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## **Nietzsche's cultural revolutions and the annihilation of the thing<sup>\*</sup>**

Nietzsche was a 'cultural revolutionary and transvaluer' (Ernst Bertram) who looked at the entire human tradition, European and extra-European, with extremely critical, suspicious and at times cynical, although at other times admiring eyes. He was convinced that all revolution, both within the materiality of history and in the intellectual sphere of the literary-philosophical discourse carries with it the opposites of destruction and construction, annihilation and preservation. Ernst Bertram, whom Thomas Mann rightly considered a man of the conservative revolution in the inter-war years, in his praising monograph of Nietzsche during the unsettled times after the end of the First World War classed him as an optimist of all becoming when he said: 'Everything revolutionary both obeys and enforces the law that ensures that the best part of what is opposed actually continues to endure.'<sup>1</sup> If in the disruptions of this warring period between ideologies, political parties and movements there is a thinker who could rival Karl Marx's influence it was Nietzsche, at least as far as Germany is concerned. Being an expert in multivalent expression his appeal extended across the entire contradictory spectrum of political, intellectual and artistic movements which battled for social and cultural change from the late 19th century through the 1920s and to the middle of the 20th century. His famous dictum "Everything is false. Everything is allowed",<sup>2</sup> initially describing the historical reversal in ancient Greek thinking from pre-Platonic myth-

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst Bertram, *Nietzsche: attempt at a mythology*, translated and with an introduction by Robert E. Norton, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2009, p.11 (Original German Edition *Nietzsche. Versuch einer Mythologie*, Georg Bondi, Berlin, 1918; 2nd edition 1919)

<sup>2</sup> 'Alles ist falsch. Alles ist erlaubt.' F.N. 1884, <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/NF-1884,25>; *Aus dem Nachlass der Achtziger Jahre*, Karl Schlechta, *Friedrich Nietzsche. Werke in drei Bänden*, Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich, 1966, 7th edn. 1973, vol.III, p.424. (Henceforth quoted as Schlechta + vol.+ page).

ological faith and wisdom to the all-questioning outlook of Socratic science,<sup>3</sup> seems to qualify him even as a forerunner of postmodernism. Fascination with Nietzsche's thought encompassed the youth movements before 1914, feminism, socialism, imperialism, expressionism, dadaism, the conservative revolution of the 1920s, fascism from Mussolini to Hitler, and German and French existentialism and post-structuralism. He also influenced many of the most important writers in Germany, Austria, Russia, France, Britain, the United States and elsewhere. His provocative ideas - the superman, the will to power, eternal return, death of god and nihilism - are widely known at least as phrases. They signal his basic concern with wanting to overcome the German and European culture in which he lived. It was modern, decadent and fateful but it contained the possibility of being excelled by its own inherent potentials. Both his advocates and his enemies tend to agree that his thought is historically pivotal. Nietzsche himself made this claim. Is it possible to test its veracity? Is it even sensible to do so given Nietzsche's derision of scientific man's incorrigible, though fallacious, belief in the possibility of truth?

I suggest that at least hypothetically we accept Nietzsche's declarations about his own importance. Recognition of his thought would come in the future, he believed: 'Only the day after tomorrow belongs to me. Some are born posthumously', Nietzsche declares confidently in *The Antichrist* in 1888.<sup>4</sup> He tentatively mentions the year 2000 when he might finally find congenial readers.<sup>5</sup> Can we test the historical perspective under which he can be examined as an oracular philosopher? After all he tried a *Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* in 1886 and understood himself not just as a diagnostician of his times, or providing a new look at the past, but was essentially focussed on the future. In his philosophical endeavour diagnosis necessitated prognosis. Can we

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<sup>3</sup> See Elisabeth Kuhn, 'Nietzsches Quelle des "Assassinenpruchs"', in Ernst Behler, Eckhardt Heftrich, Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, (eds.), *Monographien und Texte zur Nietzsche-Forschung*, vol. 27, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, New York, 1994, pp.268-75

<sup>4</sup> 'Erst das Übermorgen gehört mir. Einige werden posthum geboren.' F.N., *Der Antichrist. Fluch auf das Christentum*, 1888; Digital Critical Edition (eKGWB) at <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/AC-Titelblatt>; . vol. II, p.1162.

