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## ***Agonal Writing. Towards an Agonal Model for Critical Transvaluation***

Abstract: This paper will examine the concept of ‘agonal culture’ set out in Nietzsche’s early essay *Homer’s Contest*. The orientation is, in the first instance, hermeneutic: to what extent does agonal culture offer a fruitful model for Nietzsche’s own writing? At its most ambitious, my claim is that the Greek agon, with its peculiar dynamic form, operates as a principle that organises and regulates Nietzsche’s critical discourse. As a law of production governing Nietzsche’s text, the agon allows us to make sense of Nietzsche’s polemical style - of certain puzzling, yet recurrent features of his textual confrontations that tend to get ignored or written off as inessential. More importantly, however, it addresses certain key problems intrinsic to transvaluation itself; problems that threaten the coherence of Nietzsche’s philosophical project.

**Keywords:** *Nietzsche, Agonal Culture, Polemical Style, Transvaluation, Imaginary Communities*

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### **1) Introduction**

This paper will examine the concept of ‘agonal culture’ set out in Nietzsche’s early essay<sup>2</sup> *Homer’s Contest* <sup>3</sup>. The orientation is, in the first instance, hermeneutic: to what extent does

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<sup>2</sup> References to Nietzsche’s texts appear in brackets, their titles abbreviated with section/aphorism numbers and/or names, as appropriate (occasional page references are given as p.\*\*). References to the *Nachlass* are from the *Kritische Studienausgabe [KSA]* (Hrsg. G.Collli & M.Montinari, dtv de Gruyter, München Berlin 1980), and follow the notation therein: e.g. (2[110],12) = note 2[110] in *KSA* volume 12. Where necessary, page references are made to *KSA*. Translations are mine, although I have leaned on Hollingdale, Kaufmann and others. Square brackets are mainly used in quotes for alternative translations or comments of mine. Where the text or note appears in *Appendix*, it is indicated with a capital letter: e.g. (*HaH*,214 = C) refers to text C in the *Appendix*.

Abbreviated titles are standard and include the following: *BGE* = *Beyond Good and Evil*; *GM* = *Towards the Genealogy of Morals*; *HC* = *Homer’s Contest (Homer’s Wettkampf, KSA1, p.783 f.* Translated as *Homer on Competition*, in: *On the Genealogy of Morality*, K. Ansell-Pearson [ed.], C.Diethe [tr.], CUP, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 187-194); *GS* = *The Gay Science*; *HaH* = *Human, All Too Human*; *PT* = *Philosophy & Truth. Selections from Nietzsche’s Notebooks of the Early 1870’s* (Breazale,D. [ed.& tr.], Humanties Press, New Jersey & London, 1993); *PTG* = *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (M.Cowan [tr.], Gateway, Chicago); *TI* = *Twilight of the Idols (EU = Twilight of the Idols: Expeditions of an Untimely Man; MA = Twilight of the Idols: Morality as Anti-Nature); WP* = *The Will to Power*; *Z* = *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

<sup>3</sup> *Homer’s Wettkampf* (*KSA1*,p. 783 f.). An edited translation is available in *The Portable Nietzsche*, pp. 32-39 (ed. & tr. W.Kaufmann, Viking Press, NY, 1958). Page references are to an unabridged translation by Carol Diethe. This is to be found together with a contemporaneous text *The Greek State (Der griechische Staat*, in *KSA1*, pp. 764-777) in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, (K. Ansell-Pearson (ed.), C.Diethe (tr.), CUP, Cambridge, 1994), pp. 187-194. Despite the curious translation of the title as *Homer on Competition*, this is, I find, the best available translation. Together with the notebook PII8b (=16[ ], *KSA vol.7*), *Homer’s Contest* is the most important source for Nietzsche’s thought on the agon. As one of *Five Prefaces for Unwritten Books* given to Cosima Wagner for Christmas 1872, it was «finished on the 29. December 1872» (*KSA1*, p. 792). But the drafts in

agonal culture offer a fruitful model for Nietzsche's own writing? At its most ambitious, my claim is that the Greek agon, with its peculiar dynamic form, operates as a principle that organises and regulates Nietzsche's critical discourse. As a law of production governing Nietzsche's text, the agon allows us to make sense of Nietzsche's polemical style - of certain puzzling, yet recurrent features of his textual confrontations that tend to get ignored or written off as inessential. More importantly, however, it addresses certain key problems intrinsic to transvaluation itself; problems that threaten the coherence of Nietzsche's philosophical project.

Clearly, this thesis requires a close textual exposition attending to the interplay of thematic and structural/dynamic dimensions of Nietzschean confrontation. In what follows I shall limit my considerations to an introductory account of agonal culture and its ramifications for Nietzsche's texts. To that end, the notion of agonal writing must first be situated in relation to Nietzsche's philosophical project and certain difficulties afflicting it.

Nietzsche's life-project of critical transvaluation (*Umwertung*) is dedicated to a contestation of values. Against the prevailing values of European (Christian-Platonic) culture, whether metaphysical, moral or religious, Nietzsche attempts, time and again, to raise life as the highest value. This I take to be the basic and recurrent task of *overcoming*: to overcome theoretical discourse (metaphysics), morality and religion *in the name of life*, its affirmation and elevation or 'greatness'.

Now this task originates in a critical diagnosis of the present, which in turn raises a number of problems for it. If Nietzsche is right that Western values originate in a 'decadent' form of life, a sick and impoverished will, then there is more than just values at stake in the question of overcoming. Overcoming must not only raise new values geared towards life affirmation; it requires a new *form* of evaluating, a new process of idealisation. Nietzsche's strategy of overcoming must somehow address, not just Western values, but their origin in the body, the affects, a dissolute will. The problem is: how can this be done through discourse, an ideal medium if ever there was one? Even if we grant that Nietzsche's discourse *can* somehow address the body, *how* is it to engage the condition of decadence? If, as Nietzsche claims, it is not possible to «screw back humankind towards an *earlier* measure of virtue» (*TI: EU, 43*), to reverse decadence, then how is his writing to serve the elevation or enhancement of life? What exactly would it mean to 'overcome' decadence?

On closer analysis, decadence raises a further problem. This centres on the question of closure. If Nietzsche is right that Western values originate in a life-form that is turned against

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16[ ] show that N. was working on it in period: summer '71 - early '72, i.e. during latter stages of BT. The folder MpXII 3 (=20[ ], KSA7), containing first draft, is dated summer '72.

For the agon cf. also: 1[62]; *Das griechische Musikdrama* (KSA1, p. 515 f.) on the tragedian as 'pentathlete'; *Socrates und die Tragödie* (KSA1, p533f.) on the introduction of dialectics as the 'agon with words and grounds' into tragedy, and the resulting agon between music and dialectic (p. 545 f.); *PTG* on Heraclitus' transfiguration of the agon into a *Weltprinzip* (KSA 1, p. 825 f.; C. 55); *HaH*, 158,170,214 and the important note 5[146] (1875; KSA 8) ; the lecture courses *Die Geschichte der griechischen Literatur* contain important observations on the impact of the agon on Greek art (*Grossoctavausgabe*, Naumann-Kröner, Leipzig, 1894 f., vol. XVIII, esp. pp. 134 f.); *BGE*, 259; *TI* (*The Problem of Socrates*, 9) on Socratic dialectic as a new kind of agon.

In connection with Nietzsche's philological work on the fictitious contest between Homer and Hesiod (*Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Hrsg. G.Colli & M.Montinari, de Gruyter, Berlin 1967 f., vol. II, 1: pp. 271-339), the classicist Hugh Lloyd-Jones writes: «it is more interesting to note that in this study we see the origins of Nietzsche's important observation of the significance in Greek life of contests and competitions. This is emphasized in the history of Greek culture of Jacob Burckhardt, a senior colleague of Nietzsche in the University of Basel; and though Burckhardt always kept his distance from Nietzsche, and later came to mistrust him, it seems certain that this feature of his work was due to Nietzsche's influence.» (*Nietzsche and the Study of the Ancient World*, in "Studies in Nietzsche and the Classical Tradition", J.C. O'Flaherty, T.F. Sellner, R.M. Helm (ed.), Chapel Hill 1979). Cf. Burckhardt: *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, (Kröner Vlg., Leipzig 1929), esp.vol.III ch2: 'Der koloniale und agonale Mensch'.

life: the attempted closure of theoretical discourse against time and the senses *in the name of eternal truth* (as in metaphysics); and the concurrent war of annihilation against the instincts, *in the name of virtue* (as in the moral demand common to religion and metaphysics); if, in short, these values originate in a willing that is turned against the will, then they cannot be effectively challenged through a purely theoretical discourse that neglects the body and closes itself off against the will. Such a discourse - even if it pitted life, its affirmation and elevation, against Western values - would fall prey to a performative contradiction: in its performance - as a discourse of values - it would undermine its discursive intention.

How, at the level of discourse, is Nietzsche to engage the entire problematic of values that issues from his critical diagnosis of modernity? A strictly conceptual discourse of values will just replicate what Nietzsche is contesting - the illusory closure against time and the life of the body, the theoretical and moral denial of the will on the part of the Christian-Platonic will. To lay claim on an eternal future by proclaiming a redeeming set of beliefs or evaluations clearly will not do the job of inaugurating a 'counter-movement' to modern nihilism (*WP, pref., 4*).

