

In proximity to Epicurus: Nietzsche's discovery of the past within

We need history, for the past continues to flow within us in a hundred waves; we ourselves are, indeed, nothing but that which at every moment we sense of this continued flowing [...] The last three centuries very probably still continue to live on, in all their cultural colours and cultural refractions, *close beside us*: they want only to be *discovered*. (AOM, 223)¹

A few short millennia before the ocean of impersonal forces arrayed a small assortment of its parts into a man called Friedrich Nietzsche, it spent a little time disporting itself before the senses of Epicurus. It presented itself in the guise of the sea, and sky, and clouds, and mineral formations, as animals large and small, as ideas, as feelings, as specific kinds of thoughts and mood. Later when these impersonal forces folded some tiny part of themselves into Nietzsche, something of their past presence in Epicurus's world stirred within his own:

Epicurus. - Yes, I am proud of the fact that I experience [empfinden] the character of Epicurus differently to perhaps anyone else, and enjoy in all that I read and hear of him the happiness of the afternoon of antiquity: - I see his eye gazing out on a vast, white sea, over the rocks along the shoreline where the sun lies, whilst big and small animals play in its light, secure and serene like this light and that eye itself. Such happiness could only have been invented by one who is suffering continually, the happiness of an eye looking out on a becalmed sea of existence and which can now no longer tire of its surface, and the colourful, tender, quivering skin of the sea. Never before has sensuality been so modest. (GS 45)

Contemplating the delicate shuddering waves, Epicurus enjoys a serene happiness, which across the centuries will lap at the shore of a Genovese coast on another restful summer day (KSA 8/527/30[31]). "Experiencing the character" of the ancient Greek philosopher from Samos, Nietzsche writes from the Italian Riviera in 1881 as one who inhabits the atmosphere of the afternoon of antiquity, his physiology attuned to the constellation of affects named "Epicurus". "Den Charakter Epikur's anders .. empfinden" involves a physical encounter with "temperament" or "nature" (Charakter), "empfinden" meaning "to sense", "perceive",

¹ Translations are my own.

“feel”. In channelling these forces, Nietzsche feels an affinity of disposition, something more fundamental than intellectual empathy or philosophical debt. It is as if the ancient philosopher “lives on” in his thinking, confirming the declaration that he makes in the aphorism “*The eternal Epicurus*”: “Epicurus has lived at all times and is living still, unbeknown to those who have called and call themselves Epicurean, and without reputation amongst philosophers” (WS 227). When Nietzsche claims to experience the character of Epicurus differently to others, he may intend the point atavistically, as the awareness within himself of sensibilities from the past.²

In what follows, I explore what it might mean for Nietzsche to experience the character³ of Epicurus and to “feel” powers of the past “within himself” (GS 10). A starting point will be to ask why he should envisage Epicurus by the shore, resting his eye upon the “sea of existence”. It is notable that another well-known passage in praise of Epicurus, “Et in Arcadia ego” (*The Wanderer and his Shadow*, 295), also evokes a particular landscape, atmosphere and time of day, here a sun-lit valley around half past five. Both pieces of writing concern the feeling of joy occasioned by the vividly detailed scene and both describe panoramas very familiar to Nietzsche from his European travels. Whilst these passages do not appear to contribute much to the scholarly task of evaluating Nietzsche’s relation to Epicurus, their focus on the climate and landscape of experience is instructive. It will be suggested that Nietzsche’s practice of philosophy develops in proximity to Epicurus in a very physical sense as part of a thinking relationship with the earth. Taking the “happiness of the afternoon of

² In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche suggests that although these archaic powers may seem strange, rare and extraordinary in the present day, they may once have been common. Accordingly, it behoves whoever “feels these powers in oneself” to care for, defend, honour and cultivate them “against another world that resists them” (GS 10).

³ This is somewhat different to the act of ‘identifying’ with Epicurus. For a discussion of Epicurus as a model Nietzsche uses in ‘in the process of creating himself’ see Wilson H. Shearin 2014, p.74.

antiquity” as a clue, I trace a “thought path” that links Epicurus to the experience of *amor fati* as the affective precondition for Nietzsche’s eternal return.