<sup>5</sup> See letter to Malwida von Meysenbug, 24.9.1886, at <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/BVN-1886,756>; Schlechta, vol III, p.1244. More specifically the reference is to *Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft*

read Nietzsche backwards from the future he claimed he foresaw? Is he truly marking the juncture within the history of philosophy where the whole of the past appears before one man's judging mind, empowering him to release his sensitivity as an observer and discoverer of the pointers ahead and to pick apart the entire terminological nomenclature on which the best part of European philosophy rests. Cause, causality, the distinction between right and wrong, true and false, the verity of an entity, object, thing, the rhetoric of logic and argumentation, are all sucked into the vortex of Nietzsche's pessimistic nominalism and his deconstructing perspectivism. This becomes increasingly more intense as he divorces from Platonism, Old-Testament ethics, Christianity, Wagner's music and mythology, as well as from German and European politics. Let us rehearse some of the well-known dramatic self-evaluations which occur in Nietzsche's late writings. Here is one from the now so titled 'Fragments of the 1880s' or 'Late Notebooks':

What I narrate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come otherwise: *the rise of nihilism*. This history can be told already: for necessity itself is here at work. This future is already speaking in a hundred signs, this fate is already announcing itself everywhere; for this music of the future every ear is already cocked. For long now our entire European culture has been moving, with a tormenting tension that grows greater from decade to decade, as if towards a catastrophe: restless, violent, precipitate: like a river that wants to reach its *end* and refuses to reflect - yea that even dreads reflection.<sup>6</sup>

Even more dramatically Nietzsche threateningly refers to himself as dynamite in *Ecce Homo* (1888):

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<sup>6</sup> Was ich erzähle, ist die Geschichte der nächsten zwei Jahrhunderte. Ich beschreibe, was kommt, was nicht mehr anders kommen kann: die Heraufkunft des Nihilismus. Diese Geschichte kann jetzt schon erzählt werden: denn die Notwendigkeit selbst ist hier am Werke. Diese Zukunft redet schon in hundert Zeichen, dieses Schicksal kündigt überall sich an; für diese Musik der Zukunft sind alle Ohren bereits gespitzt. Unsre ganze europäische Kultur bewegt sich seit langem schon mit einer Tortur der Spannung, die von Jahrzehnt zu Jahrzehnt wächst, wie auf eine Katastrophe los: unruhig, gewaltsam, überstürzt: einem Strom ähnlich, der ans Ende will, der sich nicht mehr besinnt, der Furcht davor hat, sich zu besinnen. <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/NF-1887,11>; Aus dem Nachlass der achtziger Jahre, Schlechta, vol. III, p.634

I know my fate. One day my name will be associated with the memory of something tremendous — a crisis without equal on earth, the most profound collision of conscience, a decision that was conjured up against everything that had been believed, demanded, hallowed so far. I am no man, I am dynamite.<sup>7</sup>

In the same book he had earlier said:

My task, to prepare for a moment of the highest self-contemplation of mankind, a *great noontide* when it looks back and forward and leaves behind the domain of chance and of priests and poses the question why?, what for? for the first time as a whole....<sup>8</sup>

Given the hyperbolic nature of such statements, it is not surprising that some interpreters count these texts as being affected by the onset of Nietzsche's mental illness, as Nietzsche's admirer and early text editor, Peter Gast alias Heinrich Köselitz, had briefly suggested; so does one of his prominent biographers, Curt Paul Janz, in the second volume of his extensive three-volume work. But it is much more likely that, as Nietzsche reported in a letter to Malwida von Meysenbug, he adopted the image of dynamite after it had been used about him in a review of *Beyond Good and Evil*.<sup>9</sup> There is no irony in Nietzsche's self-assertive statements; their shrill boastfulness is meant seriously. It provokes this question: has Nietzsche really proved to be dynamite in the realm of thought and culture? For him the world of politics at his time was beneath contempt. He refers to Nationalitäts-Wahnsinn<sup>10</sup> (nationalistic frenzy), Hornvieh-Nationalismus (bovine nationalism), and despises 'Vaterländerei und Schol-