What Nietzsche needs is to confound the Socratic will to closure endemic to discourse, to open up his discourse towards life - *without* undoing its discursive force. He needs to *complement* or *supplement* his discursive challenge with a *performative* challenge that enacts the concept of life raised and pitted against western values. My thesis is three-fold:

First, that agonal culture represents the highest form of life for Nietzsche; and it does so as a collective, affirmative practice of life-as-art.

Second, that Nietzsche's text is itself agonal culture, as the affirmative interpretation of life thematised throughout his work as the highest form of life - the rebirth of tragic culture.

Third, that Nietzsche does not simply oppose morality, religion, metaphysics or Platonism *within* theoretical discourse; he does so from within an artistic-cultural practice - the agon - which sustains, i.e. drives and organises his discourse.

This problematic and Nietzsche's agonal response can also be grasped at the level of values themselves. As Zarathustra's Prologue makes clear, the death of God raises acute difficulties for an affirmative discourse seeking to reinvest this life and human nature with value. If nihilism has issued in a generalised crisis of authority, how is Nietzsche to authorise his own affirmative discourse? As Pippin and others<sup>4</sup> have shown, Zarathustra's need to 'go down' stems from a recognition that a life-affirmative discourse *depends* on contingent historical communities for its sense and its justifying force (- a book «for all...»). The problem, as Zarathustra rapidly discovers, is that the appropriate community is absent (a book «for none»). We crave redemption, a new belief (e.g. the Cripples), or are indifferent, content to gently rub shoulders (the Last Man); either way, we have no ears for this teaching. While Zarathustra himself fails conspicuously to resolve this problem, Nietzsche's response can be read in his character's interminable wandering, as a politics of resistance : «The narrative itself strongly implies that Zarathustra is fated eternally to go 'up' or beyond man and 'down' into the human community. He can neither accept nor fully transcend the context that produced him.»<sup>5</sup> To accept would be to renounce his ideal, to resign himself to the redemptive needs of the modern 'herd animal' as their 'shepherd'; to transcend or will his audience away would be to assert his will and his ideal against time - the very gesture of

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<sup>4</sup> Pippin, R.B.: *Irony and Affirmation in Nietzsche's 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra'*, in *Nietzsche's New Seas*, M.A.Gillespie & T.B.Strong (ed.'s), Univ. Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1988, pp. 45-71; *Nietzsche and the Origin of the Idea of Modernism*, in "Inquiry", 26, 1983, pp. 151-180. See also: Conway, D.W.: *Solving the Problem of Socrates. Nietzsche's Zarathustra as Political Irony*, in "Political Theory", vol.16, no.2, May 1988, pp. 257-280.

<sup>5</sup> Pippin, R.B.: *Irony and Affirmation...*,p. 55.

revenge to be overcome. In resisting either temptation, it seems Nietzsche's Zarathustra can only wait for the historical community he «cannot create but cannot do without»<sup>6</sup>.

Nietzsche cannot create the audience he needs for his affirmative discourse; that much is clear. Yet this does not exhaust the *strategic* value of creating fictive or virtual communities of readers. Such a strategy («... to enforce, falsify and invent an appropriate fiction for myself...») is described in the late preface to *HaH* as a «cunning of self-preservation», given the fearful isolation of a life dedicated to critical transvaluation. Yet in this passage there is more at stake than survival or respite from solitary travails. A curious exchange occurs between Nietzsche's life-affirmative discourse and his fictive communities -

the belief that I was *not* thus isolated, not alone in *seeing* as I did - an enchanted surmising of relatedness and identity in eye and desires, a reposing in a trust of friendship, a blindness in concert with another without suspicion or question-marks, a pleasure in foregrounds, surfaces, things near and nearest, in everything possessing colour, skin and apparitionality. (*HaH, pref., 1*)

Here the utopic community is not simply the occasion or site for Nietzsche's affirmative discourse; his rapprochement with sensuality and desiring life is his immersion in this longed-for friendship. It is as if his affirmative discourse, on the point of formulation, bursts at the mere image of the slightest friendly touch, dissolving into pulsion, the pure pleasure of attunement<sup>7</sup>. In the absence of an actual community that would give sense and authority to Nietzsche's affirmative discourse, the question of affirmation devolves into that of the identity ('the Greeks'? 'the Germans and their future?') and shape of that imaginary community which *would* make affirmation possible.

In this context, the imaginary we's and you's populating Nietzsche's pages serve to open up his affirmative discourse to time, to expose his ideal to the historical contingencies of readership *without* abandoning it to them. Clearly, this is more than a strategy for survival or a form of resistance. Through the forms and identities he gives to his imaginary communities of readers, Nietzsche does not just resist or exclude certain redemptive misreadings; he seeks positively to cultivate appropriate responses to the task of overcoming. He himself describes this positive, formative impulse as 'acceleration':

... and perhaps I shall do something to accelerate their coming if I describe in advance under what vicissitudes [lit. fates] I *see* them arising, upon what paths I *see* them coming? - (*HaH, pref., 2*).

It is this strategy of acceleration or cultivation (*Bildung*) which, as I shall argue, agonal readings of Nietzsche's texts illuminate. Nietzsche's agons do not just engage the values he is contesting on the page; they engage a community of readers in a collective contestation of values that is open-ended, yet regulated by specific, agonal codes. Pitched somewhere between prescription and *laissez-faire*, between prophecy and a fatalistic waiting, Nietzsche's agonal practice serves to stimulate and guide actual readers in the collective construction of radically new evaluations of life 'beyond good and evil'.

Even in sympathetic readers, however, the fictional mode of Nietzsche's formative impulse must arouse suspicion. After all, the cultivation of affirmative communities in their absence is, on Nietzsche's own admission, 'false-coinage', the desperate 'self-deception' of one irredeemably isolated (*HaH, pref., 1*). How seriously are we to take an affirmative discourse virtually devoid of content and reduced to imagining those who could respond to it? What, in short, is the *value* of such fictions? This question is, in fact, pre-empted in the preface to

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<sup>6</sup> Pippin, R.B.: *Irony and Affirmation...*, p. 63.

<sup>7</sup> This reading is inspired by David Allison's account of the Dionysian in terms of Schiller's notion of *Stimmung*. Allison, D.B.: *Nietzsche Knows No Noumenon*, in *Why Nietzsche now?*, D.O'Hara (ed.), Indiana Univ. Press, Bloomington, 1985.

*HaH*, where the text undergoes a crucial turning from one perspective into another, a transaction which completes the exchange, noted earlier, between Nietzsche's life-affirmative discourse and his fictive communities. If earlier the question of affirmation was virtually collapsed into the question of feigned affirmative readers, the question of feint or fiction and its value is now translated back into the language of life -

... what do *you* know, what *could* you know, of how much cunning of self-preservation, how much reason and higher safeguarding, is contained in such self-deception - or of how much falsity I shall *require* if I am to continue to permit myself the luxury of *my* truthfulness?... Enough, I am still living; and life is, after all, not a product of morality: it *wants* [lit. *wills* ] deception, it *lives* on deception... (*HaH*, *pref*, 1)

- translated *back* ? Back from what? From the moral language of truth versus lie, 'self-deception', or 'falsity' into the unmoral/ immoral/ extramoral language of life 'beyond good and evil'<sup>8</sup>. At stake in this translation is the *standard* by which we evaluate fiction. When measured against truth as the highest value, fiction *means* deception (suspect), falsity (base). But the text effects a transition or transvaluation from truth ('you') to ('my' - our?) life as the highest value - a move which throws the meaning and value of fiction wide open: What would fiction *mean* from a perspective in life? - Certainly more than falsity (as opposed to truth). What is its value when measured against life? - Certainly not the stigma of untruth, the deception castigated by Plato as non-being. Transvaluation requires that we overcome the prevailing set of meanings, so as to open a new space of meaning. This is the *collective* challenge thrown out by the text, the cultural work to which it invites us.

Within the space it clears, the text itself opens play. Teasing, provoking us, Nietzsche suggests a complicity between life and fiction at the level of surface, «skin and apparitionality». From this angle, fiction acquires a positive value insofar as life «*wills* deception, it *lives* on deception». This provocation suggests a response to our original question concerning the value - and meaning - of Nietzsche's fictional communities. Here, fiction, as the product of the will to deception, *means* culture, as metaphor or '*vita femina*' - the transference (*Übertragung*, meta-phor) or repressive displacement of the body (instincts) towards the conscious surface of thought and language (expression), on the basis of the primal scission of life into unconscious instincts and conscious life or '*Geist*'<sup>9</sup>. We are familiar, from the *Genealogy of Morals*, with bad conscience and its priestly manipulators, as the 'mother' of man as a cultural being. We are also familiar with its ambivalent value: in turning the 'instinct of freedom' back against itself and shattering the instinctive unity of our 'animality', it brought about the constitutive 'sickness' of culture that culminates in decadence; yet this «sickness which is... like a pregnancy» (*GM*, *II*, 19) has also been productive, giving '*depth*' to the human soul, making the human into «*an interesting animal*» (*GM*, *I*, 6), one that arouses «an interest, a suspense [or tension - *Spannung*], a hope» in it, as if it «were not a goal, but a path», «a bridge» - the «great promise» of self-overcoming (*GM*, *II*, 16).

