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Seeking Nietzsche's Great Tree of Humanity: The Overhuman and Powers's The Overstory

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In 1873 Nietzsche wrote a famous fable about the human intellect and its place in nature. It begins:

In some remote corner of the universe, flickering in the light of the countless solar systems into which it had been poured, there was once a planet on which clever animals invented cognition. It was the most arrogant and mendacious minute in "world-history"; but a minute was all it was. After nature had drawn just a few more breaths the planet froze and the clever animals had to die.²

Today Nietzsche could have added this: well before the sun consumed itself and the planet froze, these all too clever animals deployed their invention of cognition to devise tools, construct engines, overpopulate the earth, make industrial scale war on one another, detonate atomic weapons, pollute lakes, rivers and oceans, turn forests into wastelands, and exhaust much of the soil. They burned trillions of tons of other animals' fossils, overloading the air with carbon. They overheated their habitat, provoking the sixth great extinction of earthly life, pushing their vaunted civilization to a precarious brink, subjecting many to flood, drought, starvation, and disease. *Long* before the planet froze, the few survivors declared science and technology to be forbidden practices. "World-history," if remembered at all, was seen as a sinful episode for which their shrinking populations would be atoning until they too disappeared.

Is it too late now to pledge loyalty to the Earth, the fundamental demand of Nietzsche's Zarathustra? Did the philosopher suspect anything of what we now see and expect under names like "climate change" and the Anthropocene? We can find a few tantalizing suggestions. In notebooks from around 1882, when composing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche wrote: "We ought to preserve the evil, just as we ought to preserve the forest. It's true that by thinning and clearing the forest the Earth will become warmer" (KSA 10:191). So global warming was not beyond the limits of his imagination. Later I will return to the theme of the forest. Nietzsche had strong scientific interests, and around the time he wrote this note, he was reading and annotating books on human geography, notably Friedrich Ratzel's *Anthropo-Geographie*.

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² Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" in *The Birth of Tragedy and other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speiers. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. P. 141.



There's another warning about the Earth in *Zarathustra's* chapter "*Von grosse Ereignisse*," where Nietzsche's hero tells the fire-hound "The Earth...has a skin; and this skin has diseases. One of these diseases is called, for example, 'humanity.'" Now the skin-disease has spread and embedded itself widely and deeply enough to leave irreversible scarring. Geologists name our era the Anthropocene. If humans were to disappear, alien geologists millions of years from now would still observe the Anthropocenic stratum we have added, including evidence like the sixth great extinction and nuclear explosions.

How odd that just when we begin to understand our massive entanglement with the natural world, we must ask whether it's too late to preserve the metastable, shifting equilibria that condition human memory, history, and legend. As perpetrators and spectators of the massive extinction, we hope to preserve rare seeds and clone extinct animals from their frozen remains. Hegel said the owl of Minerva takes flight only at twilight. Philosophy paints its gray on gray as the shades of night are falling. We come to know where we've been and how we've gotten here, only when the process is complete, yielding to a new phase. The great idealist turned to a bird's story - a familiar analogy from natural history - as he sought a metaphor for the hinge or caesura of past and future. Of course, he spoke of a human history that he imagined taking place in a relatively permanent natural setting. Will future philosophers, should there be any, require a footnote to explain the behavior of the vanished owl species?

Today we can't take weather or climate for granted. Different climes - what the Greek Hippocratic text calls "airs and places" - were topics of obsessive interest for Nietzsche. He called himself a human barometer, traveling nomadically, seeking favorable seasonal climates. Now the climate is changing, seas are rising, the probability of increased, more intensive storms is growing. The conditions allowing humans to spread across the Earth, cultivating the land, pursuing technology, and concentrating themselves in mega-cities are on the verge of a tipping point. If any survivors remain after the feared collapse, they may look back on the 12,000 years or so between the last ice age and the disaster as the Earth's fleeting halcyon days. Some might dream of a recurrence to be repeated when the great hour glass of existence is turned over.

