**“Is the Sea Not Full of Verdant Islands?”:**

**Zarathustra on Passing by the Great City**

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*Thus Spoke* *Zarathustra* presents us with the first, and perhaps most forceful, expression of the political Platonism that will characterize Nietzsche’s later thought: the philosopher-type steps forth as commander and legislator, replete with prophetic trappings, and offers up a new table of values by which humanity will live.[[1]](#endnote-1) Indeed, one might say that Zarathustra’s descent back into the cities of human beings represents the culmination of what Nietzsche will elsewhere call “great politics”: the revaluation of values, the creation of new world-interpretations, meanings and goals and the cultivation or ‘perfection’ of the human being.[[2]](#endnote-2) Yet in spite of Zarathustra’s grandiose task, one can find in his story a reassertion of the ancient tension between philosophy and the city—and even a recognition of its indissolubility. Indeed, the book might be read as an extended, if interstitial, argument against the grand political ambitions of philosophy.[[3]](#endnote-3) This essay will consider Zarathustra’s own joyful relinquishment of the political life of the city and his continual deferral, if not ultimate abandonment, of the attempt to ‘fix’ humanity.

I will begin by reconstructing the initial ebb and flow of Zarathustra’s great politics and then focus on one speech in particular: “On Passing By.” This speech, delivered at the gates of “the *great city*” to an ignoble figure simply named Zarathustra’s ape, suggests that the best response to the life-denying morality of custom is not critique and supersession, but rather withdrawal and disregard.[[4]](#endnote-4) “[W]here one can no longer love,” Zarathustra counsels, “there one must—*pass by*!—” (Z III: “Passing By”).[[5]](#endnote-5) As it turns out, this teaching applies more generally to Zarathustra’s own great politics, inasmuch as he can no longer convince himself that he loves humanity. So when the prophet withdraws from the political realm for the third and final time, he does not return. Yet, as I shall argue, the seemingly quietistic teaching of “passing by” contains within it the germ of a more powerful yea-saying orientation towards the world which leads us up the ladder of love towards more radically affirmative doctrines such as *amor fati* and eternal recurrence—suprapolitical teachings suitable for anchorites or small isolated friendship communities, but not the city.

**Descent and Withdrawal**

The book begins with Zarathustra’s impending descent from his isolated mountain world. We are told that when the prophet was thirty years old, “he abandoned his home and the lake of his home and went into the mountains,” where “he enjoyed his spirit and his solitude and for ten years did not tire of them” (Z I: Prologue 1). Interestingly, no further explanation is given for Zarathustra’s original retreat from the human world a decade before, but a few salient details can be cobbled together. First, earlier drafts and sources for this initial speech indicate that his home—which at first glance might seem rustic and pastoral—was in fact a city.[[6]](#endnote-6) Second, the saint in the forest who he passes on the way back down recollects having seen him “carrying [his] ashes to the mountains” a decade before, suggesting that the nascent philosophical legislator came to experience the customs, opinions and practices of the city as spiritually exhausting (Z I: Prologue 2). Finally, Zarathustra’s subsequent speeches make clear the emancipatory function of withdrawal as an ascetic practice—albeit one arguably shorn of any religio-metaphysical significance or stable, preestablished goal.[[7]](#endnote-7) Solitude enables us to bracket the inherited values of the city, provides leisure for contemplation and self-exploration, and opens up a feeling of height, distance and freedom in which new values and ways of life can emerge. It is no surprise then that Zarathustra repeatedly valorizes the desert and forest—archetypal symbols of ascetic withdrawal and solitude—as sanctuaries from human political life and potential places of self-overcoming, transfiguration and creation.

Now, after a decade of anchoretic self-cultivation, Zarathustra is overburdened by his accumulated wisdom and wants to share it with those below. And so he goes back down into the cities of human beings to disseminate his transformative teaching.[[8]](#endnote-8) His initial attempt at great politics goes badly: in the first town he encounters, he indiscriminately presents his doctrine of the superhuman to the vulgar multitude in the market place and is met with derision and hostility (Z I: Prologue 3-8).[[9]](#endnote-9) Zarathustra quickly recalibrates, however, and decides to seek out a smaller, select group of “companions” and “fellow creators,” whom he finds in a city called the Motley Cow (Z I: Prologue 9; Z I: “Transformations”).[[10]](#endnote-10) The second transmission of Zarathustra’s teaching takes place there and seems to go more successfully, but by the end of the First Part of the book the prophet has once again retreated into his mountain solitude, this time ostensibly for the sake of his companions: he wants to give them space to “lose” him and “find” themselves, and to give his teachings time to take root and come to fruition (Z I: “Bestowing”; Z II: “Child”).

Zarathustra’s second solitude, which lasts for several years, is marred by loneliness, concern, and impatience. Eventually spurred to action by a prophetic dream, he rejoins his companions, who have now abandoned the Motley Cow and regrouped as an insulated colony of sorts on the “Blessed Isles” (*glückseligen Inseln*) (Z II: “Child”).[[11]](#endnote-11) The establishment of this community can be understood as a continuation and intensification of the legislator’s rhetorical shift from the many to the few: just as Zarathustra by the end of the Prologue chooses to reserve his message for a select group of friends and co-creators recruited in the archetypal city, the Blessed Isles represent the eventual withdrawal of that elite few from the city itself.

As suggested by Zarathustra’s earlier teaching, this isolation is necessary for their proper cultivation. Yet instead of each disciple retreating individually to the wilderness, they opt for a small, tightly-knit friendship community—a hidden cloister of free spirits, as it were.[[12]](#endnote-12) Its placement on a cluster of islands seems particularly significant in this respect: it is far away, sequestered and secure, cut off from the demands of political life.[[13]](#endnote-13) Zarathustra himself must travel over “distant seas” to find it.[[14]](#endnote-14) At same time, the Isles’ location evokes the sea-symbolism that looms so large in the middle-period works immediately preceding *Zarathustra*, alternately representing “the great silence” that allows us momentarily to forget the city and the stifling provinciality of human life, an uncharted and seemingly infinite horizon for free-spirited exploration in a newly de-deified world, and a dehumanized new vision of nature as will to power.[[15]](#endnote-15) Finally, the Isles themselves provide a “soft greensward” for Zarathustra’s teaching, a paradisiacal halfway house of sorts between everyday political life and the unadulterated solitude of the desert, forest or mountain cave.[[16]](#endnote-16) In short, the Blessed Isles represent the possibility of a shared philosophical life freed from the tyranny of the city—a sanctuary that provides the necessary distance and leisure for contemplation, self-cultivation and individual creativity while still permitting a selective, upbuilding sociality. In this respect we might think of them as a naturalized version of the mythic Isles of the Blessed (after which it is loosely named) or even a new Epicurian Garden.[[17]](#endnote-17)