If we trace Nietzsche's thought of culture as deception back to its inception in reflections (surrounding *Truth and Lie* and *Homer's Contest* inter alia) inspired by Greek, rather than Christian culture, its positive value is far more emphatic:

... Without untruth [there can be] neither society nor culture. The tragic conflict. All that is good and beautiful hangs on deception [*Täuschung*]: truth kills - it even kills itself (insofar as it recognises that error is

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<sup>8</sup> The passage continues: «... but there you are, I am already off again, am I not, and doing what I have always done, old immoralist and bird-catcher that I am - speaking unmorally, extra-morally, 'beyond good and evil'?» (*HaH*, *pref*, 1).

<sup>9</sup> The best account I know of *Vita femina* as a metaphor for metaphor, or life as culture is: Blondel, E.: *Nietzsche: Life as Metaphor*, in *The New Nietzsche*, D.B. Allison (ed.), MIT Press, Cambridge Mass., 1985, pp. 150-175.

its foundation). (29 [7], 7; *PT*, p. 92)

Here, as in the next note, the value of untruth or deception derives from its complicity with art, virtue and life - as against the complex: truth/death/self-destruction.

Every kind of culture begins with the *veiling* of a great many things. Human progress hangs on this veiling - life in a pure and noble sphere and the closing off of baser impulses [*Reizungen*]. The struggle against 'sensuality' through virtue is essentially of an aesthetic nature... (19 [50], 7)

Now in his contemporaneous account of *agonal* culture, Nietzsche explores an other form of bad conscience - perhaps its Other: 'good conscience' - mediated, not by priests but by a *public* institution regulating all forms of cultural life: the contest. In the final part of this paper, I shall develop Nietzsche's suggestions that agonal culture *means* the transference (*Übertragung*) of the 'evil' Eris (goddess of war and hatred) into the 'good' Eris (goddess of envy and ambition); that is, the affirmative transformation of destructive affects into constructive cultural forces. If, as I shall argue, Nietzsche's textual confrontations engage *agonal* communities of readers, then this fiction or deception *means* his texts become works of agonal culture which enact the highest affirmation of life: the transference of (self-) destructive instinctual resources into productive forces of culture.

It is important to clarify at this point what I am not claiming. The claim is not that Nietzsche single-handedly revives ancient Greek culture; nor that through some trans-historical miracle, he is able to transcend the modern condition, to embody agonal drives and express them in his text. Such clumsy readings of Nietzsche's agons are undone by the feint of writing, the emphatically fictive style of his agonal confrontations. I do maintain, on the other hand, that the dynamic form peculiar to the Greek agon operates as a principle that organises and regulates his critical confrontations. We could speak of an agonal law of production governing Nietzsche's text, as long as production is not separated from interpretation, so that Nietzsche's textual antagonists and his readers are implicated together within its jurisdiction. As such a productive-hermeneutic principle, the agon is a good model for trying to think the discursive *and* performative aspects of his challenges to prevailing values *together*. If we restrict ourselves to a discursive analysis, we often get stuck in dualisms such as life-truth, becoming-being, health-sickness, active-reactive etc. Clearly, this is unsatisfying in the light of Nietzsche's own critique of metaphysics as the «belief in the antithesis/opposition of values» (*BGE*, 2). But it also seems inadequate to the task of posing a radical challenge and alternative to the metaphysical/moral values under attack; it seems as if Nietzsche remains tied to what he is criticising. Finally, a purely discursive analysis is unsatisfying, because it fails to confront what Blondel has called the 'enigma' of Nietzsche's text<sup>10</sup>. This means to confront them in a way that connects the thematic dimension - amenable to discursive synthesis and analysis - and the performative dimension - those elements which resist discursive synthesis: the narratives, mythologies, breaks, polemics, music, the surface play and comedy of Nietzsche's texts, commonly relegated to the extra-philosophical domains of rhetoric, style, art or literary history. Until we find a way to link the discursive themes with this 'rest', we have failed to engage their unique status in the history of European (Christian-Platonic) philosophy and culture. Only if we consider Nietzsche's discursive critique *together* with the performative dimension of his writing - the attempt to *enact, through agonal confrontation*, the concept of life pitted against metaphysics and morality - can we make a decisive break from these dualisms, and reach a fuller, more adequate understanding of his challenge.

Finally, agon is a good model for considering the cultural, collective presuppositions and

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<sup>10</sup> Blondel, E.: *Nietzsche: The Body and Culture*, Sean Hand (tr.), Athlone Press, London, 1991, Introduction.

implications of Nietzschean critique. Nietzsche reacts to the status quo with the demand that things be changed or transformed. Only, this demand is *not* addressed to individuals as the movers and agents of this change; it is pitched, rather, at a trans-individual level of *mores*: customs, practices and collective belief-structures that govern individual values and action. Culture - collective belief-structures - is the framework of analysis for Nietzsche's critique of values, and the site for the new values he deploys. Although Nietzsche's work is characterised by a personal, individual pathos and an increasing preoccupation with the individual - its constitution and disintegration, its pathology and potential - this does not exclude a trans-individual, cultural dimension from his thought. This unfolds more at a performative, than a thematic level: in his agonal confrontations, and the we's and you's that occupy the pages of his texts.

## 2) Agonal culture in *Homer's Contest (HC)*

What follows is a general characterisation of the agon from *HC*, with a view towards those features that are prominent in Nietzsche's own agonal practice as a writer. The procedure will be to pick out certain features of agonal culture, and draw out their implications for agonal contestation as a model for writing.

An oblique entry into the concept of agonal culture can be made by considering the notion of ostracism or banishment and the rationale given for it in *HC*:

The original sense of this peculiar institution [ostracism -HS] is not, however, that of a vent [escape-valve], but rather that of a stimulant: one removes the outstanding individual so that the play of forces [*Wettspiel der Kräfte*] may reawaken: a thought that is inimical to the 'exclusivity' of genius in the modern sense, but presupposes that in a natural order of things there are always *several* geniuses who rouse [stimulate] one another to action [lit. deed], as they also hold one another within the bounds of measure. That is the crux of the Hellenic notion of contest: it abhors absolute hegemony and fears its dangers; it desires, as a *protection* against genius - a second genius. (*HC*, p. 191 f.)

The 'outstanding individual' is the one who holds 'absolute hegemony' (*Alleinherrschaft*): i.e. *the absolute and conclusive victor*, that contestant - symbolised by the figure of Alexander in *HC* - who spurns any kind of challenge. That he is the target of ostracism, allows us to characterise the agon as follows: the agon can only work and thrive where *a plurality of antagonistic forces [Kräfte] or 'geniuses' are engaged in an inconclusive, open-ended contestation of victory*. The agon admits mastery *between* the contests - temporary, intermittent victors like the Olympic champion or the winner of the contest of tragedies *this year*. But the emergence of an absolute victor kills the agon and, since it is the life-blood of the Greek city-state and community, it also annihilates the state. In short, the agon gives absolute precedence to comparatives over absolute superlatives. This, then, is the sense Nietzsche gives to ostracism, as to the death of the city-state and the emergence of empire under Alexander. That the agon is intrinsically open-ended, inconclusive, repeatable can be heard in Nietzsche's formulation: *Wettspiel der Kräfte*. As the competitive play of forces, it combines the notion of a contestation of power with the endless repeatability of play.

There is, however, one crucial difference between the agon and a normal game. Usually victory and defeat in a particular bout are firmly defined, prescribed by a rule or set of rules that give a standard or measure of victory, *outside and independently* of the course taken by a particular bout. In the agon, by contrast, the measure or standard of victory is up for grabs in each bout, the judgement of what constitutes victory and defeat is determined *immanently* by the dynamic of each contest. The concept of justice determining the standard or measure of victory is immanent to the dynamic of each contest: it is the actual issue of contestation, the bone of contention. Support for this interpretation can be drawn not only from *HC* (e.g. the story of the wrestling contest between Pericles and his opponent in *HC*, p. 191), but from

aphorism 170 in *HaH*. Of ‘artistic ambition’ Nietzsche writes:

The Greek artists, the tragedians for example, poetised in order to win; their entire art cannot be conceived without the contest: the Hesiodic Eris, ambition, gave wings to their genius. Now this ambition demanded above all else that **their work should attain the highest excellence in their own eyes**, that is, as **they understood this excellence, without concern for the dominant taste and the general opinion concerning excellence in a work of art...** Thus they strive for victory over rivals in their **own estimation**, before their **own seat of judgement**, they really want *to be* more excellent; they then demand consensus on this their own estimation from others outside, confirmation of their judgement... (italics original; emphasis added)

Not only does the agonal antagonist want to win; in striving for victory in his own eyes, before his own seat of judgement, his ambition is to determine what counts as winning, so that you have a contest of judgements of victory or a contestation of justice - of the very standard or measure of victory. The agon, therefore, is not just the inconclusive contestation of victory suggested above, but *an inconclusive, open-ended contestation of justice or the very standard of victory*. What counts as victory is not pre-determined or fixed outside, but *immanent* to, each contest; it needs to be re-determined, defined anew in response to the dynamic course of taken by each agon, which begins by throwing our judgement into question. In each contest it is the very definition of victory that is at issue, so that each bout puts the question: ‘What constitutes victory?’ into play.