Nietzsche persistently explored the question of Earth's future, deploying a variety of styles and perspectives. Consider the contrast between two ways in which Nietzsche interrogates the future and futurity of the Earth. There is the great, complex, multi-season landscape poem *Zarathustra* and its more prosaic, argumentative, negative version *Beyond Good and Evil*. One points to a mythical, cyclical pattern, the other to an irreversible stratum in a temporally linear geological accumulation. One involves conceptual and scientific analysis, the other is literary and imaginative. I want to comment on a pair of recent books by different authors that approach the theme in these two ways, one more theoretical, one more imaginative (fortunately each is informed by the other mode). On the scientific side there is Bruno Latour's *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climate Regime* (2017). The more explicitly literary and imaginative work is Richard Powers's novel *The Overstory* (2018). I'll attempt to think Nietzsche's "great politics of the Earth" through these books.

Latour's conception of the Terrestrial is close to what Nietzsche calls the human earth (*Menschen-Erde*). Latour's Terrestrial is understood as a political attractor or focus, distinguished from the more conventional but now outdated poles of the Global and the Local. The Global is roughly the goal of neo-liberal policies and practices, as accelerated



in recent decades. It would subject as much of the Earth as possible to the market's regime; resources, including humans, are exploited for the sake of maximum growth, with little or no regard for the consequences of generalized exploitation. The Global is the neo-liberal analogue of the *Welt* in Hegel's *Weltgeschichte* or Hartmann's *Weltprozess*. In reaction, many make a stand for the Local, defending regional traditions, customs, political and economic relations. But both Global and Local are impossible today. The Global project encounters disastrous consequences of unlimited growth. The Local has ceased to be a viable alternative. It no longer offers a secure refuge, disturbed as it is by neo-liberal economic incursions and disruptions of land, air, and sea caused by unrestrained industrialism. The Terrestrial is the humanly inhabited Earth in its complexity, an Earth that responds to human projects in unexpected, unpredictable ways. For Latour it is a question of scale. I quote:

It makes no sense to force the beings animating the struggling territories that constitute the Terrestrial back inside national, regional, ethnic, or identity boundaries; nor does it make sense to try to withdraw from these territorial struggles so as to "move to the global level" and grasp the Earth "as a whole." The subversion of scales and of temporal and spatial frontiers defines the Terrestrial. This power acts everywhere at once, but it is not unifying. It is political, yes; but it is not statist. It is, literally, atmospheric (L 93).

Nietzsche develops similar critiques of both globalism and localism. In his second *Unmodern Observation*, he attacks the Global, ridiculing Eduard von Hartmann's *Weltprozess*, a peculiar amalgam of Hegelian philosophy of history and Schopenhauerian ethics. Hartmann thought that the modern world was humanity's last phase, the attempt to achieve happiness through science, industry, and commerce. Writing in the 1860s he thought it likely that this process would be led by American oligarchs, which he called a "republican pyramid" with (doubtless) unconscious proleptic irony. This last great cultural and political attempt to achieve earthly happiness was a goal that the Schopenhauerian Hartmann deemed impossible. This pessimistic analysis might be mapped onto current discontent with how the internet encourages work and commerce to colonize increasing swaths of daily life, while social media enable mobbing, deception, hysteria, and envious comparison with "friends" or "frenemies." If this is the Global, Nietzsche wants no part of it. Yet we might say that he did respond to Hartmann's raising the question of Earth's future direction.

In the same essay Nietzsche exhibits two apparently contrasting attitudes toward the Local. His analysis of antiquarian history, fixated on the regional and specific, explains how it can, at best, be a form of honoring and preserving a genuine heritage, yet may degenerate into mindlessly clutching the past's useless furniture. Here too Nietzsche explains beautifully how any genuine, original culture requires a nurturing, supportive *atmosphere* to take root and flourish. What happens then when we destroy the atmosphere? In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche deploys withering sarcasm, portraying the "blood and soil" advocates of his day as suffering from *Schollenleberei*. He sees that European populations are increasingly nomadic as workers adapt to diverse employment in various settings - a point easily extended to other continents and intercontinental movements, including the migrations of political and climate refugees. Nietzsche deconstructs the binary opposition of Global and Local. Neither fulfills its promise. The way forward is not the glitzy promise of globalizing

neo-liberalism or its negative version, the mass suicide envisioned by Hartmann. The Local is no longer what it claims to be and will never regain the aura with which nostalgia adorns it in the age of cascading climate change (so much for the evil clown president's slogan "Make America Great Again").

