

## Burning a (Forgotten) Memory: Nietzsche's "Mnemotechnics" and the Eternal Return of the Feminine

Lisa Zucker

### La mémoire amnésique

*La philosophie, d'après Gayatri Spivak, s'inscrit sous le signe d'Œdipe. Elle s'élabore à travers une rhétorique ancrée dans le féminin, mais elle ne peut guère imaginer un sujet au féminin. Dans cette optique, les réflexions de Nietzsche sur la question de l'amnésie peuvent être lues comme un commentaire sur les lacunes de sa propre réflexion. Selon Zucker, le philosophe pratique la politique de l'autruche ; il cache sa tête dans la matérialité linguistique, oubliant le rôle médiateur de cette matérialité et sa dette au corps féminin. Cet essai met en relief l'économie sexuée du texte de Nietzsche, dont un des exemples les plus remarquables est la féminisation de l'amnésie.*

If as Gayatri Spivak suggests, the history of Western philosophy has also been the history of its oedipalization (Spivak 35), then it is important for feminists to reread philosophical texts and to determine how the sign of the feminine has been fetishized in relation to generalized oedipal inscriptions of textual blindness, denial of desire, and amnesia. To what degree have philosophical texts framed the literary question of displacement and its attendant amnesiac ideological exclusions as feminine? What kinds of forgetfulness have been necessary for the discipline of philosophy to assure the intact relay of masterful understanding?

The text of Nietzsche is a particularly rich site for such readings, beginning with the extensive work on memory and hypnosis in *On the Genealogy of Morals* in relation to the question of the master-slave relationship and ultimately to the sign of the feminine. I will attempt, in the following paper, to trace Nietzsche's genealogy of the "science of memory" particularly in relation to his philosophical articulation of the feminine. This discussion is inseparable from a discussion of his inscription of "understanding" and its semiocentric inversion in a complex of motifs concerned with "standing under," and with a peculiarly "inde-

cent" weakness in the legs which seems to accompany it. Ultimately, I will read Nietzsche's text as an *an-aesthetic* with its own set of amnesiac exclusions and I will raise the question of the value of such an-aesthesia to the political project of feminism.

*On the Genealogy of Morals* traces the historic use of what Nietzsche refers to as "mnemotechnics," that is, the use of hypnosis to "burn a memory" into the mind of the ascetic slave so that the pain which the latter suffers as slave is displaced and "remembered" as the text of pain (GM 61). Under hypnosis, the slave begins to "exist" insofar as he turns to himself into an object of exchange and converges upon his own pain as a series of affects which are in turn translated into the language of those affects. In this way, the slave's "condition of existence" is the effect of translation; his "cause" is figured as the effect of affects, separated from their putative meanings by semiocentric inversion. In short, the slave has come to speculate upon his own suffering, multiplying and scattering its affects, which in turn allows the internalization of greater and greater amounts of displaced pain "in the same measure as outward discharge [i]s inhibited" (GM 84). The slave is encouraged to will the repression and inversion of the metaphysical categories of cause and effect, even to enjoy the pain, since he is figured in this process as the entrepreneur of his own affects. The burning of memory may be read, then, as the burning in of a certain unacknowledged amnesia brought about by the "chronological reversal" of cause and effect (WP 804). Moreover, this amnesia is feminized by Nietzsche in terms of pregnancy. According to Nietzsche's account of the historic use of "mnemotechnics," the slave's interior world gradually becomes a "womb" which is "pregnant with a future," inflating with the proliferation of internalized and translated affects (GM 85, 87).

Nietzsche's *Genealogy* reads less like a historical text than a psycholinguistic manual with a fully elaborated terminology for the science of memory, and as such is consistent with his earlier investigations into hypnosis as a rhetorical "science" (CR). In an ostensibly neutral scientific mode, the analysis of "mnemotechnics" begins to reduce the metaphysical ideal of a fully conscious mind to the materiality of a body, yet the politicized term which bears the burden of repressed pain issuing from this dialectic is that of the feminine, specifically that of the womb. However, Nietzsche also stipulates that any ultimate attempt on the part of science to reduce the spirit to materiality without metaphysical presuppositions (of mind) constitutes a violation of epistemological

decency. It is “faith” and the subjective mental processes which supply science with its direction, its meaning, its methods, and even its right to exist: “Whoever tries, for example, to place philosophy “on a strictly scientific basis,” first needs to stand not only philosophy but truth itself *on its head* – the grossest violation of decency possible in relation to two such venerable females!” (GM 151-52). Yet again there has been a dialectical inversion involving amnesia, the forgetting of mind, and again the term which is introduced to serve as host for the violation is female.