Here lies the first set of important implications for the agonal writing. If it can be argued that Nietzsche engages in agonal contests with the metaphysical, moral and religious values of European culture under the sign of their representatives - whether the priest, Socrates, Rousseau or any other of Nietzsche's chosen adversaries - then we can say: at issue in every confrontation is the *question of overcoming*. Nietzsche's confrontations serve, not to establish victory or a personal hegemony over his opponents, not to destroy and be finished with truth, good and veil, equality, or whatever values he is contesting; they serve rather to *open* the question: What would be the overcoming of these values? What would a standpoint beyond good and evil look like? What concept of justice can we appeal to in order to determine whether a given posture is beyond good and evil or not? What would constitute an affirmative practice beyond the hostility to life? Rather than close the book on certain pernicious values, consigning them to oblivion, agonal texts serve to open and re-open the question of overcoming. Their principal orientation is not destructive, but productive and experimental: to inaugurate and stimulate radical new challenges to hegemonial ideals, and to multiply new postures and radical alternatives.

This point broaches the collective and communal - i.e. cultural - character of agonal texts. In putting the question of overcoming into play, they can only work if this question is contested in a ‘play of forces’, if a plurality of antagonistic forces are drawn, challenged, provoked to contest the question. Just as the Greek agon is conditional upon a plurality of antagonistic forces, so agonal writing can only thrive where ‘we’ - an agonal community of ‘scholars’, ‘artists’, ‘free spirits’, ‘immoralists and anti-Christians’, ‘philosophers of the future’ or any other readers who respond to the imaginary communities which populate Nietzsche's texts - are drawn into the fray.

In this way, agonal texts can be seen to respond to two of the constraints governing Nietzschean overcoming discussed in the Introduction. In the first place they engage Nietzsche's demand for change at a collective level. For, as a model for Nietzsche's writing, the agon is inseparable from questions of reading and responding to agonal texts. It compels the recognition that reading Nietzsche is the collective affair of a community of readers, whose constitution and multiple determinations must be drawn into our interrogation of the text: ‘Who are we?’, ‘How are we to judge Nietzsche?’, ‘Whose concept of justice or tribunal do we appeal to?’, and their genealogical counterparts ‘What do we want (will)?’ and «What



exactly in us wills ‘to truth’?» (*BGE*, 1).

In the second place, agonal texts do not attempt to prescribe or authorise a new, contesting set of values from above. Nietzsche does not counter the generalised crisis of authority that is modern nihilism with a new table of values etched in stone, as it were, beyond time. Instead, agonal authorship opens its counter-values, together with the very standard of evaluation or judgement, to contestation *as a provocation and a question*; it puts the entire ‘questionable question’ of overcoming to a collective readership which would respond to the task. This is not, on the other hand, to consign it to the interpretations and evaluations of *any* historical community; much less, to those of any historical individual. Agonal writing gives a public turn to the individual accent in Nietzsche's thought and style, and that personal, almost muscular attraction-repulsion it provokes. As a multiple and reciprocal interplay of forces that excludes the hegemony of a single force or ‘genius’, the agon compels us to think the personal through in collective terms: to find one's own voice with and against those of others; or, as Nietzsche remarks, «to recognise oneself against [or in: *am*] the antagonist» (*am Gegner sich erkennen*: 16[19], 7). As for the community itself, it is ‘open’ in the sense of *underdetermined*; but the spirit of agonal antagonism does not leave it wholly *undetermined*. Agonal writing places the responses it provokes under certain unnamed codes or constraints, under a ‘lawfulness without law’ or a virtual ‘*sensus communis*’ that would bind us, not through transcendent laws, but rather by virtue of certain affects and a specific dynamic of wills *immanent* to agonal contestation <sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Clearly, I am using the language of aesthetic judgement from Kant's *Third Critique* here. For ‘lawfulness without law’ see *Critique of Judgement* (W. Pluhar [tr.], Hackett, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1987), pp. 91-92. For the connection with Hegel's *Sittlichkeit* as «customary practices in which form as condition is not separate from what it informs», see J.M. Bernstein: *The Fate of Art* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1993), p. 59.

That Nietzsche's reflections on the agon revolved around the question of aesthetic judgement can be seen from a chapter outline for planned book on the Greek agon: «... Ch. VII. Aesthetic Judgement. What is *aesthetic judgement*? The form of judgement [*Richtertum*] in tragedy. The contest [*Wettkampf*] presupposes the *righteous [or just: rechte]* public. *Should this public be absent*, then he is in *exile (Philoctetes)*. All laws of art [*Kunstgesetze*] relate to *transference [das Übertragen]* (not to the original dreams and intoxications).» (16[21], 7).

The Kantian orientation of Nietzsche's interrogation of aesthetic judgement is patent here: the basis of judgement in the agon is the public or *sensus communis*, whose presence and standard of judgement are in question; it is, as I have argued, precisely these questions that the agon serves to open and re-open, as the issue of contention: who is *das rechte Publikum* - the just public? See also 16[6] (Appendix) where Nietzsche gives primacy to the imagination *without* the mediation of concepts (the laws of the Understanding), in response to the question: ‘What is aesthetic judgement?’.

There is, I believe, a deep relation between agonal judgement and Kant's aesthetic judgement. This needs to be argued in detail elsewhere, but an obvious convergence can be pointed out here. The agonal plurality of «geniuses who rouse one another to deeds», precluding the hegemony of one genius, mirrors Kant's notion of genius as the making of original sense which «arouses [another] to a sense of his own originality in putting freedom from the constraint of rules so into force in his art, that for art itself a new rule is won» (*CJ*, sec. 49, p. 187). See also T. Gould: *The Audience of Originality*, in *Essays in Kant's Aesthetics*, P. Guyer & T. Cohen [ed.'s], Univ. Chicago Press, London, 1982, pp. 179-193). The temporal structure of Nietzsche's agonal writing, spanning a fictive, stylised past and a virtual future, has far-reaching affinities with J. Bernstein's reading of aesthetic judgement, and its basis in *sensus communis*, as memorial: «in making aesthetic judgements we judge things 'as if' from the perspective of our lost common sense, a common sense that may never have existed... This 'remembered' common sense is... both presupposed in the judgement of taste and yet to be obtained.» (*The Fate of Art*, p. 60). *Sensus communis* 'remembers' a situation in which «objectivity and 'truth' are not distinguished from the beautiful or the good... where... to be true is to be good...» (op.cit., p. 59); what it mourns, according to Bernstein, is «the separation of beauty from truth and goodness» (op.cit., p. 17) in modernity. This is clearly what Nietzsche means when he writes: «... The judgement in the contest [*Wettkampf*] is not aesthetic, but universal... The poet is judged as a 'higher man', his song as true, good, beautiful. The judgement is only right [or justified: *gerecht*] as long as the poet and his public have everything in common [*gemein*]...» (16[5], 7).

See also *HaH* 170 (Appendix), where Nietzsche stresses that agonal poets really want ‘to be more excellent’. For all these affinities, Nietzsche's account of agonal judgement differs from Kant in stressing anti-Christian

But what exactly is an ‘agonal community’? What is its constitution and immanent dynamic? What mores, affects, postures, relations distinguish it, say, from a herd? Or a scholarly community of dialecticians?

Here again the passage on ostracism gives us an important indication. The agon, Nietzsche writes, presupposes a plurality of forces or *geniuses who rouse [reizen] one another to action [Tat], as they also hold one another within the bounds of measure*. The agonal dynamic is one of mutual stimulation, arousal, provocation, empowerment and mutual disempowerment, limitation within the bounds of measure. The contest will only arise out of mutual stimulation, empowerment; while mutual limitation tempers and contains the victory of a single force, so that the contest may continue. As a complex interplay of positive and negative postures, reciprocal affirmation and negation, it is distinguished on one side from a redemptive scheme of peace, harmony, reconciliation (Nietzsche's construal of the socialist state, for example: 5[178], [180], [188], 8); and on the other, from the pure, unmeasured antagonism of war, or mutual annihilation.

Fine. But how can forces be so ordered as to both stimulate *and* limit each other? And how can this order be conceived on the level of human beings, members of a state-community or readers? The answer given by the text centres on *agonal affects*. Referring to Hesiod's Erga, Nietzsche writes of the good Eris

who, as jealousy, wrath, envy, rouses [stimulates] men to deeds, but not that of mutual destruction [Vernichtungskampf], but rather the deed of contest [Wettkampf]. The Greek is *envious* and feels this quality not as a flaw, but rather as the effect of a *beneficent* deity... (HC, p. 190)

Such agonal affects do not just provoke contestation; they also ensure the second moment of mutual limitation. This can be seen through brief consideration of envy and ambition.

