LITR 332: Nietzsche's Zarathustra
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A Return to Primordial Chaos in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*
by Alexis Teh

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In section 9 of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (*TSZ*), Nietzsche delivers one of his most opaque and figurative statements: that "one must have chaos in oneself in order to give birth to a dancing star." He then asserts directly to a listener that "you still have chaos in you" (Del Caro 9). Nowhere else in the text does he use the word "Chaos" again. To better divine the subtleties of Nietzsche's "Chaos" and the vital and Dionysiac role it plays in one's route to the *Übermensch*, we scrutinize the word's development over time: from its ancient Greek sense of a generative and amorphous primordial matter, towards its later German meaning as a lifeless and mechanistic state of disorder.

"Chaos" is at the fore of Greek cosmogonic myth-making; it is the first entity Hesiod introduces in his *Theogony*. "ἦ τοι μὲν πρώτιστα" [In the very beginning], Hesiod recounts, "Χάος γένετ'" [came chaos] (116), with the superlative "πρώτιστα" highlighting the temporal primacy that *Χάος* holds before all other known entities of the human world. However, this earliest "Chaos" had yet to attain the sense of mayhem or destructive confusion seen in the word's modern German or English usage. Rather, archaic *Χάος* was more a yawning gulf or abyss than a locus of disorder: thus Martin West's English translation of Hesiodic *Χάος* as "Chasm" (West 6), instead of the more etymologically direct "Chaos." This sense of emptiness is reflected in the word's cognates: *χαῦνος* [hollow], *χάσκω* [to yawn] and *χάσμα* [chasm]

(Chantraine 1246). In the *Theogony*, Hesiod also refers to primordial *Χάος* as a *χάσμα*. The occurrence of "Χάεος ζοφεροῖο" [murky Chaos] in line 815 mirrors that of "χάσμα μέγ᾽" [great chasm] in line 740. Both words are preceded by the same repeated set of four lines in which Hesiod reflects upon the limits of his entire cosmogonic project. He gestures here towards the unintelligible matter hovering at the limits of the known world: *Χάος*. The symmetrical positioning of these two words strengthens our conception of 'Chaos' as a chasm: an expanse of murky formlessness that bears so little resemblance to the human world that even Hesiod's Muses cannot help the poet penetrate or describe it.

Yet, both Nietzsche's and Hesiod's conceptions of "Chaos" transcend that of a vacant and lifeless *χάσμα*. A hollow *χάσμα* resonates more with the "arm und zahm" [poor and tame] soil which Nietzsche dreads, as opposed to the "reich" [rich] and generative soil that nourishes the "hoher Baum" [tall tree] and enables one to "give birth to a dancing star" (Del Caro 9). Nietzsche already employs the German *Abgrund* for vast and empty spaces, an association mirrored in its English cognate "abyss" since both are descended from the Latin "abyssus" (Oxford English Dictionary). Nor is Nietzsche stingy with the word *Abgrund*, employing it thirty-two times across *TSZ* where "Chaos" appears only twice. Nietzsche's diction mirrors the difference between *χάος* and *χάσμα* in ancient Greek. While *χάσμα* can be applied to any geographical or bodily cavity, *χάος* only denotes that primordial substance that birthed the cosmos and hovers still at its edges. Nietzsche consciously differentiates star-bearing "Chaos" from numerous other instances of *Abgrund* in *TSZ*. While the nothingness of *Abgrund* allows Nietzsche to cast it as a locus of danger or destructive risk, the emptiness of "Chaos" reads not as the emptiness of nonexistence, but as an emptiness with abundant generative power.

Hesiod, too, conceived of *Χάος* as an active and generative *χάσμα*. One must be careful

not to understand Hesiodic *Χάος* as a state of absolute nothingness preceding existence, as in the

Christian account of Genesis where the will of God conjures up all things *ex nihilo*. Rather,

Greek cosmogony begins one frame later, with an already-existing but amorphous *Χάος* charged

with creative potential and acting as both the "πηγαὶ καὶ πείρατ'" [sources and ends] of the

universe (738). Understanding the project of the *θεο-γονία* as a divine genealogy, we see *Χάος*

numbered amongst a family of active deities rather than lifeless elements. The first drama of

existence occurs when the emergence of Χάος is immediately followed by the emergence of

"Γαῖ' εὐρύστερνος" [broad-sterned Earth] (116). The sense of swift aftereffect in the conjunction

"αὐτὰρ ἔπειτα" [right after] suggests that *Χάος* must produce *κόσμος*: that the primordial chasm

cannot help but generate structure in a response to its formlessness. This amorphous "Chaos"

sets the chain of creation in motion: Earth is quickly followed by "Ἔρεβός τε μέλαινά τε Νὺξ"

[Erebos and black Night], and then by "Αἰθήρ τε καὶ Ἡμέρη" [Aether and Day], and so forth.

400 years later in old Attic comedy, *Χάος* retains its generative potency in Aristophanes's *The*

Birds. In the comedy, primordial *Χάος* mates with Eros, and the cosmos is produced through this

sexual act (693). The world that begins with *Χάος* thus begins on a stage already supercharged

with creative potential. We thus see that Hesiodic *χάσμα* is not a void of activity or existence, but

a generative matter that lacks any structure intelligible to the schematising mind. With this

"Chaos," we hear Zarathustra imploring his listeners, descendants of *Χάος* themselves, to

embody its formlessness and wield its generative capabilities.

Over time, "Chaos" lost much of its creative potency. By the time of Classical Athens,

we already see Aristotle rejecting the generative primacy of *Χάος* in his *Metaphysics*. Instead, he

displaces the power of creation onto an earlier motivating principle: "ὁ πρῶτος οὐρανός" [the

first sky] which he calls the true "ὃ οὐ κινούμενον κινεῖ" [unmoved mover] (12.1072a).