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That Nietzsche was preoccupied with the optimum climate and landscape for his thought is amply demonstrated by his private notes, letters and autobiographical reflections in addition to the copious references in his published works. Two texts from Nietzsche’s “middle period”, *Dawn* (1881) and *The Gay Science* (1882), were produced during his time on the Italian Riviera (the Liguria region). In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche likens both the text of *Dawn* and its author to a basking sea beast, sunbathing amongst the rocks near to Genoa where “almost every sentence of that book was thought, *hatched* [*erschlüpft*]” (EH “Books”, D, 1). Alone and sharing ‘secrets with the sea’ (EH “Books”, D, 1), the thinker’s ideas incubate in the warmth, abundant sentences unfold in the sun. In praise of this work site Nietzsche writes to Franz Overbeck:

I think so often about you, especially in the afternoon when almost every day I sit or lie in my secluded cliffs along the coast, resting like a lizard in the sun, while my thoughts embark on some adventure of the spirit. My diet and the division of the day should eventually do me good! Sea air and clear skies: now I see that these are indispensable to me! (KSB,6,57).

Nietzsche writes to Peter Gast and to his mother and his sister on the same day, repeating the lizard image and enthusing about the beneficial effects of the sea and clear sky on his health (KSB,6,56-57). As is immediately apparent from these remarks, Nietzsche’s description of himself sequestered among the rocks in the afternoon sun calls to mind his representation of Epicurus. Writing to friends about this Genovese coast he likens its solitude to that of “an island of the Greek archipelago” (KSB,7, 259); “no doubt about it, there is something *Greek* about this place” (KSB,7,261). In such a setting it is possible that lines of Epicurean verse lap

at the edge of his consciousness, as he takes pleasure in watching the sea.⁴ It is also worth noting that in this letter to Overbeck the blessings of the climate (sea air and clear skies) are married with more domestic matters (diet, division of the day) to form the indispensable requirements for the thinker. As this letter and many similar ones indicate, philosophy for Nietzsche is shaped by the vital forces of the body and its environment and reciprocally, thought belongs to particular locations and climatic conditions. In *Dawn*, Nietzsche suggests that his philosophy might be seen as a “translation” into reason of the “circuitous paths” of his drives: drives for “gentle sunlight, bright and buoyant air, southerly vegetation, the breath of the sea, fleeting meals of meat, eggs and fruit ..” (D 553). To “embark on some adventure of the spirit” – as Nietzsche reports doing in his secluded cliffs along the coast – it is necessary to attend to an array of “worldly” things.

Such material concerns are constant features on Nietzsche’s horizon. In correspondence to Overbeck from St. Moritz, Nietzsche likens his fastidious attention to small details to a classical style of living:

The air is almost better than Sorrento, and is full of fragrances, the way I like it. The way I divide my day, my life-style, my diet – these things would not have dishonoured a wise man of old: everything *very simple* and yet a system of fifty sometimes very delicate considerations. (KSB,5,425)

As is well known, Epicurus commends the wisdom of the simple life and liberation from unwholesome desires.⁵ Keith Ansell Pearson proposes that “Nietzsche is attracted to the Epicurean emphasis on the modesty of a human existence”, exemplified by simple pleasures and philosophising in a garden, away from public view (Ansell Pearson 2014, 3): “A small

⁴ See Book II of Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* (Gaskin 1995, p. 120).

⁵ See “Letter to Menoecus” (Gaskin 1995, p.45).

garden, figs, little cheeses and in addition, three or four good friends – that was the opulence of Epicurus” (WS 192). In his letters to Peter Gast during the 1880s, Nietzsche makes frequent reference to the idea of Epicurus’s garden, reflecting repeatedly on the environment in which Epicurus thinks: “*Where* are we going to revive the garden of Epicurus?” (KSB,5,399); “What I envy in Epicurus are the disciples in his garden..” (KSB,6,436). He even compliments Gast for “everything redolent of the air and fragrance of Epicurus’s garden” that has emanated from his recent letters (KSB,6,428-9).