### 2.1) Envy

Agonal envy, as Nietzsche emphasises, is not restricted to living peers - a highly important point if we consider that the majority of Nietzsche's antagonists are dead. In HC (p. 191) Nietzsche recalls Xenophanes' relation to Homer, cited by Aristotle as an example «that even one who is dead can rouse one who is alive to a consuming jealousy». Nietzsche sees this, like Plato's attack on Homer, as rooted in the

monstrous desire...to take the place of the fallen poet oneself and to inherit his fame [reputation]. Every great Hellene passes on the torch of the contest; every great virtue kindles a new greatness. (HC, p. 191)

Agonal envy thus stimulates an individual to outbid the current victor. It is the desire to limit him and create a new ‘greatness’; that is, a new value and a new standard of evaluation that is binding on others, so that one might ‘inherit his fame’, his cultural authority<sup>12</sup>. *At the same time* it is also envy that, on the other side, provokes the Greek's vertiginous fear of victory and its fruits. Nowhere is this moment of *self-negation* and *-limitation* so pronounced as in the victor's fear of divine envy:

Because he is envious he also feels, with every excess of honour, wealth, glory [splendour], happiness,

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affects, such as envy and ambition, over affection, concern or respect; and in attempting a more productive account of judgement than Kant's or Schopenhauer's reception aesthetics offered.

<sup>12</sup> This is very close to Kant's conception of exemplary genius as the making of original sense «which liberates the other's originality... the making of original sense is the making of something that enables or stirs others to make original sense.» (T. Gould: *The Audience of Originality*, in *Essays in Kant's Aesthetics*, P. Guyer & T. Cohen [ed.'s], Univ. Chicago Press, London, 1982, pp. 188-189).

the envious eye of a god resting upon him, and he fears this envy; in this case it reminds him of the transience of every human lot, his happiness fills him with dread and, sacrificing the best of it, he bows to the divine envy (*HC*, p. 190)

This account bears a number of implications for agonal writing and the reading of agonal texts. First, it describes the tyrannical element in so many of Nietzsche's attitudes; but more than that, the *necessary* tyranny in any attempt at interpretation, as the «monstrous desire to take the place» of what is being contested. At the same time, agonal envy grounds the limiting or curbing of this tyrannical drive, *not* in a solipsistic agony of conscience, but in a gesture of 'sacrifice' or renunciation necessitated by an open-ended public agon: the submission of one's claim to a collective process of contention that ensures its mortality, the passage of each hard-won 'truth' into memory. On an affective level, agonal envy binds the act of critical interpretation to a dynamic of appropriation and sacrifice. Within an agonal community, the desire to appropriate for oneself the authority of another, to create a new value or rule and lay claim to a new truth, is sanctioned, indeed encouraged. In its character as a plurality of equally active, antagonistic forces, however, this community also afflicts this desire with a sense of its own vulnerability, an anxiety to discharge hard-won satiety into badly needed innocence<sup>13</sup>.

In the second place, envy provides an interesting model for the fundamentally productive orientation which agonal texts give to the question of overcoming, in both its negative and positive aspects. Agonal envy is *not* the desire to annihilate the champion; it seeks to limit his achievements by outbidding them. As such it conserves them, treating them as a *stimulant* for a new deed or work, a new 'greatness'. In the context of overcoming, the prevailing values also stimulate the agonal critic to interrogate the conditions for a radical challenge to them: Whence the authority of hegemonial ideals and values such as truth, good, pity etc.? What are their origins in the body, the will, the affects? How are we to dethrone them? What kind of postures, affects and evaluations are needed for such a challenge? And what kind are open to us? - all the questions pursued through genealogical strategies of exposing, diagnosing and evaluating the origin of values in the evaluating body or will.

On the positive side, envy uses prevailing values in order to explore radical alternatives: What would a new set of values beyond truth, good and evil be? And a new 'anti-Christian' affects beyond resentment? What would constitute a new human 'greatness'? And a new justice, an evaluative standard for determining whether or not this is just the 'same old sun'?

What this productive orientation comes down to is a *strategy of exploitation and mastery*, rather than annihilation, as can be seen from a number of texts spanning seventeen years of Nietzsche's productive life:

It is not a matter of annihilating *Wissenschaft* but rather of *command* [mastery, control]. For *Wissenschaft*, in all its goals and methods, depends through and through upon philosophical views, *but forgets this easily*. *But the commanding philosophy has also to reflect upon the problem to what degree Wissenschaft may grow: it has to determine its **value** !* (19 [24], 7)

I have declared war on the anaemic Christian ideal (including what is closely related to it), not with the intention of annihilating it, but only of putting an end to its **tyranny** and making place for new ideals, more **robust** ideals... The **continued** existence of the Christian ideal belongs to the most desirable things that exist: and that for the sake of the ideals, which want [will] to assert themselves next to it and perhaps over it - they must have opponents [antagonists] **strong** opponents, in order to become **strong**. In this way, we

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<sup>13</sup> Concerning the agonal victor, Walter Benjamin writes: «Visible to all, praised by the people, the victor stands there: *he* is in desperate need of innocence [*Unschuld tut ihm bitter not*], holding the cup of victory in upheld hands like a shell full of wine, from which a spilt drop would taint him eternally.» (*Das Glück des antiken Menschen*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, R.Tiedemann & H.Schweppenhäuser [Hrsg.], Suhrkamp Vlg., Frankfurt a. M., 1977, Bd. II.1, p. 129).

immoralists need **the power of morality**: our drive to self-preservation wills that our **opponents** remain strong, - it wills only to become **master over them**. - (10[117],13. Emphasis added)

And finally in *Morality as Anti-Nature* sec.3 (*MA*, in *TT*), Nietzsche describes ‘our’ posture vis-à-vis Christianity and the moral community of the church as a ‘spiritualisation of enmity’:

It consists in profoundly grasping the value of having enemies: in short, that one acts and thinks in the reverse of the way in which one formerly acted and thought. The church has at all times desired [willed] the destruction of its enemies: we, we immoralists and anti-Christians, see that it is to our advantage that the church exists.... A new creation in particular, the new *Reich* for instance [or agonal community - HS] has more need of enemies than friends: only in opposition does it feel itself as necessary, only in opposition does it *become* necessary. (*MA*, 3)

## 2.2) Ambition

In *HC* Nietzsche compares the Hellenic attitude to ambition and egoism with that of Jesuit pedagogy:

They seem to believe that egoism, that is, the individual factor is just the most powerful agent which, however, receives its character as ‘good’ or ‘evil’ essentially from the goals towards which it stretches out. Now for the ancients the goal of agonal education was the welfare of the whole, the state society. Every Athenian, for example, was supposed to develop his self in the contest to that degree which would be of greatest advantage to Athens and do it the least harm. (*HC*, p. 192)

The contestant's driving ambition was for personal glory and fame (*Ruhm*); but for the agonal individual, this was inseparable from that of his state or community:

...it was of the well-being of his maternal city that a youth thought when running or throwing or singing in competition; it was her fame that he wanted to increase through his; [and] the wreaths which the judges of the contest placed in honour upon his head, he dedicated to the gods of his city. (*HC*, p. 192)

Nietzsche's point seems to be that a pre-reflective identity between the self and the community was pre-formed on an affective level in the agonal affects such as ambition: the agon is based on social or communal drives, what Nietzsche sometimes calls «allgemeine Triebe» (3[44], 19[21], 7). Their effect is to place the individual actions which they drive into the service of the state-community:

Every Greek felt from childhood on the burning wish within himself to be an instrument for the good [salvation] of his city in the contest of the cities: therein was his egoism enflamed, therein it was also checked and bounded. (*HC*, p. 192).

Or again: «The agon unleashes the individual and at the same time it binds [restrains] the same according to eternal laws.» (16[22], 7)

Thus both moments of stimulation and limitation are pre-formed on an affective level: it is the communal or social character of Hellenic ambition that determines the moments of mutual stimulation or empowerment *and* constraint or limitation, characterising agonal interaction.

I would like to dwell upon two points in particular when considering the implications of ambition for agonal writing and the reading of agonal texts: first, it is in the trans-individual, communal orientation of agonal ambition and practice it provokes, that *limits* are imposed; and second, the communal orientation or goals of agonal activity are pitched by Nietzsche at the *pre-reflective, affective level* of ambition.

As a model for agonal writing, ambition suggests that the postures Nietzsche adopts only

find their limit in the agonal community of readers. If Nietzsche models his confrontations on agonal ambition, as that which drives and regulates his discourse, then they are driven by an ambition for glory and fame *as the instrument* of the agonal community, its glory, fame and well-being. To the extent that his personal ambition exceeds, excludes or conflicts with the well-being of his community, it forfeits its agonal character for the imperialism of Alexandrian ambition or the nihilism of Socratic ambition<sup>14</sup>. This connects with the theme of ‘our advantage’ in the passage cited from *Morality as Anti-Nature*, sec.3 (II(i) above). It then recurs in the finale of this chapter, devoted to the immoralists' confrontation with the church. Nietzsche writes that ‘we immoralists’ have come to appreciate

that economy in the law of life which derives advantage even from the repellent species of the bigot, the priest, the virtuous man -*what* advantage? - But we ourselves, we immoralists, are the answer to that...  
(MA, 6)

But what are we to make of the agonal community of immoralists and anti-Christians, and its well-being? If, as suggested, Nietzsche's communal orientation lies in *opening* the question of overcoming, then we have to think of an impersonal, trans-individual purpose served by this question: agonal ambition opens the question of overcoming *in the name of human life, its elevation or enhancement*; what was called ‘a new greatness’ in the context of envy; or what Nietzsche calls ‘the great life’ in *Morality as Ant-Nature*. That the agonal community of immoralist readers, as the goal of ambition, constitutes a *preliminary, experimental realisation* of a new, trans-individual human ‘greatness’, can be seen from sec 3. in that text, where Nietzsche writes:

One is *fruitful* only at the cost of being rich in antagonisms [or oppositions: *Gegensätze*]; one remains *young* only on condition that the soul does not relax, does not long for peace [the agon does not *allow* the soul to relax, it spurs the individual to contest victory, overcoming - HS].. Nothing has grown more alien to us than that desideratum of former times ‘peace of soul’, the *Christian* desideratum; nothing arouses less envy in us than the moral cow and the fat contentment of the good conscience... One has renounced the *great* life when one renounces war [or agon: what Nietzsche has called ‘our spiritualisation of enmity’ in this section - HS]... (MA, 3)

The agonal community served by Nietzsche's ambition constitutes an experimental enactment, a performative correlate of the concept of life, its elevation or ‘greatness’, pitted against moral and religious values on the discursive level.