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<sup>7</sup> *Ich kenne mein Loos. Es wird sich einmal an meinen Namen die Erinnerung an etwas Ungeheures anknüpfen - an eine Krisis, wie es keine auf Erden gab, an die tiefste Gewissens-Kollision, an eine Entscheidung, heraufbeschworen gegen alles, was bis dahin geglaubt, gefordert, geheiligt worden war. Ich bin kein Mensch, ich bin Dynamit.* F.N., *Ecce Homo*, *Warum ich ein Schicksal bin*, at <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/NF-1888,12>; also at <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB>; Schlechta, vol. II, p.1152

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo. How One Becomes What One Is*, Translated by Thomas Wayne, Algora Publishing, New York, 2004, p.65. Original German: *Meine Aufgabe, einen Augenblick höchster Selbstbesinnung der Menschheit vorzubereiten, einen großen Mittag, wo sie zurückschaut und hinauschaat* At <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB>; Schlechta, vol.II, p.1125

<sup>9</sup> See Letter to Malwida von Meysenbug, Sils-Maria, 24 September 1886, at <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/BVN-1886>; Schlechta, vol. III, p.1245

<sup>10</sup> F.N., *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, (1886), <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/JGB>; Schlechta, II/724

lenkleberei' (patriotic stupor and clodhopping provincialism). His ideal is a racial mix of all Europeans, a transcultural nomadic elite as planetary rulers.<sup>11</sup> Has he truly been the prophetic historian of the time that came after him and in which we now live?

Nietzsche certainly tried to blow apart the chief cultural assumptions of the world in which he had grown up. Perhaps there were stimuli in his early psychological make-up for some of his radical dictums. More or less plausibly it has been suggested that his Zarathustra's declaration, God is dead, is but a kind of revenge for the loss of his father at the age of five.<sup>12</sup> Already as a youth in his early teens and fundamentally at sixteen and seventeen Nietzsche deeply reflected about the spiritual, social and cultural environs that had shaped his experience to date. From the beginning his thinking is concerned with how he might have been influenced by the world around him and how he might find a critical location within it. His many poems, right from his early teens, show him to be keen to overcome the seductions of comfortable domestication. There are signs that he is applying a hermeneutics of suspicion already as a youth, trying to reveal the hidden motivations operative within the world of faith and morality in which his life is set. He appears driven by a feeling that he has to reject and oppose these motivations in order to find himself.

However, at Schulpforta, the grammar school Nietzsche attended, he was also still thinking hard about what the Christian faith could mean for him although he tended to a decidedly this-worldly interpretation with implications, counter to his later scepticism about free will, that the individual is an entirely self-responsible being. In April 1862 at seventeen and a half he wrote to friends that we as individuals are exclusively to blame if we fail to fulfil our purpose in life, we cannot seek to pretend we are in the hands of any higher powers. His demythologisation of the Christian teachings had already progressed to the point where he could declare: 'That god was made man only

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. F.N., *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, (1878), <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/MA-II>; Schlechta, vol. I, p.916

<sup>12</sup> See Hermann Josef Schmidt, *Nietzsche Absconditus oder Spurenlesen bei Nietzsche*, IBDK Verlag, Berlin - Aschaffenburg, 1991

shows that the human being should not look for salvation in infinity, but must find heaven on this earth.’<sup>13</sup> For good measure, but without naming his authority, he refers to Ludwig Feuerbach’s *Das Wesen des Christentums* (The Essence of Christianity, 1841) where the evolution of religion is closely related to distinct stages in the development of human kind which, fully matured, is thought to mean the abandonment of religious sentiment. Hence Nietzsche’s first critical step away from the cultural environment in which he grew up was taken under the banner of an influential left Hegelian theorist whose ideas are also traceable in Nietzsche’s remarkably prescient essay on *Fatum und Geschichte* (*Fate and History*), dated Easter 1862. Here the youth is boldly announcing his far-reaching philosophical intentions and at the same time precociously reminding himself that he must be careful lest he pretend to solve problems that have beaten the best thinkers of the past millennia. He wants to reconcile science and philosophy and from science and history construct a ‘system of the real’. Present in this text are most of the themes which he intoned in ever renewed variations throughout his writing career: not being a ‘free spirit’ yet he is yearning to attain more liberated judgement about ‘religion and Christianity’.<sup>14</sup> He stresses the necessity to throw off the yoke of prejudices acquired through primary socialisation in childhood, meaning to gain critical distance from Christian teaching and church history, calculating the presumption of launching himself into a revolution against the entire philosophical tradition of Europe, conceiving of the idea of the superman. The philosopher is to be a prophet of the circularity of history, being aware of the multiplicity of moral systems and of standing at the beginning of a new age.