The importance of these physical conditions and parochial concerns is formulated most explicitly in *The Wanderer and his Shadow*, where Nietzsche claims that the discipline of philosophy has been wrongly orientated towards the “farthest things” such as metaphysical questions of immortality, god and the soul (WS 6). By contrast, the most immediate “nearest things” [*nächste Dinge*] such as the division of the day, eating, sleeping and other “small and everyday” matters have been poorly regarded, a fact which Nietzsche claims accounts for “almost all the physical and psychical frailties of the individual” (WS 6). Undoubtedly this failing stems from the Platonic-Christian legacy that the “nearest” and “farthest things” are fundamentally different in kind, the latter having been prized as idealities, ungrounded in matter and removed from active processes of materialization (“culture”). Because these realms have been regarded as mutually discontinuous, the world is perceived as a mass of isolated beings, unitary souls and brute material forms. However, for Nietzsche, the “nearest things” embrace “systems” rather than entities (“health”, “upbringing”, “nature”),⁶ and share with Epicurean thinking idiosyncrasies such as “retreat from politics” and “use of moods and

⁶ Nietzsche lists his “Doctrine of the Nearest Things” in his private notes as follows: “*Division* of the day, purpose of the day (periods). Nourishment. Company [Umgang]. Nature. Solitude. Sleep. Profession [Broderwerb]. Upbringing (original and foreign). Use of moods and atmospheric conditions (*Witterung*). Health. Retreat from politics.” See KSA 8/581/40[16].

atmospheric conditions”.⁷ The overarching factor uniting the two philosophers is their faith in the wisdom of the earth, their sensitivity to matters that are “close”.

The “nearest things” include personal preferences and some eccentric proclivities, but attention to these things is not about knowing “who” you are; it is about knowing the formative forces that progressively “make” you. For example, in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche identifies the impact of the nearest things in terms of the task of “becoming what one is”: “little things” like nutriment, place, climate and recreation “are more important than anything that has been considered of importance hitherto” (EH, ‘Clever’, 10). However, lest this seem a simple determinism it is essential to recognise that the physical environment in which writing and thought are possible is reciprocally conditioned by prevailing beliefs. Material forces influence thought but ideas also have physical effects on the body. Nietzsche integrates this idea into a draft for section 341 of *The Gay Science* in which the thought of the eternal return is first announced. To the anticipated question “But if everything is necessary, how can I be in charge of my own actions?” (KSA/9/11[143]) Nietzsche gives the following response: “You say that food, place, air, society shape and determine you? Well, your concepts do still more for these determine you to this food, place, air, society” (KSA/9/11[143]). The fundamental point is that if you “incorporate” (einverleiben) the “thought of thoughts” it will *physically change you* (9/11[143]). Such an outlandish proposition is unthinkable within the Platonic-Christian worldview which can only understand matter by recourse to the powers of a ‘higher’ realm. Things may be otherwise for Nietzsche’s Epicurus, his eye never straying beyond the horizon. Alert to the turbulent depths of existence, he never tires of contemplating the surface of ‘this world’.

⁷ See Nietzsche’s list at KSA 8/581/40[16]. Various sayings attributed to Epicurus concern a retreat from public office and political life. For example, “We must release ourselves from the prison of affairs and politics” (“Vatican Sayings”, LVIII, cited in Gaskin p. 52). See also Gaskin 64, 71. Epicurus’s remarks on meteorological phenomena are to be found in his “Letter to Pythocles” (see Gaskin 1995, pp. 30-41).

According to Keith Ansell Pearson, it is “from Epicurus that Nietzsche gets the inspiration to give up on what he calls the first and last things, the questions of a theologically inspired metaphysics, and devote attention to the closest things” (Ansell Pearson 2013, 104). This view is supported by the fact that the two sections of *The Wanderer and his Shadow* (WS 5 & 6) which introduce the doctrine of the nearest things are directly succeeded by a lengthy passage on the consolations of Epicurean teaching. The “wonderful insight” which Nietzsche attributes to Epicurus is the realisation that to quell the tempests of the soul “it is absolutely not necessary to have resolved the ultimate and outermost theoretical questions” (WS 7). Faith in the notion of ultimate truth is undermined by Epicurus’s embrace of a “multiplicity of hypotheses” and by his insistence on the gods’ disregard for the affairs of mortals (WS 7). The proximity of Epicurus is also felt in the closing section of *The Wanderer and the Shadow*:

Only to the enobled man will the freedom of spirit be granted; to him alone does the alleviation of life approach and salve his wounds; he first must say that he lives for joy and for the sake of no further goal; and in any other mouth his motto would be dangerous: *Peace around me and goodwill to all nearest things*. (WS 350)

To live for joy and for the sake of no other goal is to make a profound affirmation. The state of serene calmness (*ataraxia*) so highly valued by Epicurus is achieved through a grateful embrace of life and particularly an embrace of the nearest things, the gifts of the earth.

Book Four of *The Gay Science* opens with an affirmation made for the New Year: “*Amor fati*: let that be my love from now on!” (GS 276). Vowing to love fate, Nietzsche speaks about wanting only to be a “Yes-Sayer” and not an “accuser” (GS 276). Again, the proximity of Epicurus is felt in Nietzsche’s writings for this section is directly followed by a passage entitled “Personal providence” which affirms the beauty of chance and commends the “gods of Epicurus” to the extent that these “carefree and unknown ones” have no involvement with

the petty concerns of mortals (GS 277). In *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Pierre Hadot alludes to E. Hoffman's claim that "it is precisely because the Epicurean considered existence to be the result of pure chance that he greeted each moment with immense gratitude, like a kind of divine miracle" (Hadot 1995, p.252). Indeed, to feel good will to all nearest things is to mark a decisive break with the forces which "accuse life" and to affirm a this-worldly love of the here and now. This bears on the relation of thought to its "physical" context because Epicurean philosophy cannot thrive with the big cities which lack quiet and expansive places for reflection and which are dominated by ostentatious monuments to 'other-worldly' discourse (GS 280). In "Architecture for those who wish to pursue knowledge", Nietzsche writes that the abandoned churches will not meet the needs of the secular thinker: "we godless ones could not think *our thoughts* in such surroundings" (GS 280). The environment for god-less philosophy must be conducive to its this-worldly flourishing: "We want to see *ourselves* translated into stone and plants, we want to take walks *in ourselves* when we wander around these buildings and gardens" (GS 280).

To see ourselves translated into stones and plants, to take circuitous paths "in ourselves" as we stroll around buildings and gardens is to refuse the basic Platonic-Christian presumption of the "inner" sanctum of thought. In section 291 of *The Gay Science* entitled "Genoa", Nietzsche says that he has studied the buildings and landscapes of this city for a long time and declares that he can see the "faces" of past generations.

Genoa. – I have looked upon this city for a good while, its villas and pleasure gardens and the wide circuits of its inhabited heights and slopes. Finally I must say this: I see *faces* of past generations. This district is strewn with the images of bold and autocratic men. They have *lived* and have wanted to live on - they say so with their houses, built and decorated for centuries, and not for the fleeting hour: they were well disposed to life [sie waren dem Leben gut], however ill-disposed they may often have been towards themselves. (GS 291)

To become well-disposed to life manifests itself as a desire to live on. This is not a desire for immortality but for the externalization of desire, its manifestation in things. For Nietzsche, thought is in the world, not in the thinker. All the default settings of language militate against travelling with this idea. To think of the soul or self as an internal entity is a Christian prejudice. For Nietzsche, souls are not unitary, immaterial, ghosts of another world. On the contrary, rare human beings of an age are best thought of as “the suddenly emerging after-shoots [*plötzlich auftauchende Nachschösslinge*] of past cultures and their powers: as atavisms of a people and its ethos” (GS 10). In a wonderful passage, “Why we have to travel” (AOM 223) Nietzsche claims that “the past continues to flow within us in a hundred waves; we ourselves are, indeed, nothing but that which at every moment we sense of this continued flowing” (AOM 223). The traveller soon discovers that one cannot step into the river of one’s most intimate being twice. Moreover, the one who becomes adept in the “subtler art of travel” will rediscover the adventurous migrations of his ego “in the process of becoming and transformation” in many countries and ages, in Egypt and Greece, Byzantium and Rome, “in the Renaissance and the Reformation, at home and abroad, indeed in the sea, the forests, in the plants and in the mountains” (AOM 223). One rediscovers the flows of the past in oneself with every fresh encounter, finding within *this world* hitherto unguessed at depths.