The Blessed Isles would seem to be the ideal place for a transformative philosophical re-education and Zarathustra’s small transplanted community of fellow creators would appear to be ideal pupils. Accordingly, his third transmission is more nuanced and advanced than his first two. Yet by the end of the Second Part, he has taken leave of them again. Zarathustra’s third and final withdrawal is harder to make sense of than the previous two, for he provides different reasons at different moments. On the one hand, his departure is prompted by pivotal challenges from less sympathetic audiences (e.g., the Soothsayer, the “cripples and beggars”)—challenges that reveal the existential incompleteness of his teaching, test his mettle as a philosophical legislator and make him doubt his ability to command.[[18]](#endnote-18) But at the very beginning of the Third Part, we find another reason: here he observes that the “protection” afforded by the Blessed Isles has made him “sickly” (Z III: “Wanderer”), suggesting that the sheltered life of a philosophical friendship community will eventually become dogmatic, self-indulgent and enfeebling. This point is further developed in a subsequent speech, where he recognizes that his own work of self-cultivation is not yet done: he still needs to “perfect himself” for the sake of his children and for the “greater perfection of all things” (*Z* III: “Blissfulness”). In short, he must articulate, wrestle with and ultimately affirm his most difficult abysmal thought, the eternal recurrence—and this is something that he can only do alone, through a final *anachōrēsis*. Yet before he even left, he had observed (in a speech notably delivered only to himself) that his role as legislative gift-giver was making him increasingly isolated and lonely, and he yearned for the solitude of his mountain retreat (Z II: “Night Song”; cf. III: “Return Home”). This of course was the very task that brought him back down to humanity in the first place and one that the saint in the forest had preemptively warned him against (Z I: Prologue 2).[[19]](#endnote-19) Curiously, by the time he returns home to the mountains, this last reason has completely overshadowed the other two (Z III: “Return Home”). We might say then that Zarathustra’s third and final withdrawal is overdetermined: he doubts his abilities as commander and legislator, he senses that his work on himself and his teaching are not yet complete, he feels that even the limited and selective sociality of the friendship community has become counter-productive, he seeks silence and solitude, and he seems increasingly conflicted about—one might even say less concerned with—his “gift” to humanity.

In Zarathustra’s farewell speech to his friends, he appears troubled and weeps unconsolably (Z II: “Hour”). Yet within a day of his departure, he is again savoring his solitude, almost as though he has awakened from the malaise of a sad dream. (ZIII: “Blissfulness”). The way home is long and winding: his ship journey takes several days and upon reaching the distant shore Zarathustra decides not to return directly to his cave. Rather, he takes the scenic route, wandering at leisure through the various cities that lie between the sea and the mountains in order “to experience what had happened to humanity in the meantime” (ZIII: “Virtue”). It is at this point that Zarathustra delivers his speech “On Passing By.”

**Disgust and Revenge in the Great City**

“On Passing By” is the prophet’s penultimate public address before finally arriving home at his mountain retreat. It is delivered at the gate of “the *great city*”—no other name is given—to a figure simply called “Zarathustra’s ape.”[[20]](#endnote-20) Zarathustra seems not to be visiting this place deliberately; he is described as having stumbled upon it “suddenly” or “unexpectedly” (*unversehens*).[[21]](#endnote-21) At that very moment, he is confronted by a degraded imitation of himself:

[H]ere a frothing fool with hands outspread leaped before him and barred his way. But this was the same fool that people called ‘Zarathustra’s ape’: for he had gathered something of the phrasing and cadences of Zarathustra’s speech and also liked to borrow from the treasure of his wisdom. (Z III: “Passing By”)[[22]](#endnote-22)

The ape warns Zarathustra away from the city, launching into a joyless and obsessive critique overstuffed with gruesome images: great thoughts being “boiled alive” and “cooked down small,” “slaughterhouses and soup-kitchens of the spirit,” souls hanging like “limp and filthy rags.” A grotesque parade of caricatures is trotted out: money-grubbing shopkeepers, grasping beggars, war-mongering pseudo-patriots, venal princes and so forth. In the ape’s feverish imagination, the whole city seems to be awash in a deluge of swill, vomit, spittle, blood, and sewerage. His central practical teaching, repeated several times, is to “spit upon the city and turn back.” The entire speech is essentially a crude caricature of Zarathustra’s own teachings, appropriating and regurgitating vulgarized fragments from some of the prophet’s earlier speeches.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Zarathustra finally interrupts the ape’s tedious harangue by putting a hand over his “frothing” mouth. His counter-speech unmasks the base, ignoble sentiments that have animated this condemnation of the city: the ape despises it and yet remains within it to curse it and wage war against it—a choice that has made him as small and loathsome as the place he despises. Zarathustra presses the ape on this point and in one of the few gentle moments of his response, asks him why he hasn’t simply left:

Why did you live for so long in the swamp that you yourself had to become a frog and a toad?

Does a putrid and spumy swamp blood not now flow through your own veins, that you have learned to croak and blaspheme such?

Why did you not go into the forest? Or plough the earth? Is the sea not full of verdant islands?

Now, the ape was initially described as a frothing fool who is simply imitating Zarathustra’s words without understanding. But Zarathustra’s interrogation here implies that there is perhaps more to him than his present state might suggest. So let us assume for the moment that the ape, despite his failings, is still a philosopher—or at least aspires to be one. Zarathustra says that he *became* a frog and a toad from living in a swamp for so long. His virulent disgust towards the city is thus not an essential aspect of his character, but rather has been acquired circumstantially. He experiences first hand on a daily basis the tension between what the human being is in his petty society and what it could be. His own attempt to reorder the regime of his soul and self-legislate healthy values is incessantly disrupted by the feverish city in which he lives. That is to say, the great city is a monster against which he perpetually struggles. But as Nietzsche elsewhere counsels, “Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster” (BGE 146).[[24]](#endnote-24)

Zarathustra is thus reiterating a familiar point: if the philosopher’s way of life is irreducibly at odds with the opinions and practices of the city, there are other extra-political options: the life of the renunciant or anchorite (the forest, or by extension, the desert or mountain cave), the life of the agrarian primitivist recluse (the self-sufficient farm), the life of the philosophical ‘friend’ (the Epicurean Garden or Blessed Isle). All of these are examples of withdrawal.[[25]](#endnote-25) The final option here, however, provides the most striking juxtaposition of the three: over against the fetid, gloomy, claustrophobic swamp of the ape’s great city we envision a small cluster of green islands far away in the midst of a vast ocean, with fresh air blown in by trade winds.[[26]](#endnote-26) Over against the ignorant masses, avaricious merchants and fanatical ideologues we envision a small, self-selected community of philosophical companions and fellow creators. Over against the oppressive heteronomous customs, petty gossip and screaming headlines of traditional political life we envision the possibility of contemplation, self-cultivation and the exploration of new shapes of life. One wonders whether this idyllic alternative is really available to the ape; Zarathustra himself is confident that such islands are hidden everywhere.[[27]](#endnote-27) Whether or not this is true, we see here, in spite of Zarathustra’s own recent abandonment of the Blessed Isles, a residual acknowledgement of their abiding importance for nascent free spirits and higher types. If nothing else, his initial reply to the ape makes it clear that, wherever the appropriate place of the philosopher may ultimately be, it is *not* locked in a perpetual *agon* with the monstrous city.