The reference here is to Hegel’s investigation of the question of man’s empirical *understanding* as a question of *standing under*: “to center himself on his head, i.e.: in thought, and to construct reality according to it” (Hegel 447). Authority was thus given to subjectivity (the mind) by reifying it and grafting it to the material world in the hopes of bringing the latter within the subject’s control. Fallen to the ground, the head “forgets” to find anything amiss, anything in opposition to it, organizing a perception of the ground as merely the mirror image of subjectivity. Before meaning can be affixed to it, the mind must be objectified so that it becomes a textualization or translation of the ground, and the ground becomes in turn a mediated or textualized sign of mind, personified. Subjectivity “forgets” or misunderstands these mediations, bringing their synthesis into possibility in forms subversively projected without acknowledgement (Hamacher 1985). What is particularly forgotten in the Hegelian synthesis is that in the attempt to achieve the dream of an unmediated grasp of materiality, the mind has had to internalize the polarized functions of *understanding* and *standing under*, metaphorically sticking its head in the sand to suppress the difference. For Hegel, this difference is sublimated in a final moment of *Aufhebung* or synthesis, but for Nietzsche the sublimation becomes downright indecent. Hegel’s synthesis is indecent not only because of the mind-body split which it has initiated but because it forgets (is *without*) a knowledge of what it is *without*, paradoxically redoubling its lack and calling attention to it in the act of “stopping” the dialectical movement. For Nietzsche, forgetting to acknowledge the movement results in a gross violation of decency, displacing the sign of lack to another site which is even more visible, not to mention ancient and female. Yet it is Nietzsche, not Hegel, who feminizes the indecently flailing legs of Hegelian “understanding,” thus forgetting, it would seem, that he himself has a hand in the display.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, the problem of memory appears with yet another set of oppositions involving the difference between “sin” and

"sacrilege." On the "Semitic" side is the passive and "feminine" notion of sin typified, tellingly, by the myth of the *fall*, and by a multiplicity of petty acts: "curiosity, mendacious deception, susceptibility to seduction, lies" (BT 71). On the "sublime" and "Aryan" side is the Promethean version of "active sin" or "sacrilege" which involves a single, much grander crime – the crime of attempting to act like a god without the acknowledgement of difference, the attempt to forget the curse of individuation and to become "the *one* world-being" by stealing "the best and highest possession mankind can acquire." The result of such subversiveness is that "he suffers in his own person the primordial contradiction that is concealed in things" (BT 71). The Promethean sacrilege in question, "that man should freely dispose of fire without receiving it as a present from heaven," involves the internalization of a greater debt than that of sin, the debt incurred by pretending to be *without* the interference of prior representation, translating oneself into the duplication of Logos and forgetting or internalizing the gap between mankind and godhead. In this way a noble and tragic (and male) crime has been committed, as opposed to Eve's theft of knowledge which constituted a pettier crime involving not active creativity but a passive submission to *suggestion*. Yet the Promethean tragedy of noble sacrilege comes dangerously close to Hegelian *Aufhebung*, actively seeking to become "the *one* world-being" by suspending the enormous contradiction and debt incurred by forgetting that one is "without" the curse of differentiation.

For Nietzsche, the immemorial suspension or gap in the structure of meaning is indecent, and its attendant lag is obscurely related to a weakness in the legs. Sacrilege, the active "masculine" crime, involves a single such gap or lag characterized by a larger stride; sin, the passive "feminine" crime typical of the slave, involves a multiplicity of petty gaps or lags characterized by numerous little steps (BT 71-72). Nietzsche's binary opposition between sin and sacrilege inscribes Eve as the transgressor who is acting passively as the mere reflection of a suggestion from an external source, whereas Prometheus' transgression is autonomous. But one could note that both agents are acting "autonomously" insofar as they are reflections or versions which diverge from a prior representation, incurring a multitude of gaps or repressions as the logical outcome of the slide of the "first" male gap. When a "deity" is said to create a version or representation of himself, a schism has been introduced into the notion of universality which in turn has the potential to generate an infinity of schisms. If anything, Eve's "pettier" act could well be read as

more rigorously subversive than that of her male counterpart since it cannot afford the luxurious assumption of priority or privilege and indeed calls into question the possibility of such autonomy for anyone. The "pettiness" or passivity of Eve's "autonomy," dependent as it is on external forces, is precisely what throws into question the entire concept of a unified, determinable conscious ego, separable from the instability of representation. Her act is autonomous insofar as it necessarily occurs as a movement in the displacement of representation. As the representation of representation, Eve is the sign of the slide and instability of the entire logocentric system of Western culture, re-formed from an already derivative model (Adam) with excessive individuation and reflexivity. As sign, she calls into question the possibility of any original or autonomous ego or act and returns us to the problem of displacement which has always already been obliterated from memory.