I've suggested that Latour's geo-ethics and geo-politics represents a latter-day version of Nietzsche's great politics of the Earth. In *Nietzsche's Earth* I read Nietzsche in terms of a contrast between world and earth (*Welt* and *Erde*). *Welt* is the world of world-history, composed of national states, their unity and destiny modeled on theological categories (as Carl Schmitt pointed out later). The *Erde* or *Menschen-Erde* (human earth) is a plane of immanence, irreducibly plural, involving mobile populations and changing landscapes. To comprehend the contrast, I've elsewhere examined some of Nietzsche's associated analytical categories, such as the conceptual pairs of masses/multitude, state/nomad, mortgaged time/time of opportunity (*kairos*), garden/wasteland (*Nietzsche's Earth: Great Events, Great Politics*).

Latour's manifesto coheres with this analysis. I read it in conjunction with Richard Powers's novel *The Overstory*, suggesting that we can discern a certain attunement with Nietzsche's song of the earth, *Zarathustra*. There he poses the opposition between the wasteland proclaimed by the prophet (*Wahrsager*) and the garden revealed by eagle and serpent as waiting for the convalescent who's been struggling with his abysmal thought.

The Overstory, as the title suggests, operates on multiple levels. It assembles a disparate set of Americans, coming from different places and backgrounds. All have life-changing experiences involving trees. One group comes together in the 1990s dedicated to saving America's great Pacific Northwest forests from predatory logging interests. The characters are moved by the deteriorating natural environment, focusing on deforestation and accompanying ecological degradation. The wasteland here results from devastating tree disease and thoughtless logging; the garden is found in rich old forests with growths of gigantic redwood trees. The main characters have in effect pledged their loyalty to the Earth. Some become environmental activists. They live in anarchic forest camps, demonstrate, are beaten and arrested. One pair lives for a year high up in the redwoods, blocking industrial timber pirates from felling them. They discover a surprisingly diverse ecosystem in the forest canopy - an overstory. A few turn to sabotage and arson, accidentally killing one of their fivesome in a bombing. The groupuscule disperses, knowing they're sought as environmental terrorists. One who lives almost as a hermit is discovered by a US agent in deep disguise. He makes a problematic judgment to inform on just one of his group. That one, spotted by an informer at Occupy Wall Street, chooses life imprisonment rather than implicate others.

One character, Patricia Westerford, is an ungainly young girl, partially deaf, and socially awkward. Her early love of plants is fostered by her father, an agricultural extension agent. When Patricia's fourteen, he gives her a young person's edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and she's transfixed by the first line: "Let me sing to you now, about how people turn into things." Patricia is especially fascinated by stories of humans changing into trees: Daphne, the Maenads attacking Orpheus, Cyparissus, Myrrha, and especially Baucis and Philemon, "spending the centuries together as oak and linden, their reward for taking in strangers who turned out to be gods" (O 117). She reads the passage at her father's funeral. Eventually, Patricia becomes a forest botanist and dendrologist. She is a pioneer of a new



tree science, a science we learn as we follow her research on the ground. The trees communicate rhizomatically with each other and with their ecological systems. Patricia writes:

Forests mend and shape themselves through subterranean synapses. And in shaping themselves, they shape, too, the tens of thousands of other, linked creatures that form it from within. Maybe it's useful to think of forests as enormous, spreading, branching, underground super-trees. (O 218)

Another character, Nick Hoel grew up on an Iowa farm that's long been in his family. The gem here is a magnificent chestnut tree that somehow survives the blight eliminating its species across the continent. Eighty years ago, Nick's ancestors began taking monthly photos of the tree. When assembled they form a flip-book condensing its impressive growth into a few minutes. After the rest of the family dies in a terrible accident, Nick turns to making "tree art," depicting trees or incorporating them into sculptures and paintings. In the meantime, on the eastern edge of the continent Olivia, a restless young woman living an aimless life, experiences near-death through electrocution. Now spectral voices summon her to travel West to dedicate herself to the ancient life at risk there. She encounters Nick on her cross-country drive, they join forces and arrive together in the Pacific Northwest as eco-activists.