The next stage in Nietzsche’s conception of cultural revolutions is a much more thought out text which he later called his first attempt at a transvaluation of all values.

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<sup>13</sup> *Daß Gott Mensch geworden ist, weist nur darauf hin, daß der Mensch nicht im Unendlichen seine Seligkeit suchen soll, sondern auf der Erde seinen Himmel gründe.* Brief BVN-1862,301, 27 April at

<http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/BVN-1862>

<sup>14</sup> ‘...einen freieren Standpunkt wählen, um von da aus ein unparteiisches und der Zeit angemessenes Urtheil über Religion und Christentum fällen zu dürfen.’ F.N., *Fatum und Geschichte*, April 1862 available at

<http://www.thenietzschechannel.com/works-unpub/youth/1862-fahg.htm>

In *The Twilight of the Idols* he talks about the orgiastic exuberance of saying yes to life, even to the extent of affirming its destructiveness and possible self-destruction:

And with that I again touch on my earliest point of departure: The Birth of Tragedy was my first revaluation of all values.... I, the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysus...<sup>15</sup>

*Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* was finished in October 1871 and programmatically formulated what Nietzsche considered to be a joint project with his then friend Richard Wagner. Both were filled with a messianic sense of mission. Cosima Wagner, who was present at their conversations exhorts Nietzsche to hold on to their shared ‘hopes and desires’ to bring about the defeat of the dull world and prepare for the advent of ‘the noble one’.<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, instead of following the idealised humanistic interpretation of Winckelmann and Goethe, saw in the ancient Greek gods, above all in Apollo and Dionysus, elemental vitalist forces.<sup>17</sup> In order to be able to achieve the highest form of life, that is human society, the life-force itself had to create the Olympians lest mankind linger forever in the abyss of suffering and death that is its constant natural fate. Apollo is interpreted as the divine projection of an anthropomorphic drive to fashion a screen of images, myths, religious narratives, utopian ideologies, social institutions, and art, and to posit as perception in front of the harshness of reality. Not unlike Marx’s idea of society evolving a superstructure of ideas, beliefs, laws and institutions to legitimate the rule of class society the Greek gods are manifestations of a strategic ruse to make the survival of the human race a seductive proposition. Cultural creativity is but the ingenious erection of a screen of illusions which hides, and yet is rooted in, the Dionysian exuberance of nature’s procreation and destruction. Nietzsche, deeply convinced of the necessity of rank, at that stage still could not see any development towards a higher culture without the coercion of the

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<sup>15</sup> F.N., *Twilight of the Idols*, ‘What I owe to the ancients’, section 5; trans. Duncan Large, Oxford, 2008

<sup>16</sup> N.F., *KGB*, II.2, p.152

<sup>17</sup> Georg Friedrich Creuzer in *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*, 1810-12, explained the old mysteries of Dionysus and Orphic myths as oriental substrates of ancient Greek religious beliefs.

state enabling the enslavement of the many. The state is a ‘means of the reality of art’.<sup>18</sup> Without bracketing the many by a disciplinary structure the liberation of the few from constant toil could not be effected and hence the evolution of art and architecture would not be possible.

