

## Nietzsche, or, The Parting of the Waters

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*It is impossible not to make out Nietzsche's figure (and Michel Foucault's reading of the philosopher from Sils Maria) behind the intense polemic provoked in Germany by Peter Sloterdijk's conference, entitled "Rules for the Human Park". Question: will the charge of neo-conservatism, which yesterday was thrown at Nietzsche (and Foucault) and today is renewed against Sloterdijk, suffice to block any questioning regarding both the unthoughts of humanism and its forms, liberal ones included, of "taming the species"?*

In a recent article, Bruno Latour celebrated by way of a "Sloterdijk Affair" the appearance of *A New Nietzsche*.<sup>1</sup> Daring and provocative as this suggestion may be, it is worthy of interest on two counts:

- it indirectly recalls the fact that Sloterdijk is above all a great reader of Nietzsche, this thinker who takes you from behind and gives you a child, as Deleuze put it, giving one the taste for speaking "by affects, intensities, experiences, experiments..." – and anyone will be able to judge for himself by glancing through this work which was translated into French a dozen years ago: *Thinker on Stage: Nietzsche's Materialism*.<sup>2</sup>
- it directly situates Nietzsche at the point of crystallization of the "Sloterdijk Affair" – indissociable in my eyes from the "Habermas

<sup>1</sup>*Le Monde des Débats*, n° 8, November 1999.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Sloterdijk, *Thinker on Stage: Nietzsche's Materialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

Case" and this for reasons which go beyond the framework of said affair.<sup>3</sup>

So, Nietzsche or modernity's parting of the waters?

As good genealogists, we'll begin by an all too certain end.

This end is that of Critical Theory such as it will have, *de facto*, coincided historically with the liquidation of its Nietzschean component, the *de jure* prelude to the liquidation of the legacy of the Frankfurt School by Habermas himself. In a "Return" (how could he not?) to Kant and Fichte".<sup>4</sup> For it could not be denied that Nietzsche provided the initial impetus behind the project of an *experimental philosophy* — of an *Experimentum Mundi* to use Bloch's term — demanded by the deconstruction of a *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (whose subtitle is not without its Nietzschean ring: *Philosophical Fragments*<sup>5</sup>). What followed is well known. Noting that the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* "owes more to Nietzsche than the mere strategy of a critique of ideology which turns on itself" on account of a confused "rhetoric" which tends to associate reason and domination, power and ratification-legitimation; seeing in the critique of instrumental reason a negation of universal morality insofar as it masks "imperatives whose end is to guarantee both self-conservation and domination" — which cannot but lead one back to a Nietzschean "unbridled scepticism" (and to its Foucauldian echoes) — Habermas will make it his mission to finally have done with this Nietzschean legacy. As we know, this will involve extricating the "universalistic foundations of law and morality" from the *performative contradiction* which haunts a reason that denies itself with its own instruments... And to establish through this logic of the One the rights of a communicative rationality transcendent to any "theory of power", superior to any "aesthetic glorification" of force.<sup>6</sup>

It follows that any *Why we are Habermasians* is declined into a ringing *Why we are not Nietzscheans*. Its manifesto-value depends on the intersection, behind the scenes, of readings of Nazism and Stalinism (destruction of Reason = destruction of Democracy), whilst the stage is

<sup>3</sup>See my article in *Le Monde des Débats*: "L'Affaire Sloterdijk ou le Cas Habermas?"

<sup>4</sup>Cf. J. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), Ch. 9 [Suhrkamp, 1968].

<sup>5</sup>M. Horkheimer, T. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1997) [First Edition: 1944].

<sup>6</sup>Cf. J. Habermas, *The Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), Ch. 5 [Suhrkamp, 1985].

occupied by the Installation-Opposition of *tradition* and *argumentation*. Carried to the heights of the “ethics of discussion”, Nietzschean philosophy is finally revealed for what it was all along: a *neo-traditionalism* and a *neo-conservatism*.<sup>7</sup>

Whereby we refer less to Sloterdijk than to the Affair destined to bear his name. Let us now imagine a reader who had not let himself be blinded by the extreme clarity of these arguments, who perhaps was even alerted by the more “performative” than “public” nature of the Trial,<sup>8</sup> and who, *tradition oblige...*, in the half-light of his study is holding a book between his hands, the very one mentioned above, with its slightly pre-destined title: *The Thinker on Stage*. Well, this reader will have the luck of discovering a rare text, a model of commentary, or rather, of *accompaniment*, which in order to think the dramatic structure of *Aufklärung* brings to bear on Nietzsche’s first work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, an empathy that one is tempted to call “rhythmic”. So that the “dictatorship of transparency”, to which some have attempted to reduce *Aufklärung*, will be replaced by the dramaturgy of forces, Apollonian and Dionysian, at work ever since its centauresque birth. (Here one should, like Baudelaire, think of Delacroix, this painter drunk with music, as the *leader of the modern school*.) Through the intensity of the projection of Nietzsche upon a largely hallucinatory antiquity, through the method of dramatization to which Sloterdijk submits the text to extract from it an “original history of subjectivity” (which is not yet the doctrine of the will to power), this play of forces counts as a definition of a model of truth which undoes the identity of representation and throws existence into self-experimentation, in a *tragic theatre* whose principle states: “the unbearable imposes the constraint of art”.

Or, life considered *sub specie artis*.

Now, what Sloterdijk shows masterfully, is that the genius and actuality of Nietzsche depend, from *The Birth of Tragedy* onwards, on the excess of this proposition with regard to its *secondary* manifestations, whether Romantic, Schopenhaurian, Wagnerian, etc., but also with regard to the idea of a way towards the historical compromise between Apollo and Dionysus, the suffering God. After Nietzsche this excess has a name, a name both new and ancient which fastens onto the

<sup>7</sup>Cf. L. Ferry, “La critique nietzschéenne de la démocratie”, *Les Critiques de la Modernité Politique*, ed. by Alain Renault (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1999).

<sup>8</sup>Including *Der Spiegel* which did not hesitate to put on the cover of one of its issues a rather amusing photomontage joining Nietzsche, Sloterdijk ... and Dolly, the cloned sheep!

“Dionysianism of the ordinary” and onto the transmutation of the suffering of individuation: philosophy. Or, how to make the unbearable bearable by *transforming* it into a gay science in which *life is first and foremost its own poetization — not the object of self-reflexive deconstruction*. “Authentic philosophy” — writes Sloterdijk — “appears therefore as the Dionysian calm after the storm. It is the ceremony of the ordinary in the light of excess.”

Against the worn-out *Aufklärung* of modernity’s protestant wing, the Nietzschean *Aufklärung* presents itself as a *somatic aesthetics* wagering on intelligence as the dramaturgy of thought: open to what may happen in the form of a challenge to the present time. Against “common values” therefore, but not through the aristocratism of a desocialized body flirting with the abyss, as the partisans of Critical Theory feared; instead, by virtue of the most sensitive problematic of modernity, according to a “nocturnal concept of politics which brings attention to the hidden ecology of the world’s pain”, a concept making its own, with Nietzsche, “the proto-political ground of pain and pleasure, which precedes any action and any reaction on the level of everyday politics.”

This pressing urgency, what Sloterdijk sees as our task, is that of a *dionysiac materialism*.

*Translated by Alberto Toscano*