The ape’s insistence on remaining in the great city in order to critique it in some ways recalls Nietzsche’s great antipode, Socrates. But the ape is no Socrates in the marketplace: he lacks the ironic distance, the dialectical finesse and the gentle humor. We might even say that he is Socrates’ ape just as much as Zarathustra’s. Indeed, if there is a philosophical ‘type’ under which the ape can be subsumed, it is the Cynic: a kind of vulgarized, dogmatic and implacably combative Socrates. The Cynic despises the conventional morality of the city, relentlessly exposing its hypocrisies and transgressing them in as shocking a manner as possible. Yet this still requires an audience of the ‘good and righteous’ before whom one can perform such indictments. In this respect, the Cynic remains dialectically bound up with the customs and values he is rejecting. As Nietzsche points out elsewhere, in committing himself to the continual critique of his fellow citizens’ opinions and desires, the Cynic merely negates them without ever managing to raise himself above them and free himself from them.[[28]](#endnote-28) In effect, the dog-philosopher defines himself reactively in opposition to that which he hates and thus allows himself to remain inversely conditioned and determined by it. This is the ape-philosopher’s conundrum as well. Perhaps that is why Zarathustra accuses him of secretly wanting recognition from his fellow citizens: “‘What was it then that made you begin grunting? That no one has *flattered* you enough:—therefore you sat yourself down in this filth, that you might have grounds for such grunting—that you might have grounds for much *revenge!* For revenge, you vain fool, is what all your frothing is.’” (Z III: “Passing By”; cf. II: “Wise Men”).

At the same time, Zarathustra acknowledges the dangerously close kinship between the ape’s diatribes and his own previous teachings: “‘But your words harm *me*’,” he says, “‘even when you are right! And if Zarathustra’s words *were* even a hundred times right, by my words you always—*do* wrong!’” This is because the ape’s words are rooted in resentment and the spirit of revenge rather than love and great longing.[[29]](#endnote-29) That at least is what Zarathustra claims, but his own response to the ape’s speech seems residually bound up with feelings of repulsion and the need for vengeance: he admits that he is “disgusted” by the ape and claims to “despise [his] despising.”[[30]](#endnote-30) And when he finally looks at the great city—recall that he came upon it unexpectantly and was initially distracted by the ape’s performance at its gates—he sighs and then, after a long reflective silence, confesses that he too is disgusted by it. He even indulges himself at this point in a vengeful prophecy of Biblical proportions: “Woe unto this great city!—And would that I might already see the pillar of fire in which it will be consumed! For such pillars of fire must precede the Great Midday. Yet this has its own time and its own fate.—” Is this yet another illustration of the infectious nature of resentment? One wonders whether Zarathustra’s unexpected exposure to the ape and the great city has rekindled the smoldering embers of his basest and most reactive sentiments—or whether Zarathustra’s great politics too have been fueled by the spirit of revenge all along.

**Zarathustra’s Lesson**

It is at this point, however, that Zarathustra leaves the ape with a parting gift, which leavens and perhaps even redeems the pervasive ugliness of their exchange: “Where one can no longer love, there one should—*pass by!—*” This teaching is not without its antecedents: consider, for instance, the saint’s initial warning to Zarathustra *not* to bring humanity a gift (Z I: Prologue 2), or Zarathustra’s subsequent advice to his disciples to pass by priests quietly with a sleeping sword, lest they “besmirch” themselves in attacking their kin (Z II: “Priests”). But something new is coalescing here.[[31]](#endnote-31)

There is an odd symmetry between the ape’s speech and Zarathustra’s. The ape urges us to “turn back” (*kehre* *um*) from the city because it is despicable; Zarathustra counsels us to “*pass by*” (*vorübergehn*) because it cannot be loved. Consider the difference: the ape’s orientation is essentially one of recoiling and sheer negation. It blocks the way and does not allow us any recourse to move forward.[[32]](#endnote-32) We are, in effect, returned to our previous square and prohibited from continuing along our way (whether deliberately chosen or merely stumbled upon). The city thus continues to stand before us as that which defeated our plans. It remains an object of regret, resentment and imagined revenge even after we have ostensibly abandoned it. What then is Zarathustra’s orientation? It too involves negation, but it is of a more nuanced and indirect sort. He doesn’t encourage us to “spit” on the city, as the ape does. But on the other hand, he can’t bring himself to “bless” it either—a noteworthy fact, given the increasing prevalence and significance of that gesture in the latter part of the book.[[33]](#endnote-33) Similarly, while he doesn’t advise us to retreat from the city as the ape does, neither does he encourage us to confront it and overcome it, as an earlier (and more agonistic or hyper-volitional) version of himself might have (Z I: “Transformations,” II: “Self-Overcoming”). Zarathustra’s counsel is to pass *by* the great city, not to pass *through* it. On the face of it, this teaching of evasion appears unexpectedly quietist and apolitical. It may even sound like an admission of defeat, an abdication not only of the philosopher’s zetetic responsibility to the city, but of the task of great politics itself. Yet Zarathustra’s apparent disregard here contains within it the seed of a more affirmative teaching. And it is not just a remedial lesson intended for the ape. Zarathustra subsequently repeats it to himself—as a vital insight that he too has gained—two more times throughout the remainder of Part III.

The first is when he has returned to his mountain world for the third and final time. This is a pivotal moment in the narrative and, notwithstanding his concluding songs in celebration of eternal recurrence, arguably the most unadulterated expression of joy to be found in the book. He reflects on the superiority of solitude to lonely sociality, of free and honest private discourse with oneself to public dissimulation or even prudent silence among others, of communing with worldly things instead of attempting to manipulate and control them:

Here the words and word-shrines of all being spring open for me: all being wants to become word here, all becoming wants to learn from me how to talk.

Down there however—there all talking is in vain! There forgetting and passing by are the best wisdom: *that*—I have now learned!

Whoever wanted to grasp [*begreifen*] everything about human beings would have to grapple with [*angreifen*, i.e., attack, assail] everything. But for that my hands are too clean. (Z III: “Return”)

It is wisest to pass by and forget the city because engagement with it is ultimately fruitless—it will not be improved—and contending with it only soils and infects the philosopher-legislator (cf. Z II: “Priests”).[[34]](#endnote-34) He goes on to juxtapose the pure air and blessed stillness of his mountain retreat with the foul smells and empty chatter of political life, celebrating the fact that his “greatest danger”—humankind—now “lies behind” him. One gets the sense here that Zarathustra is weary of encountering things to which he must say ‘no’, among them humanity itself. Forgetting and passing by are the best wisdom at this juncture because they prepare the ground for new experiences to which one can finally say ‘yes’.