This representation of femininity as the host for the problem of displacement is not new to Nietzsche's writing. In the Nietzschean oeuvre, woman frequently appears as the sign which bears the burden of the discourse of idealism with all of its exclusive and amnesiac ideological formations (Blondel). Hence philosophy and truth appear inverted in a Hegelian headstand, their feminine sexuality safely dysfunctional but nevertheless capable of invoking revulsion. For Nietzsche, woman is the version of versions, repetition itself and thus petty, a translation of the material ground of understanding as standing under. Woman, like knowledge, can only ever embody error and amnesia, a mere outline of outlines, and worst of all, arbitrariness and accident. Yet because the accidental outline of the signifier is crucial to Nietzsche's own attempt to move beyond the artificially arrested dialectic of Hegel, the figure of woman also constitutes a threat. "Her" potential for accident and dispersal without limit is capable of disseminating Nietzsche's entire enterprise. In *Ecce Homo*, for example, the philosopher evokes the phantasm of being torn to pieces by the "perfect woman" who, in her "subterranean" agreeability is nothing more or less than "a little beast of prey" (EH 255). What is glaringly apparent in both this example and in the example of the indecently flailing legs of idealism is a horror of the feminine potential for submissive weakness and dispersion. Confronted with such structural weakness, the understanding can only invert itself in the earth and ultimately go to pieces, lost in an Orphic phantasm of dispersal which "would run over fate itself." Without the reserve

implicit in Nietzsche's notion of *amor fati*, female instability is the parasite which preys on his dialectic, preventing it from maintaining its control of fate (EH 85).

Elsewhere, the fear of excessive dispersal of understanding is expressed with explicit reference to the reception of Nietzsche's text, especially those parts in the argument which veer furthest from idealism in their reduction to materiality, and which are thus most prone to accidental appropriation and misrepresentation (GS 196). The gravity of this prospect is associated with the precariousness and even terror which attends all texts whose materiality can only signal coherence in the form of a promise of meaning which is vulnerable to forgetting, misappropriation, and even mischief on the part of the reader (Hamacher 1983). The text thus returns to the feminine obscenity and head-in-the-sand evasions of idealism. Can Nietzsche avoid such a prospect?

Nietzsche's description of the promissory master is that of a "born piper of consciousness whose voice knows how to descend to the underworld of every soul." Despite fearful references elsewhere to the fate of Orpheus, torn apart by the "feminine" textual principle of subterranean dispersal, Nietzsche's project would seem to involve seeking out the subterranean consciousness of his reader. Yet the descent to this underworld of *mind* ultimately converges upon its own *materiality*, and encounters, if not the feminine obscenity of idealism, then a sodomous version of it. The promissory master is a manipulator of waste material "who guesses the concealed and forgotten treasure...and is a divining rod for every grain of gold that has long lain buried in the dungeon of much mud and sand" (EH 268). Ultimately, this tendency to "guess" the reader's future response from out of the past and thus to oscillate back and forth between past and future, is to maintain an amnesia with regards to the gap of the present moment – an amnesia which complicates the anal nature of the genealogy of the text [sic]. As anal intercourse, Nietzsche's writing falls short of complete fertility, subsisting on the materiality of its own discourse as a mere *sign* of pregnancy: "For from the depths one loves only one's child and work; and where there is great love of oneself it is the sign of pregnancy..." (Z 161). The unresolved guesses and empty promises of the "longest, deepest, and sternest past," which are only compensated with further gaps, and which in turn deepen the fission of the text – all of this may "rise up in us" at length as a thing of terror when considered too closely (Z 262). The

terror is that of Orphic dispersal, and the tendency to readerly misappropriation is directly related to the bloody debt which is at the fundament of these texts: "Ah, reason, seriousness, mastery over the affects, the whole somber thing called reflection, all the prerogatives and show pieces of man: how dearly they have been bought! how much blood and cruelty lie at the bottom of all 'good things'" (Z 62).