As model for reading, ambition also has a number of important implications. Its communal orientation distinguishes the agonal community of readers equally from a capitalist community of bourgeois individuals (contra Lukacs), and from a liberal community of possessive individuals. Modern ambition, as Nietzsche notes, being abstracted from any communal goals, is limitless and self-defeating (HC, p. 192).

Agonal writing does not appeal to its readers on the level of discourse - ideas and values - alone; it also moves at the level of desires, drives, affects and bodily postures. And this includes its communal orientation. It is the pre-reflexive, affective formation that distinguishes the agonal community of readers from a Hegelian community grounded in the

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<sup>14</sup> On Alexander, as the ‘grotesque’ of the Hellene and the ‘caricature’ of Achilles, see HC, p. 187 f., p. 194, and 16[16], 7. As the ‘absolute victor’ whose ambition exceeded the limits of the polis, he destroyed the agon. Together with Alcibiades, Socrates’ famous pupil and lover, he represents a ‘deification of the individual’ (3[73],7). It is no coincidence that Alcibiades betrayed Athens in the Peloponnesian War. For it was Socrates, according to Nietzsche, who first alienated the individual from the state-community: he displaced the latter's authority with the ‘sovereign concept’(16[17], 7), and, with his ‘individual-eudaemonological’ ‘pretension to happiness’, focused his redemptive energies on isolated individuals, rather than the ‘common weal’ (19[20],7; 6[13-15], 8).

meeting of selves through the dialectic of mutual recognition. Tracy Strong, in his essay *Nietzsche's Political Aesthetics*<sup>15</sup>, has argued that the «Hegelian politics of recognition and the search for mutuality suffice as long as selfhood is possible» (p. 162). Nietzsche's diagnosis of modernity as a condition of nihilism means, however, that selfhood is dirempt, that we are alienated from our 'selves', not to mention each 'other'. At stake is the very constitution or creation of the self, and the character of the self to be attained.

What, then, happens when 'we', caught in this condition of self- and mutual alienation, are addressed as agonal individuals whose postures and deeds are governed by the community at an affective level? Nietzsche is, of course, well aware that 'communal drives' no longer exist or move individual action; indeed, in one note (19[21], 7), his diagnosis of modern nihilism rests on their demise. But what happens if this pre-reflexive communal orientation is *simulated* by using agonal ambition as a model for writing? What consequences does it have? What response does it provoke from shattered, self-alienated readers? Nietzsche's point about agonal individuals in the Greek context, is that individuality is *constituted* by the community at the affective level of agonal drives, rather than opposed to it. If this condition is simulated at a performative level, by addressing 'us' *as if* we were agonal individuals, does it not serve to pitch the question of individual constitution, the creation of selves, *at a collective level of affects*? Does it not force us to recognise that the creation of our 'selves' is a matter of a *collective ordering of willing* into postures and deeds of mutual stimulation and limitation; that is, that the creation of our selves as individuals *and* as a community or polity must be grounded in *collective belief-structures, agonal mores and institutions*<sup>16</sup>?

### 3) The agon between *Geist* and the passions, and culture as metaphor

I would now like to bring these results to bear on the question of the 'inner relation' between spirit (*Geist*) and the passions (the central issue of *Morality as Anti-Nature*); discourse and the body; purposive reason, consciousness and the forces of the unconscious; values, ideals and their origin in the evaluating body and affects.

The question is: What distinguishes agonal culture - the agonal community of readers (or pre-Socratic Greeks, their model) - from Christian culture (the moral community of the church) and Socratic culture (the scholarly community of dialecticians)? I want to focus this question on the inner relation between *Geist* and passions. The thesis is that, according to Nietzsche, the latter two both attempt to wage a war of annihilation (*Vernichtungskampf*) against the passions; necessarily unsuccessful, this war does however result in life-negating regimes of suppression:

...Formerly one made war on passion itself on account of the folly inherent in it: one conspired for its annihilation - all the old moral monsters are unanimous that 'il faut tuer les passions'... The church has at all times placed the stress of discipline upon extermination (of sensuality, of pride, of the desire to rule, of greed, of the desire for revenge) - But to attack the passions at their roots means to attack life at its roots: the practice of the church is *hostile to life* ... (MA, 1)

By contrast, the agonal community - thematised in this text as 'our spiritualisation of enmity' (sec. 3) - is based upon an agon (*Wettkampf*) between *Geist* and the passions, what

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<sup>15</sup> In *Nietzsche's New Seas*, M.A.Gillespie & T.B.Strong (ed.'s), Univ. Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1988, pp. 153-174.

<sup>16</sup> That Nietzsche, *contra* liberal individualism, understands the emergence of the autonomous individual as «possible only within the context of a well-ordered community» is persuasively argued by Daniel Conway in *Solving the Problem of Socrates*, esp. pp. 258-259 (see note 4 above). Interestingly he identifies this view with Socrates, which runs counter to Nietzsche's own view of Socrates as 'individual-eudaemonological' (see note 14 above for references). Unfortunately Conway does not address this disagreement.

Nietzsche here calls a ‘spiritualisation of passion’ (sec.1). It results in an affirmative regime of regulation, moderation or codification (*Einordnung*) which accommodates and transforms - or in Nietzsche's words, transposes (*überträgt*) - destructive, egoistic affects into constructive cultural forces. Although pertaining to the individual and individual agency, the open-ended agon between *Geist* and the passions is grounded in *collective structures* : agonal mores and institutions. These structures are, therefore, what make agonal culture the highest - most affirmative and most creative - form of life for Nietzsche.

Key texts for this thesis are notes from Nachlass; note 5[146](= F) from 1875 in particular. But I want to begin with *HC* and the discussion of agonal affects. Agonal affects are distinguished from another set of affects - those that drive men to struggle for annihilation - according to Hesiod's distinction between the good and the evil Eris goddesses. The ‘evil Eris’, referred by Nietzsche to affects such as hate, cruelty, lust, deceit, vindictiveness «drives men towards the inimical struggle for annihilation [*Vernichtungskampf* ]»; whereas that Eris is good «who, as jealousy, wrath, envy, rouses [stimulates] men to deeds, not of mutual destruction [*Vernichtungskampf* ], but rather the deed of contest [*Wettkampf* ] . The Greek is *envious* and feels this quality not as a flaw, but rather as the effect of a *beneficent* deity...» (*HC*, p. 190).

If the Greeks celebrated agonal affects, like envy, ambition etc. in the deity of the ‘good Eris’, they also held a reverence of terror for other, destructive affects, in the sister deity: ‘the evil Eris’.

But what exactly is the relation between the two Eris goddesses? How does Nietzsche construe the genealogy of sisterhood between the destructive, egoistic affects of the struggle for annihilation and the constructive affects of agonal culture? It is the metaphorical relation of ‘transposition’ or ‘transference’ (*Übertragung*): through agonal culture the older (evil) is transposed into the younger (good) sister. This is related to the ‘feminine’ form of life that Nietzsche will later call ‘*vita femina*’ (*GS*, 339) and to the concept of ‘spiritualisation’ from *Morality as Anti-Nature*, mentioned above; indeed, I would suggest that *Übertragung* underpins and informs the latter. In any case, reading *Morality as Anti-Nature* together with *Homer's Contest* illuminates the text and in particular, the difference between the ‘spiritualisation’ of the passions and the suppressive, destructive regimes endemic to Christian and Socratic culture. The notion of *Übertragung* is pervasive in *Homer's Contest*<sup>17</sup>, but it is in the Nachlass surrounding the essay that explicit formulations are to be found:

7. Finale: Dithyramb to *art and the artist* : because they first create [*herausschaffen*] the human and transpose [*übertragen*] all its drives into culture. (16[18], 7 = D end)

The poet overcomes the struggle for existence by idealising [cf. spiritualisation - HS] it into a free agon [contest]. Here is the existence, for which there is still a struggle, existence in praise, in undying fame.

The poet *educates* [*erzieht*] : he knows how to transpose [*übertragen*] the Greeks' tiger-like drives to ravaging devastation into the good Eris. (16[15], 7 = E)

What, then, does *Übertragung* involve? And how does it work? In one note Nietzsche suggests that the artist, as architect of the agon, ‘imitates’ or ‘plays’ at war: «The contest [*Wettkampf*] arises from war? As an artistic play [*Spiel*] and imitation [*Nachahmung*]?» (16[26], 7).