Zarathustra articulates the doctrine of “passing by” one final time in “On Old and New Tablets,” a lengthy speech in which he recapitulates all his various teachings:

I love those who are brave: but it is not enough to be an old swordsman—one must also know how and whom to fight!

And there is often more bravery in restraining oneself and passing by: so that one might save oneself for a worthier enemy! (Z III: “Tablets” 21)

Zarathustra develops the point at some length, reminding himself to “[k]eep your eyes clear” of the contentions of unworthy enemies, since whoever “looks on” such things merely becomes angry. Zarathustra here seems to be recollecting his own visceral disgust and desire for revenge when he finally looked upon the great city. He sums up his lesson with the dictum: “Go *your* ways! And let folk and people go theirs!” The overall point is clear: one shows greater valor by choosing one’s enemies carefully and not indiscriminately squandering one’s forces with petty skirmishes. Whether the “worthier enemy” here is the eternal recurrence or Zarathustra himself as object of self-overcoming, he no longer seeks to contend with imperfectible humanity.

As a formula of selective affirmation, Zarathustra’s teaching on “passing by” anticipates the book’s culminating doctrine: eternal recurrence.[[35]](#endnote-35) That chief concept has already begun to emerge at this point in the narrative, and we might even say it hovers in the background of the three speeches above, although Zarathustra has not yet adequately articulated it, let alone managed to affirm it himself. To appreciate the relation between these two teachings (one fairly modest, the other almost impossibly ambitious), we need to turn to an intermediate doctrine which does not explicitly appear in *Zarathustra*, but which might nonetheless be said to pervade the entire book: *amor fati*, or ‘love of fate’. It is first presented in *The Gay Science*, as Nietzsche’s own personal New Year’s Day “wish” and “dearest thought.” In full it reads:

I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. *Looking away* shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: someday I wish only to be a Yes-sayer. (GS 276)

In the first and last parts of this passage, one can certainly see the germ of Zarathustra’s climactic doctrine: the desire “to see as beautiful what is necessary in things,” to “make things beautiful” through one’s love and someday “to only be a Yes-sayer” anticipates the will to affirm all things—not only every joy and pain of one’s individual life but the totality of natural history itself—and indeed to will their eternal recurrence.[[36]](#endnote-36) We might say that these desires point towards the ideal of unadulterated and indiscriminate love. The middle three sentences however, offer a provisional and slightly tempered teaching that may help illuminate Zarathustra’s parting gift to the ape, so let us focus on those.[[37]](#endnote-37)

“I do not want to wage war against what is ugly”: is this not precisely what the ape does in the great city? We might say as well that it is the error into Zarathustra himself too often falls when he attempts to transform and redeem humanity. So it is no small matter that the prophet congratulates himself on having escaped this temptation at the beginning of his final solitude. Yet Nietzsche’s own wish in GS 276 makes it clear that he still feels the pull of such conflict. However far the sphere of necessity extends, *not everything* is beautiful for the author of this wish.[[38]](#endnote-38) The world still unfortunately contains for him much that is ugly and bad and even painful. He cannot love it yet, but at least he will endeavor not to organize his life around attacking it.

“I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse”: he no longer wants to degrade the world for its ostensible imperfections and disappointments or to reproach the base and lowly. Of course, this is easier said than done: the ugly aspects of the world do not just sit there passively allowing themselves to be observed, they often actively reach out to us and assault us. But we should be careful not to respond in kind. Here we might be tempted to replace “accuse” with ‘injure’ or ‘harm’, and this would certainly capture the afore-mentioned point about fighting monsters. But having enemies or even hurting another is by no means incompatible with this teaching: for better or worse, Nietzsche and Zarathustra both praise the “swordsman.” Nietzsche’s resolution is not a commitment to non-violence or ‘turning the other cheek’, but rather an attempt to twist free of the infectious and self-replicating nature of reactive sentiments like resentment, the spirit of revenge or the need to punish.

“*Looking away* [*Wegsehen*] shall be my only negation”: after contemplating the lofty but seemingly impossible ideal, we arrive at the strategic compromise. Nietzsche is not yet capable of universal affirmation; *some* form of denial is inescapable. But there are different sorts of practical negation. One might negate something by actively trying to annihilate it or irreparably damage it. One could hate something but not have the power to combat it and thus be perpetually wounded or haunted or paralyzed by it, passively suffering from the existence of that which is irredeemably painful or ugly or unlovable. One could negate something by insisting on its unreality, demoting it to a dreamlike or merely illusory status. One could negate something by accusing it or reproaching it. One could negate something by assigning blame or guilt and punishing it. One could even negate something by trying to change it or ‘improve’ it. Or one could negate something *only insofar as one chooses not to acknowledge or recognize it*: that is to say, one could simply “look away” or “pass by.”[[39]](#endnote-39)

This last strategy points towards the “pathos of distance,” a sentiment that Nietzsche will elsewhere associate with the emergence of noble moralities and the phenomenon of rank-ordering: the noble look down from afar on the lowly and base, not hating them, not dwelling on them, not unduly amplifying their significance.[[40]](#endnote-40) Their self-affirmation and embrace of comparably ‘good’ things is the fundamental evaluative act; their negative evaluation of the ‘bad’ a mere afterthought.[[41]](#endnote-41) Similarly, the doctrine of passing by, despite its evasive and non-confrontational overtones, insists on the primacy of affirmation and the parasitic or at least merely reactive nature of negation. If we cannot yet say yes to everything, we can at least minimize and decentralize our nay-saying so that it does not sap our joy, degrade us, poison our highest ideals or distract us from cultivating our own gardens.[[42]](#endnote-42) In passing by that which we cannot love, in looking away from that which we cannot see as beautiful, we break its spell over us, move beyond it and open up the possibility of finding that which we *can* affirm. Modest as it seems, it is thus a crucial stepping stone in the process of learning to say yes to everything, a process that reaches its apotheosis in the teaching of eternal recurrence.[[43]](#endnote-43)

**Farewell to Great Politics**

Let us return, then, to the question of Zarathustra’s great politics. The book began with the philosophical legislator’s ambitious descent from his mountain solitude into political life, bearing the gift of a radical new affirmative teaching that would transform humanity and thereby redeem the world. But Zarathustra’s own education, it turned out, was not yet entirely complete. As he absorbed his final lessons, his teaching evolved. At the same time, his intended audience increasingly narrowed. An indiscriminate speech to the vulgar multitude in the marketplace soon gave way to more advanced discourses reserved for friends and fellow creators in the cosmopolitan Motley Cow, and they in turn gave way to more nuanced exchanges shared with a select and isolated hermetic friendship community. Now, by the Third Part of the book, Zarathustra is once again alone, his speeches directed only to himself, or solitude, or his animals, or life, or eternity.[[44]](#endnote-44) It is in this “blissful stillness” that he will articulate and affirm his culminating doctrine of eternal recurrence (Z III: “Return Home”).