"At the bottom of all 'good things'" is the gap between past and future which prevents Nietzsche's affecting discourse from becoming a discourse on affects. The temporal gap is sometimes furtively acknowledged as feminine, and sometimes as the site of the long, deep, and stern extension of the past which rises up in us in moments of gravity, in moments when the text signals its acknowledgment of suppressed difference from behind its back and in doing so, calls attention to its vulnerability and exposure. This chronic lag or weakness in the legs of Nietzsche's text is both what constitutes it as a promissory discourse and what makes it fall short of immediate realization. Nietzsche's textual suggestion, the suggestion of his text, is a double sign founded on a syllogistic (or hysterical) structure of projection and retraction which in turn depends on the promise of coherence in the future. Meanwhile it scatters the properties of knowledge and representation in the present. His words work as promises precisely because they fail as immediate acts, embodying "real" affects only insofar as they are embedded within the anticipation of suggestive readers, and fulfilling themselves only with further suggestion. The deferral between suggestion and understanding or action is what allows the understanding or action to be "autonomous" like the problematic autonomy of Eve and Prometheus, a mere version or sign of understanding or action which is neither the property of the suggestor nor of the suggestee. Because of the gaping nature of this understanding, there can be no absolute continuity between word and act, nor between affecting discourse and discourse on affects, only the problem of the eternal return of faulty memory. Suggestibility remains thus a structural necessity of texts (Borsch-Jacobsen). Given the collapse of the distinction between suggestor and suggestee, Nietzsche's suggestive text would seem to be prone to the progressive emasculation attributed to the hypnotic slave, whose internalization of pain is linked with genital damage: "The most repulsive mutilations (castration, for example), the cruelest rites of all the religious cults (and all religions are at the deepest level systems of cruelties) – all this has its origin in the instinct

that pain is the most powerful aid to mnemonics" (GM 61). Hypnosis is perhaps figured here as the inability of suggestion to stand on its own two feet.

In his weaker moments, Nietzsche is prone, as we have seen, to a *horror vacui*, a hysteria which interprets the immemorial fission of the text as feminine. The textual gap is contagious, capable of tearing one apart if read passively, with vulnerability. Yet *active* textual suggestion, multiplication and dispersal of the text's cutting edge might neutralize its fissure through deflection, figuring the catastrophe of interminable gaps in order to flatten accident into the mirror image of necessity, even if this translates the suggestive writer into an invaginated version of himself. In other words, by multiplying perspectives, Nietzsche renders himself multiple *without* awareness of the gaping femininity which his text insists it is *without*. In this sense, the text attempts to neutralize exposure by returning to it mimetically in a multiplicity of decentered amnesiac modes as in the transformative "thanatography" of *Ecce Homo* (Derrida 1985, 19 ff). In this sense also, Nietzsche is forced to return many times over in the unstable forms of those "venerable females," philosophy and truth. Thus he, too, is the mere version of versions, the eternal return of forgetting, parasitically embedded with the error and accident which is the heritage of idealism. The amnesiac contagion of the material text – the translatability of the sign and thus its potential for reversal and parasitism is responsible for Nietzsche's simulation of femininity by way of a certain muddy dungeon. And the master of irony who wished to invert idealism by celebrating the material side of its dialectic – even while mouthing disclaimers – has ultimately found himself situated as the butt of irony, at bottom prone to an infiltrating parasitism without reserve: "All honor to the ascetic ideal insofar as it is honest! so long as it believes in itself and does not play tricks on us! But I do not like all these coquettish bedbugs with their insatiable ambition to smell out the infinite, until at last the infinite smells of bedbugs" (Z I58). At bottom is a deconstruction of the distinctions between male host and female parasite, mocker and mocked, affecting discourse and discourse on affects (Behler).

Thus Nietzsche's story of understanding is, like Hegel's, a story of standing under and of the lameness or weakness in the legs which seems to attend it and in sequel, amnesiac headlessness (Bataille). The impotent rage which rises up in the philosopher at the prospect of his uncontrol-



lable parasites recalls the historical moment of impotence which occurred when man "found himself finally enclosed within the walls of society and peace." Lacking a localizable host for his aggression, he had to face himself in a situation of displacement and sublimation similar to that of the warlike "sea animals when they were compelled to become land animals" so that they became mere "semi-animals," cut down to half their stature and suffering from a weakness in the legs. Forced to sublimate their instincts rather than discharging them, they suffer from the amnesia which Nietzsche calls the "internalization of man." However, this internalization and devaluation of the "instincts" is not merely the province of animals and slaves. The avowedly "tragic" attempt to stand on two feet is also experienced by the Overman, Zarathustra, and related in the matched tales included under the title, "Of the Vision and the Riddle" (Z 156-58).