Nietzsche's own contemporary Hegel inherits Aristotle's thinking when he remarks that "Chaos is thus itself something posited, but what the positing agent is we are not told" (229). Hegel displaces the generative power of "Chaos" onto so-called "abstract moments": snapshots of action external to temporal order. For Hegel, these "abstract moments which have proceeded out of chaos are the productive element," rather than "Chaos" itself (231).

The sense of formlessness in "Chaos" also intensified over time from a mere lack of order to its opposite: disorder. By the fourth century AD, Greek *Χάος* acquired a new sense of confusion and turmoil in its Latin descendent "chaos" (Oxford English Dictionary). In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, primordial "chaos" is now a "rudis indigestaque moles" [coarse and confused mess]. Not entirely formless and indefinite, it is composed of differentiated "semina" [elements] heaped into a "pondus congestaque eodem" [pile accumulated in one place] (Book 1 Section 7). Modern German and English inherited this Latin "Chaos" with its notes of pandemonium. As a key writer during the English Renaissance, Milton offers a window into this development. In *Paradise Lost*, he speaks of the wasteland beyond hell as a "Wide anarchie of Chaos, damp and dark" (book 9, line 283). His tyrannical vision of Chaos "by decision more embroils the fray / By which he reigns" (book 2, line 907), commanding and perpetuating the randomness that shapes human fate. This sense of a disordered "Chaos" persists in its present-day sense. Just prior to Nietzsche's time, Kant speaks similarly of "Chaos" as nature "in its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation" (*Critique* 246) and a physical phenomenon resisting the "cohesiveness of matter" (*Argument* 145).

However, Nietzsche's private understanding of "Chaos" conflicts with its later nuances of lifelessness and disorder. Nietzsche speaks of "Chaos" as a "lack of order, arrangement, form,

beauty, wisdom and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms" (*The Gay Science* 109). In the use of the word "lack", we see that "Chaos" is the privation of order, not the presence of disorder. Nietzsche's language may here be informed by his training as a classical philologist, since his "Chaos" recalls the archaic nuances of Hesiodic χάσμα: a murkiness so devoid of any intelligible form that "none of our aesthetic and moral judgments apply to it" (*The Gay Science* 109). Furthermore, Nietzsche's amorphous "Chaos" is far less acquiescent than Kant's disorderly one. Kant affirms God's guarantee that "nature, when left to natural laws, tends to produce regularity out of chaos" (*Argument* 191). When Nietzsche proclaims "God is dead," he sacrifices Kant's easy arrow of time from disorder to order, and instead must confront "the total character of the world" as Chaos "in all eternity" (*The Gay Science* 109). Nietzsche's "Chaos" is thus the interminable and untameable state of all existence as it propagates itself cyclically through time.

Returning to *TSZ*, we now recognise Nietzsche's star-bearing "Chaos" as the same active formlessness which characterises and propels all existence. Yet, when Nietzsche declares that "ihr habt noch Chaos in euch" [you have chaos in you] (Del Caro 9), he implies the need for individuals to contain a germ of this universal "Chaos." Zarathustra thus calls for each man to experience oneself in unity with the earth and all existence. By embodying primordial "Chaos," one will be able to generate and define a universe of one's own. We can tie this power to the generative formlessness of Nietzsche's "Chaos," which allows one to dissolve the strictures of inherited virtues and to reconstruct the direction of one's own existence. In the very pair of sentences where "Chaos" appears, the generative sense of "Chaos" is tangible. Nietzsche first presents a conditional statement, asserting the link between an unaffirmed premise and its result.

He then declares the factual reality of his premise, actualising his conclusion that mankind can still "give birth to a dancing star."

Throughout *TSZ*, Nietzsche positions the stars as exalted goals for mankind and images of *Überfluss*. "Chaos" is cast as a generative "Boden" [soil] that allows one to define and deify one's own values and existence. Nietzsche's exalted language also prompts us to understand "Chaos" as a route towards the *Übermensch*. We can understand this route by identifying the duality of "Chaos" and the dancing star with the duality of Nietzsche's Dionysian and Apollonian elements. Our characterisation of 'Chaos' thus far resounds with Nieztsche's Dionysian element, which he suggestively labels "the Primordial Unity" in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Like "Chaos," the Dionysian element allows individuals to experience themselves in unity with the eternal formlessness of all existence. Understanding Apollo as a deification of the sun, we can also identify the figurative "tanzenden Stern" with the Apollonian element. The Apollonian element allows mankind to devise intelligible representations and interpretations of the world which, despite never fully capturing the Dionysiac "Chaos" of existence, nonetheless allows man to perceive and make personal sense of it. The image of a "dancing star" born of "Chaos" can thus be read as the journey of reading meaningful structure into true formlessness of existence. On his route to the *Übermensch*, each man must harness the creative potency of "Chaos" to decide how to represent the world to himself, defining his own maps and schemata in order to navigate existence in search of self-posited values and goals.

After examining the history of "Chaos" in tandem with its role in Nietzsche's work, we can now understand Nietzschean "Chaos" as a return to the word's earliest root in Greek antiquity, embracing the generative potency and absolute formlessness of Hesiodic *Χάος*. Indeed, Nietzsche's sense of an active and unquenchable "Chaos" animating and propelling all existence

lies in contrast with the word's modern sense of lifeless and mechanistic disorder. In the context of *TSZ*, we see Nietzsche exhorting mankind to wield this primordial star-bearing "Chaos" as a route to the *Übermensch*. As though fearing that the Western world will fall prey to Kant's reverse-entropic process and the human ability to self-define will become extinct, Nietzsche thus urgently counsels us to channel the Dionysiac "Chaos" in order to confront and interpret the true and unintelligible nature of all existence.

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