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<sup>17</sup> See e.g. the accounts of latent violence and the horror of the night - the realm of the *evil Eris* – ‘behind’ the warm, mild sunlight of Apollinian art - sculpture and Homeric epic, in particular (*HC*, p.188). The text actually opens with an anti-humanist conception of culture based, not on the ‘separation’ of ‘natural’ and ‘human’ qualities, but on their ‘inseparable entwinement’ [*untrennbar verwachsen*]: «The human being, in its highest and noblest capacities, is wholly nature and carries her monstrous [*unheimlich*] double character within it. Its fearful and so-called inhuman abilities are perhaps even the fruitful soil out of which alone all humanity can grow forth in impulses, deeds and works.» (*HC*, p. 187)

Here 'play' might be contrasted with 'war', and 'imitation' might be contrasted with 'elimination'. This is, in fact, what occurs in note 5[146] (= F), which goes some way towards setting off agonal against Christian and Socratic cultures:

... The pleasure of *intoxication*, the pleasure of *guile*, of *revenge*, of *envy*, of *slander*, of *licentiousness* - all this was *acknowledged* by the Greeks as human, and on that basis ordered into the edifice of society and mores. The wisdom of their institutions lies in the lack of distinction between good and evil, black and white. Nature, as it shows itself, is not denied, but only ordered [accommodated, assorted, codified], restricted to determinate cults and days. This is the root of all freedom of mind [open-mindedness, liberality] in antiquity; a measured [i.e. moderated] release [discharge] was sought for the forces of nature, not their annihilation or negation. - The comprehensive system of new order is then the *state*. It was not constructed around determinate individuals, but rather with a view towards the regular human qualities: in its grounding is revealed the sharpness of observation and the sense for the actual [facticity], particularly for the typically-actual, which equipped the Greeks for *Wissenschaft*, history, geography etc ... Whence do the Greeks draw this freedom? No doubt already from *Homer*; but whence does he draw it? - The poets are not the wisest and logically most cultivated beings; but they take pleasure in the particulars of reality of every kind and do not want to negate it, but still to moderate it so that it does not kill everything else around it. (5[146],8 = F)

This note is valuable because it enables us to interrogate *Übertragung* at the collective level of mores and institutions. We can begin by distinguishing *Übertragung* as 'acknowledgement' (affirmation) from 'denial', 'annihilation', 'negation' - the attempt to exclude certain destructive affects from human practice and communal life through warfare. This is a clear reference to Socratic and Christian cultures as regimes of annihilation grounded in oppositional thinking and moral judgement:

- i) the division of the human into opposed rational and appetitive elements (the half god, half animal of Christianity); and
- ii) the moral condemnation of the appetitive animal as 'evil' - the priestly work of bad conscience, or the Socratic practice of dying.

Agonal culture, governed by mores, is free from moral judgement. They make for a regime of *Einordnung*, a term that combines the notions of accommodation, appropriation (*ein-*), and regulation, re-ordering (*ordnen*). Base - destructive, disruptive - impulses of human nature are 'transferred' into cultural life by way of codification, the master code being the contest or agon regulating all areas of cultural life. As a dynamic of mutual provocation and empowerment driven by, say, revenge or envy, the agon 'plays' at the war of annihilation; yet it *merely* 'plays' at war, for as a dynamic of mutual *disempowerment* or limitation it precludes the absolute victory of annihilation.

Like Christian and Socratic cultures, the agonal 'play' of 'transference' does seek to exclude destructive forces from communal life; only it does not attempt to turn them against themselves, through ascetic practices or the inner agonies of conscience. Such regimes of self-destruction constitute what Nietzsche calls 'anti-natural morality' in *Morality as Anti-Nature*: it «turns... precisely *against* the instincts of life - it is a now secret, now loud and impudent *condemnation* of these instincts...» (*MA*, 4). Agonal culture, as a «naturalism in morality», is «mastered by an instinct of life - some commandment of life is fulfilled through a certain canon of 'shall' and 'shall not', some hindrance and hostile element on life's road is thereby removed...» (*MA*, 4).

Destructive instincts (e.g. revenge) are not condemned, but affirmed (the 'shall') or acknowledged in the agon as a stimulus to great deeds, an empowering force that provokes and empowers each antagonist to contest the other. Their destructive *effects* are, however, excluded; *not* through condemnation, the 'shall not' of moral judgement and solitary struggles of conscience, but in practice - the dynamic of mutual disempowerment intrinsic to the agon. In agonal contestation the 'naturalistic' «canon of 'shall' and 'shall not'» is unreflective and somatic - played out in the postures and counter-postures of agonal



contestation. And through the play of mutual limitation, destructive affects are effectively transformed or translated into constructive, agonal affects. Thus the agon effects a transformation of destructive passions - one that is based on affirmation, rather than repressive negation, and results in limited release or moderation, rather than suppression.

The kind of limited, transformative affirmation of destructive forces described through *Übertragung* can also be understood through the categories of *use* and *exploitation*:

How *Greek nature* knows how to make use of all **terrifying** qualities:

the tiger-like rage for destruction (of the tribes etc.) in the agon;

the unnatural drives (in the education of the youth by the man); the Asiatic *orgiastic* ways (in the Dionysian);

the hostile isolation of the individual (Erga) in the Apollinian.

The application of the harmful towards useful [ends] is idealised in the world-view of *Heraclitus* .

7. Finale: Dithyramb to *art and the artist*: because they first create [*herausschaffen*] the human and transpose [*übertragen*] all its drives into culture. (16[18],7 = D)

The agon is not just one instance of the harnessing and exploitation of destructive forces described here; it is its paradigmatic and pervasive cultural form, regulating education (the 'unnatural drives') and tragedy (the 'orgiastic ways') inter alia. There is an unmistakable parallel between the exploitation of natural forces here and the strategy of exploitation that emerged from Nietzsche's account of envy (2.1, above). The exploitation of prevailing values ('the current victor') as a stimulant for counter-values (a 'new greatness') is mirrored in the exploitation of natural drives for the sake of spiritual production. This parallel highlights the isomorphic relation between the 'vertical' and 'horizontal' dimensions of agonal contestation: only through an agon between *Geist* and the passions in each contestant can an agon between them take place; and only through an agonal contest *between* them can the agon of *Geist* and passions *within* each contestant be sustained.

In order to examine the crucial moment of mutual disempowerment or limitation, I shall exemplify *Übertragung* through a consideration of *agonal ambition*. This is an egoistic, potentially destructive affect which, in agonal contestation, becomes a creative force, deified in the 'good Eris'. Let's suppose that it represents a transposition of the «tiger-like rage for destruction» of the «evil Eris», mentioned in the above note (16[18]): what, then, is their relation? Not one of denial, negation in the name of love (Christian culture) or truth (Socratic culture); it is rather an affirmative transformation of the rage for destruction *by way of communal goals*. Agonal ambition exploits and harnesses this destructive, egoistic force by subjecting it to a new goal:

I. **Problem** : *how is the will, the terrifying [will], purified and reformed*, that is, translated [*umgesetzt*] and transformed into nobler drives?

Through a change in the world of representations, through the great *distance* of its goal, so that it must ennoble itself in excessive extension.

Influence of art on the *purification of the will* ... (16[26],7 = A)

The 'distance' of this goal, its representational 'extension' from individual rage, lies in its trans-individual, collective reference:

When the delusion [*Wahnvorstellung*] is dissolved as such, the will must create a *new* one - *if* it wants our continued existence. *Formation* [cultivation, education: *Bildung*] is a continuous substitution of delusions in the direction of nobler ones; that is, our 'motives' in thinking become ever more spiritual [*geistigere*], belonging ever more to a greater generality [commonalty: *Allgemeinheit*]. The goal of 'humankind' is the outermost that the will can offer us as a phantom.... In thinking of the well-being of greater organisms than is the individual, lies formation. (5[91],7 = B)

The transposition (*Übertragung*) of destructive into culture-creative affects - the formation (*Bildung*) or 'spiritualisation (*Vergeistigung*) of passion' (*Morality as Anti-Nature*) - works through the ennobling or 'becoming-spiritual' of their goals. Here, 'spiritualisation' is explained through reference to the Schopenhauerian-Wagnerian term *Wahnvorstellung*. This term stems from a paradox of power in Schopenhauer's system: although the World-Will is sovereign and omnipotent, it depends on our co-operation; for conscious goals or 'motives', egoistic by nature, are the sovereign movers of individual action. If, therefore, individuals are to be mobilised for the Will's 'spiritual', i.e. *trans-individual* ends, they must be deluded, so that these ends *appear* as egoistic<sup>18</sup>. In time, Nietzsche will jettison this cumbersome metaphysical baggage, but he does retain Schopenhauer's insight into our heteronomy (*vis-à-vis* the passions). It is central to aphorism 214 of *HaH*, which speaks of transposition - the ennobling or 'spiritualisation of passion' - as the 'art of idealisation':