Directly after this passage in *Assorted Opinions and Maxims*, Nietzsche speaks of ages in which the senses are so blocked that they are incapable of hearing the voice of reason and philosophy or of seeing “wisdom that wanders in bodily form [*die leibhaft wandelnde Weisheit*] whether it bears the name of Epictetus or of Epicurus” [AOM 224]. “Wisdom walking in bodily form” implies a thinking relationship with the material environment, an alertness to the sensory richness of air, temperature, fragrance and light. Like Epicurus, who embodies this wisdom, Nietzsche traces thought-paths which meander through the landscape,

through buildings and gardens, translating themselves into stones and plants. Whatever is read or heard by Nietzsche is carried into the open where it quickly sloughs off its scholarly scent. His habit is to “think outdoors [im Freien zu denken], walking, jumping, climbing, dancing, preferably on lonely mountains or close by the sea where even the paths become thoughtful” (GS 366). In this way, thoughts belong to a particular atmosphere, to a time and place of their genesis. It is a rationalist prejudice to separate ideas from their conditions as if their blossoming was independent of all nutrients. When Nietzsche declares that paths become “thoughtful”, this is not a metaphor for an intellectual journey but a description of how thinking is part of a climate and a landscape. A provisional title for *The Wanderer and his Shadow* was “Thought-paths of St Moritz” (KSA 8, 610). Almost all of it was written in six pocket-sized notebooks that Nietzsche carried with him on hikes through the hills and around the lakes of St. Moritz, Silvaplana and Sils Maria.⁸ Among the few notes gathered under this title, Nietzsche describes a sublime experience of “heroic-idyllic” power.

The day before yesterday, towards evening, I was completely immersed in Claude Lorrainian raptures and finally burst into lengthy, intense crying. That I was still to experience this! I had not known that the earth could display this and had believed that good painters had invented it. The heroic-idyllic is now the discovery of my soul; and everything bucolic of the ancients has become all at once unveiled to me and made manifest – until now I did not understand anything of this. (KSA 8, 610, 43[3])

Nietzsche’s discovery of the “heroic-idyllic” in St Moritz is an encounter with ancient forces “living on” *close beside him*. This profound experience is the inspiration for a striking passage in *The Wanderer and his Shadow* entitled “Et in Arcadia ego” (WS 295), in which Nietzsche describes stumbling upon an uncannily mythic landscape. The ground is vivid with flowers and grasses, “waves of hills” cascade to a “milky green lake”. Overwhelmed with the

⁸ See Krell and Bates 1997, pp.123-123.

beauty of the place, he trembles in wordless adoration of “the moment [*Augenblick*] of its revelation”:

Unconsciously, as if it were only natural, one transposed Hellenic heroes into this pure, clear world of light (which had nothing about it of yearning or expectancy, no looking forward or backward); one had to feel it as Poussin and his pupil would have done — at once heroic and idyllic. And so too have individual people *lived*, and have constantly *felt* themselves to be in the world and the world in them and among them one of the greatest men, the inventor of a heroic-idyllic form of philosophy: Epicurus. (WS 295)

Epicurus is ‘experienced’ on Nietzsche’s thought path in the midst of the Swiss mountains. Charged with ancient sensibilities, the traveller conjures Hellenic spirits from a newly enchanted earth. Without forethought Greek heroes are summoned forth, with no trace of yearning or expectancy, no “looking forward or backward”. To live without desire or expectation, without longing for the future or lingering in the past, is to live in the eternity of the moment. In St Moritz, Nietzsche realises that this is how individuals have actually lived; more, this is how “they have enduringly *felt* they existed in the world and the world existed in them” (WS, 295). When Epicurean affects are transmitted is this entrancing “clear world of light,” heroic idyllic philosophy is lived and felt as a profound affirmation of the earth. The character of Epicurus, one “of the greatest men,” is experienced by Nietzsche as overwhelming love of fate: “My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati* .. that one wants nothing to be other than it is, not forwards not backwards, not in all eternity (EH, “Clever”, 10).”