I share these narrative snippets to provide an elementary sense of this long, sprawling book's complex system of roots and branches. These vignettes may obscure two crucial dimensions of this imaginative novel of the Anthropocene. One is what we might call *The Overstory's* main character: the collective of trees and forests that enable thriving but threatened eco-systems and act as attractors for the diverse set of human beings drawn to love and protect them. Nietzsche readers could think of these people as analogous to the Higher Humans who gather by their individual routes at Zarathustra's cave. Both groups are provoked by distress at the current state of the Earth.

A second dimension of *The Overstory* that's likely obscured by reducing it to conventional narrative is its transformation of the sense of time. Those drawn to defense of the great trees come to realize how those forests' time-spans dwarf human lives. Their once predictable biographies and careers are thrown into disarray by threatened ecological disaster, overturning the ecological adjustments of millennia. The clever animals' civilization registers as a blip between the last ice age and emerging climate change. The characters begin to de-narrativize themselves, seeing their individual lives as equivalent to milliseconds of Earth's long history, a history better recorded by geology and tree rings than in the written chronicles of human history. We hear Nietzschean resonances. Think of his contrast between parochial *Weltgeschichte* and the *longue durée* of *Hauptgeschichte* even with respect to the human race. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* enact analogous temporal transformations. Alcyone surrenders her one mortal human span as she becomes a bird species whose annual nesting cycle marks its endurance. The humans who become trees, like Baucis and Philemon, will enjoy eternal contemplation or companionship.

Adam Appich ends up in the anarchic camp as part of his doctoral psychology project. He's intrigued by the "bystander effect," human beings' tendency to recognize a severe problem while assuming someone else will supply a remedy. Why not study the few exceptions, those who don't passively accommodate themselves? *Adam* - so he's named -

is initiated into a great *garden*, joining a pair living high in the canopy. Life is precarious, dangerous, full of challenging tests and discovery. Simple human functions, like eating, sleeping, sex, and excretion become problematic and challenging. Naturally he is enthralled by the new form of life he experiences in the overstory, joins their circle for a while. After the fatal bomb accident, he returns to academia to build a satisfying university career and happy personal life. Ten years later the informer identifies him in a staged "chance" encounter at Occupy Wall Street. Sentenced to 140 years in prison, Adam refuses to shorten his sentence by revealing others. "He thinks: seventy plus seventy is nothing. A black willow plus a wild cherry. He was thinking oak. He was thinking Douglas-fir or yew. Seventy plus seventy. With reductions for good behavior he might even finish out the first half of the sentence just in time to die" (O 471). Earlier, the narrative voice observes:

people have no idea what time is. They think it's a line spinning out from three seconds behind them, then vanishing just as fast into the three seconds of fog just ahead. They can't see that time is one spreading ring wrapped around another, outward and outward until the thinnest skin of *Now* depends for its being on the enormous mass of everything that has already died (O 358).

Nietzsche too negotiated and imagined many different times and speeds. These temporal modes exist alongside his signature concept of eternal recurrence and are not displaced by it. The century's early years had already seen the consolidation of geological and paleontological discoveries of strata and fossils testifying to Earth's deep time. These prepared the way for Darwin's concrete account of evolution. As early as 1865 Nietzsche was wrestling with Hegel's *Weltgeschichte*, which he came to see as pretentious Eurocentric narcissism substituting itself for a fuller, more plural take on the past. Each of the *Unmodern Observations* aims at undercutting modernist metanarrative, whether Strauss's nationalistic triumphalism, Hartmann's bleak picture of modernity's melancholy realization, or the jabbering of journalists and "public intellectuals" who inflate the minor news of the day with gaseous meaning. In the last of the series, Nietzsche spoke of a new way of marking time by "great events," unexpected and unprecedented breaks introducing new eras. Although he soon abandoned his identification of the latest "great event" with Wagner's supposed consolidation of Western culture, "great events" surface again in *Zarathustra's* eponymous chapter. In Nietzsche's texts we frequently encounter his respect for the slow growth of life and cultures, along with his realization that contemporary industrial society is becoming obsessed with an Americanizing speed of growth, productivity, and a narrow efficiency.