In the course of the 1870s Nietzsche was increasingly unable to accept a position of satellite to Wagner. At the same time he became ever more critical of Bismarckian Germany and its state as agents of cultural advancement. He seems to have become sufficiently disgusted with Germany to claim that he had Polish ancestry. This claim has been thoroughly disproved by Curt Paul Janz and declared as fanciful by the editors of the *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Already by the time of Nietzsche’s third so-called *Untimely Meditations*, ‘On the future of our educational institutions’, in February 1872 he considered the way that German grammar schools, also German universities, were developing as utterly at variance with the aim of achieving a creative elite under the umbrella of the state’s protection. Instead the state, above all the Prussian one that was so admired in many parts of 1870s Europe, was only interested in educated uniformed lackeys for its administration and its military.<sup>19</sup>

The modern state is therefore an instrument of enchaining its youth in small-scale, short-sighted utilitarian purposes and hence promotes the trajectory of nihilism that is the essence of modernity. Nietzsche’s argumentation for the necessity of the transformation of all values, another phrase for fundamental cultural revolution, becomes more acute in the course of the 1880s. There is little to be hoped for from the modern state, which is but a vehicle for mediocritisation (*Vermittelmäßigung*), hence of nihilism. Nihilism is defined as a contemporary European phenomenon, a historical phase that has collectively been entered and that is marked by an ever less retrievable loss of values, religious, moral, intellectual, and communal. In the fragmentary notes which

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<sup>18</sup> F.N., *KGW*, vol.III.3, p.149: ‘*Der Staat war ein Mittel der Kunstwirklichkeit*’.

<sup>19</sup> See Schlechta, vol. III, pp.226-7 (*Über die Zukunft unserer Bildungsanstalten. Dritter Vortrag*) where Nietzsche argues that the ancient state emphatically did not share the utilitarian point of view of recognising as culture only what was directly useful to the state itself.



make up his posthumously published literary legacy of the 1880s he succinctly defined nihilism as the ‘radical repudiation of value, meaning, desirability’,<sup>20</sup> where value denotes what is regarded as good and evil in the past two and half millennia; meaning encompasses the world view chiefly of Christian societies, desirability the idea and ideals of the metaphysical imaginary. Nihilism is the historical tsunami that is sweeping over the entire European life world, thought and behaviour, past and present. It is not just an inadvertent happening but driven by science and technology which have forcefully taken hold of the nature that surrounds us and of which we are an inseparable part.

In a passage from *On the Genealogy of Morals* of 1887, which initially sounds as though the still lucid Nietzsche is advocating green ideas, he derides science as hopelessly enfeathered by the illusion that everything is related to everything in a web of causality:

Hubris today characterises our whole attitude towards nature, our rape of nature with the help of machines and the completely unscrupulous inventiveness of technicians and engineers; hubris characterises our attitude to god, or rather to some alleged spider of purpose and ethics lurking behind the great spider’s web of causality.<sup>21</sup>

In attacking once again the idea of causality much more radically than the empiricist sceptic David Hume ever did Nietzsche is here at the same time tearing apart the entire nexus of the construction of being hitherto believed in. He is promoting the devaluation of the metaphysical world in which the *primus motor immotus* (the supreme motor itself unmoved, that is God) is satirically dismissed as a spider spinning an imaginary web of purposes and values which are actually only the emanations of specific interests, by rulers philosophical, political or ecclesiastical. Nihilism is a period

<sup>20</sup> N.F., ‘die radikale Ablehnung von Wert, Sinn, Wünschbarkeit’, Schlechta, vol.III, p.881

<sup>21</sup> *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Cambridge, trans.Carol Diethe, 1994, p.86-7. Original German: Hybris ist heute unsre ganze Stellung zur Natur, unsre Natur-Vergewaltigung mit Hilfe der Maschinen und der so unbedenklichen Techniker- und Ingenieur-Erfindsamkeit; Hybris ist unsre Stellung zu Gott, will sagen zu irgendeiner angeblichen Zweck- und Sittlichkeits-Spinne hinter dem großen Fangnetz-Gewebe der Ursächlichkeit..., Schlechta, vol.II, p. 854

whose prediction allows Nietzsche to stress his own importance as historically pivotal, not least because it is said to be a transition. It is at once the jumping-off ground for either a promising society of higher culture, higher human beings, higher life forms or of complete destruction. Science and technology are both critically deconstructed by Nietzsche and yet praised as means giving human beings an excess of power. ‘Science strives to bring about the enslavement of nature.’<sup>22</sup> Cognition is not a search for objective truth but an attempt at fashioning reality into a functional tool for human life.

