of her seems directly linked to life. The seductiveness and uncertainty of our thinking about life does not, in sum, indicate that we have not yet attained the fixed, permanent truth about life. This uncertainty is, rather, a direct reflection of life, and reveals far more of the “truth” about life than any one interpretation claiming to be a fixed truth.

Interestingly, Life objects to having the closeness of wisdom to life made so explicit: “Should *that* be said to my face?” She closes her eyes after Zarathustra finishes describing wisdom. It is as if she does not want to be further studied by Zarathustra now that he has revealed how similar his way of studying her is to her own qualities. Perhaps this is because understanding too much about how one thinks, as opposed to being convinced that certain particular thoughts are true, will bring one too close to Life and actually prevent us from pursuing Life as she wants to be pursued. Perhaps we cannot love Life if we face her directly, but only through the beautifying veil of some particular, partial perspective or form of wisdom about her. It may suit Life's purposes to have us blind about her, that is, committed to her through the edifying camouflage of some narrow and exclusive horizon (Cf. Nietzsche, 1957, pp. 6–9).

Life demands at the end of the song that Zarathustra tell her, not about how wisdom is like herself, but what this wisdom is on her own: “‘But now speak also of your wisdom.’” We might interpret this as a demand that Zarathustra stop thinking about thinking and simply tell some particular thought or value. At this point, Life opens her eyes again, and Zarathustra slips back into oblivion. This slide into oblivion is, then, his answer to Life's demand that he reveal his actual wisdom. By opening her eyes at this point, moreover, Life deliberately solicits this kind of answer, a wordless wonder or reverie preparing the ground for an eventual value formation.

This seems to confirm our suspicion that the particular content of our thought about life is, at bottom and despite what we fancy to be its rigor and clarity, always grounded in a kind of oblivion comparable to the slumber of satisfied Desire by the well. In the end, Life rouses Zarathustra's desire only so as to be able to satisfy it and put it to sleep again. Life wants us to build those green resting places in her midst. They are fertile lies, places where life can relax, beautify and enjoy herself, like the girls dancing in the meadow. For this reason, not only Wisdom, but Life, too, can sometimes be reluctant to release their possessor from his sleep. Because he understands this, Zarathustra has a sense of how to alternate within himself between the renewing dance of desire with wisdom, and the slumber of that desire temporarily satisfied in achieved values.

At the end of “The Night Song,” just before “The Dancing Song” begins,

Zarathustra says that “night has come” (p. 219). Yet the dancing song begins while it is evening, and at its end, although the sun has set, Zarathustra still says it is evening (p. 222). There seem, then, strictly speaking, to be two nightfalls, the first one of absolute darkness, the second a kind of twilight. The implication would seem to be this: Zarathustra himself feels at the end of “The Night Song” that his matured wisdom stands in absolute contrast to, and alienation from, the darkness of the rest of life. Nietzsche, who has interpolated a story about how Zarathustra regenerates his wisdom, blurs that opposition into a mixture of light and darkness. In this way he suggests that Zarathustra’s wisdom emerges from the darkness of the rest of life and must periodically return to it so as to be able to reemerge. Prior to this return or decline, Zarathustra stands at his furthest point from life and may, in his agony, think that he is alienated forever: “Night has come: alas that I must be light! And thirst for the nocturnal! And loneliness! (p. 219).” Nietzsche, his interpreter, gives us in “The Dancing Song” a metaphor for the cycle of decline into, and reemergence from, life which Zarathustra articulates more didactically for himself toward the end of “The Tomb Song” and in “On Self Overcoming.” Life wills us to will life:

Hail to thee, my Will! And only where there are tombs are there resurrections (P. 225). . . . And life confided this secret to me: “Behold,” it said, “I am that *which must always overcome itself.*” (P. 227)

CONCLUSION

“The Dancing Song” hardly constitutes a full response to Heidegger’s critique of the doctrine of the will to power. But, if I am correct, it does call it into question at a crucial point, the relation of the thinker to Being. It reveals that Nietzsche takes what Heidegger calls letting-be (*Seinlassen*)—the thinker’s surrender to Being or Life and awareness that wisdom is granted to us from out of Life—to be indispensable for properly appreciating what it means to create values. Having said this, I must immediately add that there is no question that Nietzsche means his readers to reintegrate this more patient and passive attunement to Life into the fullblooded, aggressive quest for the regeneration of values toward the overman. The delicate outline of thinking rendered in “The Dancing Song” is abstracted from this quest and is, at bottom and throughout, dedicated to it. For Nietzsche, thinking cannot rest with “thanking” (to use a Heideggerian evocation), but must continue to strive for “the enhancement of the type ‘man’” (*Beyond Good and Evil* 257).