*Ennobling of actuality.* - Because humans saw a deity in the aphrodisiac drive and felt it acting in them with reverent gratitude, that affect has in the course of time been laced with higher representations and actually become greatly ennobled. Thus have certain peoples, through this art of idealisation, created great instruments [*Hilfsmächte*] of culture out of illnesses: the Greeks for example, who in earlier centuries suffered great nervous epidemics (in the manner of epilepsy and the St. Vitus dance) and out of them formed the splendid type of the Bacchant. - For the Greeks possessed nothing less than a burly health; - their secret was to worship [honour: *verehren*] even illness as a god, if only it had *power*. (*HaH*, p. 214 = C)

The 'art of idealisation', accommodating (*Einordnen*) the orgiastic ways (16[18]) of the aphrodisiac drive within the confines of Dionysian festivals (cf. 5[146],8; 16[18],7) is grounded in a deep *doxa* or collective belief in fate: a reverential acknowledgement of heteronomy, a celebration of passion, a thanksgiving to its power through deification. This affirmative motif, instrumental to the agonal dynamic of mutual empowerment, can be traced to *Homer's Contest* and to *Morality as Ant-Nature*. The former speaks of the deification of envy «as the effect of a *beneficent* deity...» (*HC*, p. 190); the latter speaks of being «mastered by an instinct of life» and the fulfillment of «some commandment of life» in the context of «naturalism in morality» (*MA*, 4). As for fate, Nietzsche here writes:

Even when the moralist just turns to the individual and says to him: 'You ought to be thus and thus' he does not cease to make himself ridiculous. The individual is, in its future and its past, a piece of fate, one law more, one necessity more for all that is and all that will be. To say to him 'change yourself' means to demand that everything should change, even in the past... (*MA*, 6)

Agonal mores too demand that we change - from moralists to immoralists. They are, however, less ridiculous for a number of reasons. In the first place they are grounded in an affirmative acknowledgement that the individual is commanded by instincts of life, a belief in 'fate' qua unconscious forces. In the second place the demand is not formulated as a law addressed to the individual; instead it is somatic, a specific form of practice, regulated by mores, pitched at the level of affects, instincts - a collective configuration of wills. Finally, there is no desire for finality, no pretence at conclusive change; it is rather an open-ended, eternally recurring festival dedicated to the overcoming of our collective past.

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of Schopenhauer's *Wahn* theory and its reception by Hartmann and Nietzsche, see: Gerratana, F.: *Der Wahn jenseits des Menschen*, in "*Nietzsche-Studien*", Bd.17, 1988. I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the late Federico Gerratana as an outstanding Nietzsche scholar and a hard, but deeply sympathetic critic of my work.

## Appendix

### **Some Notes, Fragments and Other Passages Relating to the 'Agon' (transl. H. Siemens)**

A:

I. **Problem:** *how is the will, the terrifying [will], purified and reformed* , that is, translated [*umgesetzt*] and transformed into nobler drives?

Through a change in the world of representations, through the great *distance* of its goal, so that it must ennoble itself in excessive extension.

Influence of art on the *purification of the will* ... (16[26], 7)

B:

- When the delusion [*Wahnvorstellung*] is dissolved as such, the will must create a *new* one - *if* it wants our continued existence. *Formation* [education, cultivation: *Bildung*] is a continuous substitution of delusions in the direction of nobler ones; that is, our 'motives' in thinking become ever more spiritual [*geistigere*], belonging ever more to a greater generality [public, commonalty: *Allgemeinheit*]. The goal of 'humankind' is the outermost that the will can offer us as a phantom... In thinking of the well-being of greater organisms than is the individual, lies formation [education]. (5[91],7)

C:

- *Ennobling of actuality* . - Because humans saw a deity in the aphrodisiac drive and felt it acting in them with reverent gratitude, that affect has in the course of time been laced with higher representations and actually become greatly ennobled. Thus have certain peoples, through this art of idealisation, created great instruments [*Hilfsmächte*] of culture out of illnesses: the Greeks for example, who in earlier centuries suffered great nervous epidemics (in the manner of epilepsy and the St. Vitus dance) and out of them formed the splendid type of the Bacchant. - For the Greeks possessed nothing less than a burly health; - their secret was to worship [honour: *verehren*] even illness as a god, if only it had *power*. (*HaH*, 214)

D:

- How *Greek nature knows how to make use of all terrifying qualities:*

the tiger-like rage for destruction (of the tribes etc.) in the agon

the unnatural drives (in the education of the youth by the man)

the Asiatic *orgiastic* ways (in the Dionysian)

the hostile isolation of the individual (Erga) in the Apollinian.

The application of the harmful towards useful [ends] is idealised in the world-view of *Heraclitus* .

7. Finale: Dithyramb to *art and the artist* : because they first create [*herausschaffen*] the human and transpose [*übertragen*] all its drives into culture. (16[18],7)

E:

- The poet overcomes the struggle for existence by idealising it into a free agon [contest]. Here is the existence, for which there is still a struggle, existence in praise, in undying fame.

The poet *educates* : he knows how to transpose [*übertragen*] the Greeks' tiger-like drives to ravaging devastation into the good Eris. (16[15], 7)

F:

- ... The pleasure of *intoxication* , the pleasure of *guile* , of *revenge* , of *envy* , of *slander* , of *licentiousness* - all this was *acknowledged* by the Greeks as human, and on that basis ordered into the edifice of society and mores. The wisdom of their institutions lies in the lack of distinction between good and evil, black and white. Nature, as it shows itself, is not denied, but only ordered [accommodated, assorted, codified], restricted to determinate cults and days. This is the root of all freedom of mind [open-mindedness, liberality] in antiquity; a measured [i.e. moderated] release [discharge] was sought for the forces of nature, not their annihilation or negation. - The comprehensive system of new order is then the *state*. It was not constructed around determinate individuals, but rather with a view towards the regular human qualities: in its grounding is revealed the sharpness of observation and the sense for the actual [facticity], particularly for the typically-actual, which equipped the Greeks for *Wissenschaft*, history, geography etc .... Whence do the Greeks draw this freedom? No doubt already from *Homer* ; but whence does he draw it? - The poets are not the wisest and logically most cultivated beings; but they take pleasure in the particulars of reality of every kind and do not want to negate it, but still to moderate it so

that it does not kill everything else around it. (5[146],: spring - summer 1875)

- Of 'artistic ambition' *HaH I*, 170:

The Greek artists, the tragedians for example, poetised in order to win; their entire art cannot be conceived without the contest: the Hesiodic Eris, ambition, gave wings to their genius. Now this ambition demanded above all else that their work should attain the highest excellence *in their own eyes*, that is, as *they* understood this excellence, without concern for the dominant taste and the general opinion concerning excellence in a work of art... Thus they strive for victory over rivals in their own estimation, before their own seat of judgement, they really want *to be* more excellent; they then demand consensus on this their own estimation from others outside, confirmation of their judgement...

The implications for the structure of judgement are most clearly developed in *PTG*. In the context of Heraclitus' transfiguration of the agon into a 'Weltprinzip' (world principle), Nietzsche writes:

Just as every Greek fights as if he alone is in the right, and an infinitely sure measure of judicial judgement determines the trend of victory at every moment, so the qualities wrestle with one another according to inviolable laws and standards that are immanent to the contest [struggle] (*PTG*, 5 end)

The standard or measure (*Maass*) for a fair judgement of victory (*das rechte Urtheil*) is drawn into, and determined by the immanent dynamic of the contest. In the context of the agon, the notion of justice (*Gerechtigkeit*) is stripped of its transcendent status, as noted by Heraclitus:

... he could no longer consider the wrestling pairs and the judges as separate from one another, the judges seemed to contest, the contestants themselves seemed to judge - indeed, as he perceived at bottom only the one eternally sovereign justice, he dared to call out: the struggle of the many itself is the one justice! ... (*PTG*, 6, beginning)

- ...It is not individuals that vie with one another, but rather ideas. (16[9], 7)

- 7. The artist and the non-artist. What is artistic [aesthetic] judgement? This the general problem.

The poet only possible among a public of poets. (Effect of Wagner's *Nibelungen*). A public rich in phantasy [imagination]. This is the material, as it were, which he forms. Poetising itself but a stimulation and guiding of phantasy. The actual enjoyment [is] the producing of images, at the poet's hand. So, poet and critic a senseless opposition - rather sculptor and marble, *poet* and *material*.

The decision in the AGON (GK) is just the confession: so-and-so makes us more into poets: we shall follow him, for then we shall create images faster. An artistic judgement, then, won from an arousal [excitation] of artistic capacity. Not from *concepts*.

Thus does myth live on, insofar as the poet *transposes* his dream. All laws of art relation to transposition.

Aesthetics only makes sense as *Naturwissenschaft* [natural science]: like the Apollinian and the Dionysian. (16[6],7)

- 6. The rhapsodist as DEMIOURGOS (GK) of art - as actual genius he does not come into consideration, but rather fuses with the primal hero of all poetry, Homer.

Peculiar. They deny existence to the poetic individual

- ... The contest [agon] distinguishes the *craftsmen* [*lit.hand-workers*]. Only where there is hand-work, is there agonal contestation.

Only the [*dramatic -HS*] heroes are *individually living* in the true [real] sense. In them the present recognises itself again and lives on in them.

From when does the *individual* arise with the Greeks? (16[8],7)

- Art is not for private pleasure, according to the ancient conception: it has its place in the agons and exists for the delight of many. The judging public pulls the artist down... (1[62],7: 1869) (quotation from an unknown source)