Much of science is but the pretence that reality can be mathematicized while mathematics rests on the illusion that things can only be understood if they can be counted, measured, quantified. Nietzsche thinks that life means living within a workable illusion. That is as such not categorised as negative. Nevertheless he warns that mathematics might just be a means of ‘debaring the mind from catching sight of the really great problems and locations of interrogation’ and the many-sided character of existence is devalued to a ‘ready-reckoner exercise and calculation for couch-potato mathematicians.’<sup>23</sup>

While the essentially mathematicised operation of science is interpreted as part of the decadence that makes up modernity it is necessary to acknowledge Nietzsche’s sustained interest in the development of the sciences from psychology and sociology to biology, chemistry and physics. Recent research has shown that his interest, far from merely eliciting caustic observations, shows him to be deeply in tune with the latest scientific discoveries.<sup>24</sup>

Since Nietzsche’s intellectual death science has been mathematicised to the point of predicting the smallest elements of energy that are at work within the atomic nucleus. Could Nietzsche be said to have prepared the ground of any scientific advances when, problematically, he had declared atoms as subjective figments of the mind, which are

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Die Wissenschaft ist darauf aus, diese *Sklaverei der Natur* herbeizuführen’; Schlechta, vol. III, p.859

<sup>23</sup> ‘*die eigentlichen großen Probleme und Fragezeichen gar nicht in Sicht kommen*’; Schlechta, vol.II, 248; ‘*Rechenknechts-Übung und Stubenhockerei für Mathematiker*’; Schlechta, vol.II, p.249

<sup>24</sup> See Helmut Heit and Lisa Heller (eds.), *Handbuch Nietzsche und die Wissenschaften*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston, 2014

falsely held to be objective. Their being anthropological constructs is pushed into oblivion. Additionally Nietzsche sought to explicate being as a whirl of power units, punctuations of the will and power quanta. Whether they be life forms or cosmic manifestations their relation to each other is said to be permanent struggle. They can only exist agonistically as realisations of the wills-to-power, that is by incessantly testing their possibility of waxing bigger. If they fail they wane, making for a flux of becoming and decay, growth and annihilation.

If we now look at the development of science post-Nietzsche there appears to be a disconnect. The philosopher's notion of power quanta seems patently divorced from the quanta of modern physics. These are used to describe the structure of the atom and enter into relation with each other precisely because, being quantized, that is delimited in their power, they keep the nucleus dynamically balanced. Do we now have to assume that Nietzsche, far from being the oracular philosopher of modernity, did in fact write himself completely out of the picture of what actually happened after him?

Physics as perhaps the most supreme of the exact sciences is certainly unthinkable without its mathematical inspirations, but remains dependent on observation in experimental proof. Nietzsche regarded it as a lowly, plebeian interpretation of the world.<sup>25</sup> It is crucially entangled in an umbilical relationship with the dominant secular narratives, the cultural habits and the politics of the societies within which it is practiced. It is through these dependencies that all the sciences are sustained not merely as an international discourse but also as a process of integration with lived history. The discovery of non-visible, non-touchable subatomic particles or waves at the turn of the century fascinatingly moved beyond classical physics and the traditional picture of human apprehension and in the direction of Nietzsche's thinking. The distinguished names involved were Wilhelm Konrad Röntgen (X-rays, 1895), Henri Becquerel (uranium radioactivity, 1896), Joseph John Thomson (electrons in cathode rays, 1897), Max Planck (black-body radiation law, 1900), Pierre and Marie Curie (discovery of

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<sup>25</sup> Schlechta, vol. III. p.578

polonium and radium, 1903), and Albert Einstein (special theory of relativity, 1905). All these discoveries began to undermine the purely mechanistic understanding of matter and, as Werner Heisenberg, famous for his uncertainty principle (Unschärfrelation), demonstrated in a lecture in 1931,<sup>26</sup> the idea of causality was seriously eroded by quantum mechanics. There can be little doubt that it is science and technology which more than any other factors have pervaded life in Europe and North America. It is they that have defined modernity in the past two centuries. The science which arguably has been the most important in this development is physics and in particular nuclear and particle physics. Nietzsche, deeply suspicious of any kind of ontology that stated as truth what things, beings, animate or inanimate, and cosmological entities might be, nevertheless held fast to the notion of the will to power. That reigned supreme in every bit of matter and constantly transformed it to something larger or lesser. The world is one of ‘Kraft-‘ or ‘Machtquanta’ or ‘Willenspunktationen’. These are interacting as a dynamic of entities striving to incorporate each other, agonistically or corporatively or parasitically or ecologically or symbiotically. We have seen that this idea is at first sight unrelated to the notion of the atom as conceived early on by Joseph John Thomson and then by later physicists. Nietzsche at times called the atom dismissively the thing (das Ding)<sup>27</sup> and held it to be imagined as hard core matter:

Physicists believe in a “true world” in their own fashion: a firm systematisation, applicable to all entities, of atoms in necessary motions....But that is how they go wrong. The atom they posit is inferred according to the logic of the perspectivism of consciousness - and is therefore a subjective fiction.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See <http://www.psiquadrat.de/downloads/heisenberg1931.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> For a more extensive discussion of this point see Wolfgang Jordan, *Friedrich Nietzsche's Naturbegriff zwischen Necromantic und positivistischer Entzauberung*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg, 2006, p. 178ff. As for the sources of Nietzsche's notion of quanta see Mattia Riccardi, ‘Nietzsche und die Erkenntnistheorie und Metaphysik’, in H.Heit, L.Heller, eds., *Handbuch....* (see note 24), p.258

<sup>28</sup> (My translation from F.N., *Aus dem Nachlass der Achtziger Jahre* Schlechta, vol.III, pp.704-5:) Die Physiker glauben an eine “wahre Welt” auf ihre Art: eine fest, für alle Wesen gleiche *Atom-Systematisation* in notwendigen Bewegungen...Aber damit verirren sie sich. Das Atom, das sie ansetzen, ist erschlossen nach der Logik jenes Bewußtseins-Perspektivismus - ist somit auch selbst eine subjektive Fiktion.

However, it was realised by the early nuclear physicists that the atom was not just in motion, it was in itself an intensely revolving universe, encapsulating large amounts of energy, possibly fissile. In other words the atom, that is the indivisible, was in fact a dynamic composition of particles that might possibly be divided from each other. As we now know, physicists brought this about. By 1940 it was two emigré scholars here at Birmingham who influentially held that a uranium bomb was feasible.<sup>29</sup> ‘The thing’ could serve to make an explosive thousands of times more powerful than dynamite and apt to realise the most comprehensive annihilation. Given the semantic range of his terms Nietzsche’s idea of power quanta could still be said to apply:

...no things remain but dynamic quanta, in a relation of tension to all other dynamic quanta...

These quanta are not themselves ‘being’ or ‘becoming’ but ‘the most elemental fact’ from which ‘a becoming, an effecting’<sup>30</sup> originate. Under the leadership of nuclear physics modern science has created a breathtaking historical bifurcation, as principally foretold by Nietzsche, in that it promises an enormous empowerment of mankind and at the same time its possible self-destruction. Nietzsche, convinced of being the bearer of good and joyous tidings, is ambiguous about the possibility of a catastrophic end, an entropy, or what other character the catastrophe might take.

The life forms that are human beings have as scientists proved to be units of the will to power that could annihilate other or all life, subject it to a superior will and put huge energies at societies’ disposal. Biologists and biochemists have meanwhile penetrated the way life itself is made up and can now alter and reconstruct it. Like never before both matter and life have come into the manipulative grasp of human beings, who may be able to design the *Übermensch* and robotised humanoids and, against all protestations of human rights and equality, bring about a society where the many are manipu-

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<sup>29</sup> See <http://www.atomicarchive.com/Docs/Begin/FrischPeierls.shtml> This memorandum by O.R.Frisch and R.Peierls was of course top secret at the time.

<sup>30</sup> See F.N., *Aus dem Nachlass der Achtziger Jahre*, Schlechta, vol.III, p.778

lated by the morally unimpeded, the noble overmen few. Or do we already have this situation now in an elite of scientists and politicians and financiers, all ‘masters of the universe’ able to control the masses by clever contrivances? It is difficult to think that Nietzsche would have recognised these elites as post-nihilist materialisations of a superior human culture because, for better or worse, he was substantially looking for a new cultural elite with a creativity similar to that of the citizens of ancient Greece.