Love of fate is only possible when one feels oneself to be part of the world. To live without *ressentiment*, to love the things of the earth, is to achieve a state of Epicurean tranquillity. On the untitled page that lies between the foreword and the first section of *Ecce*

Homo, Nietzsche expresses a supreme gratitude to his “whole life”.⁹ The image is a rich and fertile one, a perfect moment of sun-lit brilliance:

On this perfect day, when everything has become ripe and not only the grapes are growing brown, a ray of sunlight has fallen on to my life: I looked behind me, I looked before me, never have I seen so many and such good things together.

This ‘goodwill to all nearest things’ is an expression of gratitude for the bounty of the earth. To become ‘so well disposed’ to life that you would fervently desire its eternal return it is necessary to make an affirmative pact with fate. As Joseph P. Vincenzo writes, for both Nietzsche and Epicurus, “the world can show itself as it is only when one steps out of the subjective, servile will and into the state of cessation of all need” (Vincenzo 1994, 394). To feel oneself to be in the world and to embody its vital forces, is to “*realize in oneself* the eternal joy of becoming” (TI, “Ancients”, 5).

For Epicurus, *ataraxia* is an experience of the maximum pleasure of the aesthetic world and of oneself. It is a direct experience of the intrinsic pleasure of life itself, of the active forces of a life freed from the reactive force of desire. (Vincenzo 1994, 392)

The announcement of eternal return in section 341 of *The Gay Science* it is prefaced by “The Dying Socrates” (GS 340), a section in which Nietzsche presents his ultimate indictment of Platonism. Facing death, Socrates asks to make an offering to the god of medicine. The words, “O Crito, I owe Asclepius a rooster” betray his secret suffering of the “disease” of life (GS 340), his craven desire to live “beyond”. In the wake of Platonism it may be necessary to “overcome even the Greeks” (GS 340) but an exception must be made

⁹ Richard Bett notes that Pierre Hadot includes Nietzsche in his discussion of the value of the present instant in ancient philosophy, citing a passage on saying yes to eternity by saying yes to a single moment. However, he does not see any relevant link to Epicurus: “The thought is clearly connected with the attitude expressed in Nietzsche’s contemplation of the eternal recurrence; but this is not especially relevant to Nietzsche’s view of Epicurus” (Bett 2005, 70).

for Epicurus, a fellow traveller of the earth. It is reputed that on the last day of his life

Epicurus wrote to Hermarchus of his suffering and imminent death:

I am suffering from diseases of the intestines and bladder which could not be more severe ... However, all these sufferings are compensated by the joy of remembering our principles and our discoveries. [...] My joy compensates the totality of pain. (Gaskin 1995, 66)

Whatever torments they may each have known, there is no hint in the writings of Epicurus or of Nietzsche of ill will towards fate. Nietzsche to Peter Gast, 22nd January 1897:

My health is abominable – rich in pain, like before; my life much more severe and lonely; I myself live on the whole almost like a complete saint, but almost with the disposition [Gesinnung] of the complete, genuine [ächt] Epicurus – very calm in soul and patient and yet watching life with joy (KSB, 5, 383).

When Nietzsche claims to experience the character of Epicurus differently to perhaps anyone else he feels a resurgence of the extraordinary affects of Epicurus, a stirring of the “past within”. It seems likely that when he extolls the pleasures of the afternoon of antiquity he is recounting his rapturous experiences in the thought paths of St Moritz. This delight resurfaces on many an afternoon when on the rocky Genovese coast he lies like a lizard in the sun. The most serene possibility would be to live quietly and unknown, yet watching life with joy.

To “want” something, to “strive” after something, to have a “goal”, a “wish” in view – I do not know this from experience. Even at this moment I look out upon my future – a *vast* future! – as upon a smooth sea: it is ruffled by no desire. I do not want in the slightest that anything should become other than it is; I do not want myself to become other than I am. But that is how I have always lived. (EH, “Clever”, 9)

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