In the first tale, the "leaden discomfort" experienced by the semi-animals who must learn to "bear themselves" is translated as the mirror figure of a dwarf, "the spirit of gravity," who sits on Zarathustra's shoulders and taunts him during his mountain climb to a gateway called "Moment." The story of the mountain ascent is framed by the tale of a journey of descent to the black sorrowful sea below, "this pregnant nocturnal dismay," and traces of the oppressive ("female") imagery of this frame-tale of descent appear in the story of Zarathustra's mountain climb, encumbered by dripping, leaden thoughts, "lame, making lame." Zarathustra notes that the gateway is placed at a crossroads where two paths meet, contradicting and "offending" each other while leading backward and forward into eternity. In this context of sorrow, debilitation, and contradiction, Zarathustra narrates to his companion, "lame-foot," the riddle of the eternal return: "Must not whatever *can* happen have happened, have been done, have passed by before? And if everything has been there before – what do you think, dwarf, of this moment? Must not this gateway too have been there before? And are not all things knotted together so firmly that this moment draws after it *all* that is to come? Therefore – itself too? For whatever *can* walk – in this long lane out *there* too, it *must* walk once more...must not all of us have been there before? And return and walk in that other lane, out there, before us, in this long, dreadful lane – must we not eternally return?" (Z 158).

The name of the gateway is "*Augenblick*," a German word which refers not only to a moment in time but also to the blink of an eye. It is only by

an advance eyeblink or moment of forgetting or repression that the contradictory pathways leading to this moment can be inverted. Only by being blind to the presence of the moment as well as to its problematization – a self-absorbed act of *hubris* typified by the contemptuous dwarf-mole – can one straddle the contradiction of past and future, and represent them in apparent and perpetual reversals. So too does the advance blink of an eye allow cause to appear chiasmically as the effect of effect, returned to the memory only through repression and translation. And that repression or translation itself can be blinked or winked at also, although it “rises up in us” irrepressibly as “the longest, deepest, and sternest past” or “before us, in this long dreadful lane” to which we must return in moments of gravity. Moments of gravity are moments of the return of language from elsewhere, moments in which it is recognized that even the weakest and most forgettable (thus the most “female”) of signs can exert a near-insensible and thus perhaps especially threatening and parasitic power by way of the inevitable return inscribed in language.

Nietzsche’s riddles are language games which invoke the unthinkable structure of time, the unthinkable way in which sense perpetually lags behind the text, a lag which is somehow related to a horrifying, emasculating weakness in the legs. They are tales about protagonists who are chronically predisposed to blindness and amnesia so that life never quite catches up to its figuration. Irrepressibly, an ancient riddle “rises up” in these tales out of the “sternest past,” bringing with it a horror of gaps and reversible equivalencies, and rendering the memory insensible until it is too late. Time in all of these stories of the eternal return is always time as an immemorial affect turning on the trope of negativity, unconsciously predisposed to equivalency so that the past and future, which contradict each other from opposite sides of the gateway entitled *Augenblick*, also manage repeatedly to replace each other, “and walk in that other lane,” eternally blind to their own crossings. And the “present” moment seems to be inverted as well, drawing after itself not only the future (“all that is to come”) but “therefore – itself too.” The present moment is cloven, embodying the contradiction which it furtively and perpetually reverses, lost in an amnesiac abyss of repetition and reflection.

Elsewhere, Nietzsche extends the aesthetic ideal of a sort of oceanic feeling, the “proud and calm harmony” with which the text should be

able to “slope into the sea” as the end approaches (*GS* 227). However, the aesthetic of that easy slope would seem to require its own an-aesthetic, an *Augenblick* regarding a certain loss of support beneath the legs which might otherwise evoke unheard-of revulsion and horror. If feminists are to trace a political project in the text of Nietzsche, it is perhaps to be found in the “feminine” role of an-aesthesia, that is, the submission to (and perhaps even phantasmatic celebration of) the soporific forgetfulness of textuality, the return to the incipiently obscene misunderstanding which opens the deconstruction of the chronically lame stance of masterful discourse.

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