The climactic events that unfold during Zarathustra’s third and final solitude are often framed by commentators as preparation for one final descent back into humanity, by means of which Zarathustra will triumphantly disseminate his completed teaching.[[45]](#endnote-45) This is not an unreasonable assumption: there are indeed moments when he expresses a desire to return to humankind once more (Z III: “Tablets” 1; IV: “Honey,” “Sign”). And of course, his previous two withdrawals were both undertaken with an eye to his eventual return. Yet Zarathustra never actually undertakes this lastdescent. Part III (the original conclusion of the book) ends with the prophet singing his affirmation of eternal recurrence. The subsequently appended Fourth and Final Part, more satirical in mood and distributed only to a small circle of friends, finds an aged Zarathustra still enjoying his mountain solitude before awkwardly navigating a surprise visit from the higher humans.[[46]](#endnote-46) One again finds occasional promissory gestures towards a final dramatic descent—he claims to be waiting for a sign to return, abruptly anticipates an imminent reunion with his children and even emerges dramatically from his cave as the sun rises at the very end, prophesying the arrival of the Great Midday.[[47]](#endnote-47) But we never actually see Zarathustra return to humanity, and indeed the rhetoric of going “down” and “under” one last time is belied by both the history of his own formative experiences and the content of his completed teaching.[[48]](#endnote-48)

Consider the first: Zarathustra’s experiences in the human world have been almost invariably disappointing. What is it that brought him down from his mountain retreat in the first place? Zarathustra speaks of being “overburdened” with his wisdom, of wanting to “overflow” and “distribute” it to humanity (Z I: Prologue 1). Mid-descent, he tells the saint in the forest, “I love human beings”: that is his very first moment of intersubjective communication after ten years of solitude (Z I: Prologue 2). But when the saint observes that human beings are “too incomplete an affair” for him to love, the prophet quickly corrects himself: “What did I say of love! I bring human beings a gift.” Zarathustra also sees the human being as too incomplete an affair, and envisions its transfiguration into something higher and more perfect, something more capable of affirmation.[[49]](#endnote-49) That in a sense is his gift: a new teaching, a new table of values, a new way of life, a new mode of being in the world. He even characterizes himself as a sculptor of sorts, freeing human potentiality from the natural-historical prison in which it finds itself (Z II: “Blessed Isles”). Yet as his task unfolds, he seems to have an ever-lower estimation of the raw materials upon which he is working.[[50]](#endnote-50) What draws him towards humanity is ultimately the same thing that repels him: its incompleteness or imperfection. He is of course also repeatedly frustrated and discouraged by what we might call the problem of prophetic misunderstanding: if there is one constant in the book, it is the incapacity of those audiences to whom Zarathustra addresses himself fully to apprehend the radical import of his gradually developing doctrines.[[51]](#endnote-51) Even amongst his elite inner circle, he is reduced to fending off misunderstanding through dissimulation and silence.[[52]](#endnote-52) It is perhaps for these two reasons that Zarathustra finds little joy in the midst of human sociality. He struggles to breath, think and create in cities, finds even the friendship community of the Blessed Isles lonely and stultifying, and quickly chafes at the company of higher humans who visit his mountain abode.[[53]](#endnote-53) One wonders *why* he would want to go back down again: what would be different this time?

On the other hand, he thrives and seems genuinely happy during his anchoretic periods. At the very beginning of the story, we are simply told that Zarathustra “enjoyed” his spirit and solitude. Admittedly, its value at that stage lay first and foremost in its *utility* for the task of great politics: after all, the greatest events are our stillest hours and “thoughts that come on doves’ feet direct the world” (Z II: “Great Events,” cf. I: “Flies”; II: “Hour”). But this begins to shift as we see Zarathustra repeatedly flounder in the midst of community; he increasingly longs for withdrawal. When he finally returns to his mountain retreat, it is a profoundly cathartic and even ecstatic moment. He calls solitude his “home” and his “mother” (Z III: “Return Home”). Withdrawal is at that moment no longer just a means to great politics; it is an end in itself. It should come as no surprise, then, that Zarathustra associates joy almost exclusively with withdrawal and solitude and never with descent or dissemination.[[54]](#endnote-54) One might say that the apex of his existence, far from being a *vita activa* of great politics, turns out to a kind of post-metaphysical *vita contemplativa.*

Now consider the evolutionary logic of Zarathustra’s own teachings. The first two parts of the book are heavily freighted with doctrines of ambitious striving and the pressing need for radical transformation: the ideal of the superhuman, the legislation of new this-worldly values, the liberatory capacity of creativity, will to power, self-overcoming. But by the Third Part, the wheel has turned and we sense a nascent fatalism (Z II: “Redemption”). The abysmal thought of eternal recurrence is gradually emerging, a thought that will unmoor or at least radically reframe his previous teachings. I have argued above that Zarathustra’s teaching of passing by is a crucial step on the way to this highest formula of affirmation. The philosophical legislator recognizes that he is incapable of loving humanity, just as the ape is incapable of loving the city, and so instead of grappling with it—accusing it, critiquing it, trying to improve it—he has decided to pass it by, or in the words of Nietzsche’s *amor fati* resolution, to “look away”. He has been redeemed from his world-redeeming ambitions. Part III might then be read as the story of Zarathustra withdrawing from the realm of human affairs altogether and with it, the grand political project of epochal human transfiguration, to embrace a kind of blissful, self-sufficient, divine solitude.[[55]](#endnote-55)

And yet, this still misses something important. The doctrine of passing by remains a teaching of selective affirmation—of deliberately limited horizons—and as such is too weak for Zarathustra’s final experience of the world. The noble pathos of distance must ultimately be superseded by an even more powerful, healthy and joyfully indiscriminate embrace of all things. At first this ascent up the Nietzschean ladder of love might seem to re-energize the task of great politics: Zarathustra has learned to see as beautiful what is necessary in all things—among them human beings—and thus no longer need pass them by or look away. But as has often been pointed out, the circular temporality of eternal recurrence disrupts the residually teleological and millenarian underpinnings of Zarathustra’s project.[[56]](#endnote-56) In any case, his affirmation of that epiphany requires him to accept and embrace humanity’s incompleteness. It is no longer simply a question of “not . . . accus[ing] those who accuse,” but of affirming those who cannot affirm or—bearing in mind it’s profoundly un-Christian spirit—loving those incapable of genuine love. This means: no nausea over the recurrence of the small human being (Z III: “Convalescent”), no pity for the higher humans (Z IV, “Sign”), and presumably, no further need to transform or redeem humanity. Nor does it permit the paternalistic cultivation of a select coterie, i.e., his fellow creators or “children.”[[57]](#endnote-57) As Zarathustra makes clear in his final presentation of the eternal recurrence teaching, “joy does not want heirs, nor children—joy wants itself, wants eternity, wants recurrence, wants everything eternally the same” (Z IV: “Sleepwalker”). One might say that the joyful philosophical doctrines of eternal recurrence and *amor fati* are excessive teachings that cannot be subsumed or implemented within the traditional sphere of politics. They cannot even be accommodated by Zarathustra’s great politics, which is always returning us to the question of what we *ought* to become and aiming at our completion or perfection.[[58]](#endnote-58) They are suprapolitical teachings, insofar as they accept and affirm the human being as it is.[[59]](#endnote-59) As such, they have no place in the cities of humanity. They are doctrines for the forest, the desert, the mountains—or perhaps, at most, for verdant islands.