At this point, we reach the wider circle of Heidegger’s encounter with Nietzsche and must stop. But we have at least suggested some grounds for believing that Nietzsche did not regard willing to be its own basis, but rather viewed it as one dimension of an encounter between man and Life which Life

solicits in order to overcome itself. Thus it seems fair to raise for further consideration the question whether the will to create values, understood as the positive outcome of Zarathustra's dancing dialectic, does not lend Nietzsche's thought a richness of content lacking in Heidegger's gnostic evocation of absent Being—an evocation in which the very wish for a phenomenology of our encounter with Being marks an error and falling away from an encounter which resists any mediation and specification in “ontic” terms (See, e.g., Marx, 1971, p. 255; Schrag, 1970, pp. 291–95; Hoy, 1978, pp. 340–45). Nietzsche aims to elaborate a typology of values that mediates the will to power without hindering its epochal scope. Heidegger rejects the very idea of mediation. Nietzsche may not surrender enough of the will to power to Being; Heidegger may surrender too much.⁵

NOTES

1. Eugen Fink criticizes Heidegger for ignoring the Dionysian dimension in Nietzsche's thought—a playful, passionate openness to the mutability of existence which mitigates the monism of the will to power and overman teachings (Fink, 1960, pp. 85–90, 178ff.). Klossowski argues that the eternal recurrence should not be seen, as Heidegger sees it, as an inversion of Platonism which preserves the metaphysical dichotomy between Being and becoming, but as an *ekstasis* comparable to Heidegger's evocation of our “unclosedness” to Being (Klossowski, 1969, pp. 93–107). See also Krell (1984), pp. 267–78; Deleuze (1962), pp. 40–50, 197–205; Heidegger (1981), pp. 173, 207.

2. I use Kaufmann's translation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1974) occasionally amended by reference to Nietzsche (1985). Page references not otherwise identified are to this translation. Pangle's brief discussion of the three songs is very helpful (1986, pp. 163–66). I do not agree, however, that the Wisdom to whom Zarathustra is speaking in “The Dancing Song” is the doctrine of the will to power exclusively or per se. Wisdom here, I think, stands for all of Zarathustra's valuations to date. These certainly include a number of intimations of the will to power doctrine, but this doctrine receives its fullest elaboration after “The Dancing Song” in “On Self-Overcoming.” This leads me to believe that Zarathustra could not fully articulate the doctrine until he had passed through his experiences with Life and Wisdom.

3. Cf. *Beyond Good and Evil* 296 (Nietzsche, 1966, p. 237), where Nietzsche characterizes his thoughts as “only birds that grew weary of flying, flew astray and can now be caught by hand. We immortalize what cannot live and fly much longer . . . my written and painted thoughts.”

4. Cf. p. 171: “To esteem is to create. . . . Through esteeming alone is there value,” and p. 255, where Zarathustra says to the wisest: “You still want to create the world before which you can kneel: that is your ultimate hope and intoxication.”

5. The following passages from Heidegger give a sense of why he believes that the will to power to create new, life-enhancing values is based on a fundamental error. According to Heidegger, Being cannot be instantiated in any hierarchy of values. The very effort to do so drives beings apart from Being. Thinking can only dwell in Being's revelations of itself through beings—beings which limit Being by appearing, and which appear, therefore, by virtue of Being's withdrawal. The proper stance toward Being, then, can never be one of reforming it, but of a devotional openness to, and gratitude for, however it may happen to come to presence. “When the turning comes to pass in the danger, this can happen only without mediation. For Being has no equal whatever. It is not brought about by anything else nor does it itself bring anything about. . . . Sheerly out of its own essence of concealedness, Being brings itself to pass into its epoch” (Heidegger, 1977a, p. 44). “That which according to its essence preservingly conceals, and thus remains concealed in its

essence and entirely hidden, though nonetheless it somehow appears, is in itself what we call *the mystery*. We might say that the being is abandoned by Being itself. The abandonment by Being applies to beings as a whole, not only that being which takes the shape of man, who represents beings as such, a representing in which Being itself withdraws from him in its truth" (Heidegger, 1982, pp. 226, 215). "To want to overcome nihilism—which is now thought in its essence—and to overcome it would mean that man of himself advance against Being . . . But who or what would be powerful enough to attack Being itself, no matter from what perspective or with what intent, and to bring it under the sway of man?" (Heidegger, 1982, p. 223).

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