**NOTES**

1. I characterize Nietzsche’s political philosophy as ‘Platonic’ insofar as it envisions the ideal coincidence of philosophical wisdom and political power, epitomized by the philosopher ‘king’ (Plato, *Republic* 473c-e and Bks VI-VII *passim*; cf. *Laws* 712a, 713e *ff* and *Seventh Letter* 326a-b, 328a). On Nietzsche’s insistence that genuine philosophers are “*commanders and legislators*,” see *BGE* 211, as well as 61-62, 203, 208, 212; cf. *KSA* 11:26[407], 35[47], 37[8], 38[13]. This idea is anticipated by *Zarathustra*; see e.g. *Z* I: “Flies” and “Goals,” *Z* II: “Self-Overcoming,” “Events,” “Hour,” and *Z* III: “Tablets.” Nietzsche himself is keenly aware of his prophet’s proximity to Plato: in a letter to his friend Overbeck, he confesses amazement at “*how much* Zarathustra *platōnizei*” (KSB 6:469). On Nietzsche’s political Platonism, see Strauss (1983), Zuckert (1985), Ottman (1987: 239-65, 276-81); Picht (1988: 226-41); Rosen (1995: vii-xviiI: 185), Lampert (1996: 117-28) and (2004: 205-19), McIntyre (1997: 74-99), Hutter (2006: 1-8); Groff (2006), Foley (2016) and Drochon (2016: 36-48). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Although Nietzsche’s own peculiar notion of great politics is not articulated as such until *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), one might say that *Zarathustra* (1883-85) exemplifies it, and in doing so offers the richest portrait of this task in all of Nietzsche’s corpus; on this, see Loschenkohl (2020). Loeb (2019) argues that Nietzsche’s elevated and demanding conception of the genuine philosopher is in fact fulfilled *only* by Zarathustra. On the import and parameters of Nietzsche’s great politics, see Jaspers (1965: 272-84), Ottman (1987: 239-81), Detwiler (1990: 54-64, 98-143); Ansell-Pearson (1991: 200-24), Conway (1997: 1-27, 61-65), McIntyre (1997: 74-99) Siemens (2008), Lemm (2014), Shapiro (2016: 1-22), Drochon (2016) and Groff (2020a). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. This of course is how Plato’s *Republic* has itself sometimes been read: as a critique of the *bios politikos* and defense of the *bios philosophos* or *theōrētikos*; see e.g. Strauss (1964: 50-138, esp. 65), Carter (1986: 155-86) and Lampert (2013: 19-20). I have explored these themes relative to *Zarathustra* in Groff (2020b) and Groff (2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I adapt here Nietzsche’s expression from *Daybreak* 16, the “morality of custom” (*Sittlichkeit der Sitte*), to represent the hegemony of received or inherited values in traditional political life. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. All quotations of the text are from Graham Parkes’ translation of *Zarathustra* (Nietzsche 2005), with occasional alterations. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. Z I: Prologue 1 with the previously published version in GS 342, the original sketch in Notebook M-III-1 (*KSA* 9:11[195]) and the source in Hellwald (1874: 128): the original Persian prophet was born in the city of Urmia (i.e., Orūmīyeh, situated in the northwestern-most province of modern-day Iran). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The ascetic practice of ‘withdrawal’ or ‘retreat’(*anachōrēsis*) is typically associated with the Desert Fathers and Christian monastic communities, but has older and deeper roots in Greek philosophy and Mazdayasna, as well as much older Brahminical texts. On withdrawal as an ascetic strategy, see Ware (1995). Nietzsche himself interprets such ascetic strategies not as moralistic renunciations of this-worldly existence, but rather as “bridges to *independence*” (GM III.7) and “the most appropriate and natural conditions of their best existence, their fairest fruitfulness” (GM III.8); cf. D 9 and 14, which consider the ways in which they can be used as masks for overcoming the morality of custom and legislating new values or ways of life. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Zarathustra’s language of descent (*untergehen*) evokes the motif of *katabasis* in Plato’s *Republic* 327a, 516c-517a and 618e; on which, see Gooding-Williams (2001) and Woodruff (2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The narrator describes this as “the nearest town (*Stadt*), which lay on the edge of the forest” (Z I: Prologue 3). *Stadt* can refer either to a town or a city, and Parkes’ translation opts—rightly, I think—for the former. The location of Zarathustra’s first destination (“on the edge of the forest”), the provincial character of its denizens and their instinctive distrust of strangers all suggest that it is a smaller town. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. The Motley Cow is also simply referred to as a *Stadt*, and Parkes renders this again as “town.” But this second locale seems more of a city, at least in part because of its implied cosmopolitanism and selective receptivity to Zarathustra’s teachings. The name *die bunte Kuh* (the ‘colorful’, ‘variegated’ or ‘gaudy’ cow; cf. the imagery in Z II: “Culture”) additionally suggests a likeness to the democratic polis envisioned by Plato, which prioritizes freedom over all other values, manifests a striking diversity of ways of life and is receptive to novelty (*Rep.* 557c-d). It would seem that for both Plato and Nietzsche the democratic city, despite being ‘feverish’ and spiritually complacent, is a charming and fertile breeding ground for philosophers. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Although it is not made clear at the beginning of the Second Part, it seems that the Blessed Isles friendship community involves a smaller subset of the companions and fellow creators that Zarathustra originally recruited in the Motley Cow. This becomes clear in Z III: “Apostates,” when the prophet revisits that city on his final journey home from the Blessed Isles and re-encounters some of his “believers,” who have now “become pious again.” [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. On Nietzsche’s own transformative experiment with a small friendship community during his 1876-77 sabbatical in Sorrento, see D’Iorio (2016), 37-43. As Nietzsche later confessed to Peter Gast, the concrete inspiration for the Blessed Isles was the Isle of Ischia in the Gulf of Naples, which he first encountered during this period (Letter to Heinrich Köselitz, August 16, 1883 [KSB 6:452]); see D’Iorio (2016), 79-88 and Groff (2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Nietzsche’s middle period works are saturated with critiques of spirit-flattening political life in the city, often set side-by-side with portraits of productive withdrawal and solitude; see e.g. HH 438 and D 174-79. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. The Blessed Isles’ considerable distance from mainland Europe is stated outright in Z II: “Child” and suggested again in Z III: “Vision,” “Blissfulness,” and “Sunrise”—all of which take place on his long journey back to the mainland. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See respectively D 423 and 483 (cf. Z I: Prologue 2); D 575, GS 124, 289, 343 (cf. II: “Wise Men” and III: “Tablets” 5, 16, 28); and GS 310 (cf. Z II: “Priests” and III: “Wanderer”). See also Z I: Prologue 3 for an image of the sea as that which is great enough to absorb the “polluted stream” of the human without itself becoming “unclean.” [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Zarathustra in fact juxtaposes his own withdrawal into “lonely mountains” and the “harsh desert” with the “soft greensward” of the Blessed Isles (Z II: “Child”), suggesting that his companions are perhaps not yet ready for the more severe demands of complete withdrawal and solitude; cf. the retroactive description of Zarathustra’s children as “trees” who must for now stand together as a grove (Z III: “Blissfulness”). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. On the Isles of the Blessed (*makarōn nēsoi*) of Greek myth, see Rohde (1925: 55-87); for their relevance to *Zarathustra*, see Bishop (2017: 2-4) and Groff (2020b). On Zarathustra’s Blessed Isles as representing a late modern Epicurean Garden, see Groff (2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Z II: “Soothsayer,” “Redemption” and “Hour.” [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. This is the second time the saint has been proved right; cf. his warning that human beings are suspicious of solitaries and it is better to remain in the forest, counsel borne out by the prophet’s failed first transmission in Z I: Prologue 3-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. The great city is *not* “the Motley Cow,” a detail that is made clear in the subsequent section (*Z* III: “Apostates”). The Motley Cow is the final city Zarathustra re-visits before returning to his mountain retreat. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Carl Jung is the only commentator who acknowledges this detail as noteworthy. Emphasizing the vehemence with which Zarathustra excoriates the small people of the previous city he had visited (Z III: “Virtue”), he suggests that, like the moralist who is secretly obsessed with the lurid, there is something that unconsciously draws the prophet to the great city even as he is repulsed by it (Jung 1988: II: 1389). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. The image of the ape recurs throughout Nietzsche texts, variously representing the human being’s coming into being and “shameful origins,” as well as superficial mimicry and imitation; see Groff (2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Cf. Z I: Prologue 3-5, “Idol,” “Flies,” “Chastity”; II: “Rabble” and III: “Virtue.” [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Cf. the “great dragon” in Z I: “Transformations.” [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. On the forest, see Z I*:* Prologue 2, 8-10, I: “Flies,” “Chastity,” II: “Dance-Song,” III: “Passing By,” “Return Home” and IV: “Kings.” On the desert, see Z I: Prologue 2, Z I: “Transformations” and Z II: “Wise Men.” The mountain is of course Zarathustra’s own choice for solitary political sanctuary. The third option (the “verdant islands”) evokes the afore-mentioned Blessed Isles (Z II *passim*; see Z II: “Child” and III: “Blissfulness” for descriptions of them as green), but also one might say the cloister or monastery (on this again, see D’Iorio 2016 and Groff 2021). Interestingly, Zarathustra’s second suggestion—that the ape might “plow the earth”—does not seem to point back to real options explored elsewhere in the text in the way the forest or island possibilities do, unless we consider Z I: Prologue 8. Whether or not this is first time the life of agrarian retreat is broached in *Zarathustra*, it has a long history as a response to sick cities and has at times been taken up as a philosophical life-strategy; see e.g., Carter (1986: 76-98) and Graham (1989: 53-72). The image of the plow, as breaking up, turning over and resuscitating the compacted, exhausted soil of received traditions was also a crucial one in Nietzsche’s thought. The working title of *Human, All Too Human*, his first middle period work, was *Die Pflugschar*, or “The Plowshare”; on which, see D’Iorio (2016: 47). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. For comparable juxtapositions, see Z I: Prologue 3 and II: “Poets.” [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. For instance, he speaks eloquently at the end of Part I of “a thousand healths and hidden islands of life” which are as yet “unexhausted and undiscovered” (Z I: “Bestowing”). The intended sense here is predominantly metaphorical, but the passage also invokes the hope that one can still find physical spaces in the world not territorialized by the morality of custom. In a similar vein, when the Soothsayer tells Zarathustra that the Blessed Isles are no more, Zarathustra grows angry and insists that such places still exist (Z IV, “Cry of Need”). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Nietzsche compares the Cynic to the more promising Epicurean philosopher, who “uses his higher culture to make himself independent of prevailing opinions [and] rais[ing] himself above them” (HH 275; cf. 291). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. As Robert Gooding-Williams points out, his speech captures “the spirit but not the letter of Zarathustra’s teaching” (Gooding-Williams, 2001: 243). Laurence Lampert suggests that “What Zarathustra hears in the fool’s abuse and vituperation is his own teaching of contempt for the last man unrelieved by the great longing for something higher; he hears what can be made of his teaching by imitators moved only by vengeance or envy” (Lampert 1986: 165). I have elsewhere read this passage as articulating an existential notion of truth as subjectivity: there are ‘true’ propositions that in the mouths of certain people become untruth, inasmuch as truth is something be lived (Groff 2004: 24-25). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. As some commentators have pointed out, the ape’s vulgarization is a bit too close for comfort. Stanley Rosen observes that “the fool is a grotesque caricature of Zarathustra, but the caricature has some bite; Zarathustra’s own rhetoric is sufficiently perfervid to give rise to this sort of imitation” (Rosen 1995: 191-92). T. K. Seung sees even more bite in the caricature than Rosen does: on his account, the ape’s speech hardly differs at all from Zarathustra’s in either content or motivating spirit (Seung 2005: 143-45). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. In warning Zarathustra against sharing his teaching in the cities of human beings, the saint is urging him to “stay in the forest” (Z I: Prologue 2) and Zarathustra dissuades his disciples from picking fights with priests because, despite the fact that Zarathustra considers them his “enemies,” their blood is related—i.e., he too is still ‘pious’, or working in the lineage of the ascetic ideal even as he overcomes it (Z II: “Priests,” cf. GS 344 and GM III: *passim*). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Cf. D 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. See e.g. Z III: “Blissfulness,” “Sunrise,” “Tablets” 3, and “Convalescent”; cf. Z I: Prologue 1 and “Bestowing” for anticipations. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Nietzsche frequently insists on forgetting as a necessary condition for the possibility of life and health. Its pairing here with passing by (and elsewhere with looking away) suggests the necessary selectivity and even falsification involved in such strategies (truth being inimical to life). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Nietzsche characterizes the eternal recurrence doctrine as the “fundamental conception” of *Zarathustra* and “the highest formula of affirmation that is at all attainable” (EH “Books,” Z:1, cf. BT:2). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. In Nietzsche’s final formulation of *amor fati*, the first and last parts are in fact all that is emphasized and indeed are amplified to the point where it seems almost indiscernible from eternal recurrence: “My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it [. . . ] but *love* it” (EH, “Clever” 10; cf. “Books” CW 4). The experimental tentativeness, modesty and hopefulness of the original formulation (Nietzsche’s “I wish” and “I want” indicate that this is an ideal that stands above him) are lost in the less nuanced bombast of the late period. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. The following discussion is an attempt to shed further light on Z III: “Passing By” by means of GS 276. For more detailed and comprehensive readings of this pivotal section, see Higgins (2000), 146-50 and Ure (2019), 160-73. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. The realm of necessity remains an open interpretive question in Nietzsche’s texts. In the *Gay Science* itself, one finds a range of possible positions, from the idea that “one thing is needful” (GS 289) to the claim that “there are only necessities” (GS 109). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. This theme recurs throughout the remainder of GS IV; see especially GS 290 (which reflects on the necessity of attaining satisfaction with oneself, lest we become the kind of people who seek revenge and hurt others by forcing them to gaze upon our ugliness and gloominess) and GS 321 (which examines the often unproductive and self-injurious ways in which we punish, reproach and attempt to ‘improve’ others, counseling instead self-perfection, “step[ping] aside” and “look[ing] away”). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. The first explicit mentions of this phrase occur in KSA 12:1[7], 1[10], and 2[13]. However, the idea had already effectively emerged during the composition of Zarathustra; see Letter to Peter Gast, August 3, 1883, where Nietzsche speaks of the “*affect* [*Affekt*] *of distance*” in the context of hygienic withdrawal into the friendship community of the Blessed Isles. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. BGE 257, GM I.2 and GM III.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Reframing the teaching in terms of vision and proximity introduces a middle option between seeing as beautiful that which is necessary and “looking away” from that which is not: provisionally adopting a sufficiently distant perspective that allows one to find some beauty in the phenomenon (D 485, GS 15, 299); for discussion, see Higgins (2000: 147-48). [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. See Schacht (1995), 244-45. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Z III: “Return Home” *ff.* The one possible exception to this is Z III: “Tablets.” [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. See e.g. Lampert (1986), Seung (2005) and Loeb (2010). Higgins (1987), Conway (1988), Pippin (1988), Rosen (1995) and Gooding-Williams (2001) take ironic or deflationary approaches to the text which, while still sometimes entertaining the possibility of a final descent, are more sensitive to the failure or at least limitations of Zarathustra’s ambitions. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. On the question of whether to include Z IV as an integral part of *Zarathustra* (and if so, how exactly to understand its relation to the previous three parts), see e.g. Lampert (1986: 287-311), Higgins (1987: 203-32), Gooding-Williams (2001: 269-304), Seung (2005: 241-359), Loeb (2010: 85-91). For the purposes of the present discussion, it does not matter. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Z IV, “Honey,” “Welcome,” “Sign.” [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. See Groff (2020b) and (2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Z II: “Isles,” “Redemption”; III: “Blissfulness”; IV, “Midday.” In these last two speeches, Zarathustra recognizes the residual need to perfect himself and the world. Cf. Z I: “Afterwordly,” which critiques the afterworldly for seeing the world as “eternally imperfect.” [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Z I Prologue, 5, 9; II: “Isles,” “Redemption,” “Prudence”; Z III: “Return Home”; Z IV *passim*. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. See e.g. the popular crowd in the marketplace (Z I: Prologue 3-6), the soothsayer (Z II: “Soothsayer,” IV, “Cry of Need”), the “cripples and beggars” (Z II: “Redemption”), the dwarf (Z III: “Vision”), the ape (Z III: “Passing By”), his animals (Z III: “Convalescent”), the higher humans (Z IV *passim*), and even his own disciples (Z II: “Child,” “Soothsayer,” III: “Wanderer,” “Apostles”). [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. See e.g. Z II: “Night-Song,” “Soothsayer,” “Redemption,” “Prudence,” “Hour”; cf. III: “Return Home.” [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Z I: Prologue 9, “Idol,” “Flies,” “Friend,”; II: “Rabble,” “Wise Men,” “Events”; III: “Virtue,” “Passing By,” “Return Home”; IV, “Welcome” “Melancholy” 1, “Awakening,” “Ass Festival,” “Sign.” [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. As mentioned previously, Zarathustra is initially described as having “enjoyed” (*genoss*, i.e., savored or relished) his solitude (Z I: Prologue 1); a detail repeated in IV, “Midday” just before he experiences the world becoming perfect). The language of joy (*Lust*) is however primarily concentrated in four speeches. Z II: “Rabble” describes life as a “well-spring of joy,” which is however poisoned by the rabble; in order to discover its source and drink from pure waters Zarathustra says he had to fly to the “highest heights”—an expression which here evokes both his mountain world and the austere solitude of the anchorite. The next two take place in said solitude: Z III: “Tablets,” 5 characterizes joy in terms of epistemological exploration (the open seas trope), while Z III: “Dance-Song” constitutes Zarathustra’s climactic celebration of life, concluding with the motif: “all joy wants Eternity – / – wants deep, deep Eternity!” Z IV: “Sleepwalker” is ostensibly addressed to the higher humans, although Zarathustra himself seems to be dreaming or in a trance. Arguably the most powerful and extensive expression of the eternal recurrence teaching in the book, it reprises and expands upon the conclusion of Z III: “Dance-Song” with multiple expressions of the idea that “joy wants the eternity of all things,” even those that are sorrowful and painful and unjust (see esp. 10-12). The word *Freude* itself surprisingly never actually occurs in Zarathustra; one finds the occasional adjectival form (*froh*), although it is rarely employed in any philosophically substantive sense (see however Z II: “Pitying,” which celebrates the ability to enjoy oneself [*sich freuen*]). An investigation of comparable words— *Glücke*, *Seligkeit* and their variants—yields wider and less consistent usage, but the substantive, non-ironic or non-disparaging mentions of such terms again occur almost invariably in the context of Zarathustra’s solitude. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. In this respect, he is rather like the Epicurean gods, who are unconcerned with the affairs of human beings and experience no need to intervene or correct their errors. As Nietzsche explicitly admits, he himself is incapable of such divine detachment, let alone the affirmation of incompleteness ultimately required by eternal recurrence (BGE 62); hence his own insistence on the need for *Zucht* and *Züchtun*g. For discussion, see Groff (forthcoming). [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. See e.g. Löwith (1997), which shows its conflict with the will to power, Pippin (1988), which notes its tension with the future ideal of the superhuman, and Rosen (1995), which sees it as at odds with the need for transformation and redemption. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. The middle period works immediately preceding *Zarathustra* often emphasize privatized experimental aesthetic self-cultivation among a small select group; a more modest project than the great politics broached in this book. For discussion, see Groff (2020a). [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Conway (1997: 3, 9). [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Cf. Paul van Tongeren, who argues that Nietzsche is ultimately an *Über-politischer Denker,* insofar as his thought goes beyond the political by universalizing war and multiplicity and thus problematizing the very idea of unified, stable political actors (van Tongeren 2008). I mean it more in the sense that Zarathustra’s doctrines overturn the meaningfulness of normative prescriptions (the ‘ought’ of the question, ‘*what ought we to become?*’). Here I set aside the question of how exactly this reading of *Zarathustra* applies to Nietzsche, i.e., whether he himself twists free of the temptation to great politics. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)