Beyond Good and Evil is a prolegomenon to a philosophy of futurity, the *Zu-kunft*, offering free spirits critical categories for thinking beyond their present. It reminds them in Machiavellian fashion to vigilantly watch for the *kairos*, the opportune moment that must be seized by the forelock as it rushes by. In the *Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche argues that civilization is made possible by internalizing guilt and debt. To bear guilt that must be repented or debt that must be repaid is to mortgage one's time. Humans continue to be ingenious in devising such amortization schemes, even passing on the debt to successor generations. By the time of the *Genealogy*, and more acutely in *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche is increasingly aware of acceleration. As the former theology student and close friend of Franz Overbeck well knew, the Christian thematic of the Antichrist and what Paul enigmatically calls the restraining (*katechon*), all have to do with speeding up and slowing



down. In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche spoke metaphorically of earthquakes shaking the cultural and political world; in the Anthropocene we daily observe a cascading series of earthquakes, storms, floods, and fires that constitute an earthly analogue of the Antichrist's coming.

So Nietzsche is no stranger to the time of the long run. His early notes on eternal recurrence propose that those transformed by the thought will now assume the task of teaching it over a period of millennia, a span equivalent to that needed for the growth of a great forest. Zarathustra compares the nurturing of his "children," those he's inspired, to the extended work of cultivating a "living plantation." His children are now "still becoming green for me in their first spring, standing close together and shaken in common by the winds, the trees of my garden and my finest soil." Eventually, he says, each of these tree children can be dug up and replanted "that it might learn solitude and defiance and caution" (III.3). When Zarathustra dreams of weighing the world it's "as if a tree waved to me, broad-branched, strong-willed, bent down like an arm-rest and even like a foot-rest for one weary of the way" (III.10.1). Let us live for the future in a grand tree, Zarathustra calls to his friends: "In the tree called *Zukunft* we build our nests; eagles shall bring to us lonely one's victuals in their beaks!...like strong winds we would live above [the unclean], neighbors to eagles, neighbors to snow, neighbors to the sun" (II.6). These words evoke an atmosphere like the idyllic yet precarious sojourn of the eco-activists in the forest canopy. The free spirit is a "dweller in forests" (II.8). *Zarathustra* is a book of trees and gardens planted with the future in mind. The rose-apples that Zarathustra anticipates from the trees he loves materialize in "The Convalescent," fetched by eagle and serpent who tell him that the world awaits him as a garden.

Nietzsche occasionally speculates about remaking some aspects of the Earth - cultivating his garden. A few aphorisms project the possibility of a "great tree of humanity," an Earth organized in terms of "medical geography." Here individuals and groups could find the environments where they would flourish best, given their specific constitutions (WS 188-189). The "great tree" would be a green efflorescence of the planet, a great garden of extensive living space, an amalgam of environmentally conscious construction and reforestation. Perhaps the coming garden will be a giant tree canopy over the Earth.

Could the *Übermensch* be the gardener of Earth's great tree? As I read Nietzsche, we must exclude any Gnostic conception of the *Übermensch*. By a Gnostic conception, I mean one that would see the *Übermensch*, once constituted, as no longer having any necessary, essential involvement with the Earth. Nietzsche's radical emphasis on futurity as real, open, and unpredictable is deeply central to his political thought, overshadowing any speculations about eugenics or the overman's specific characteristics. The *Übermensch*, should be understood in terms of Nietzsche's analysis of the limits of the concept of *Mensch*. In his genealogical discussion of promising and debt economy he derives *Mensch* from Sanskrit *manas*, meaning "measurer," suggesting that humans in the era of civilization (condition of the Anthropocene) have always been involved in mortgaging their future. Like *The Overstory's* eco-activists the *Übermensch* is free from the all too measured time of self-destructive civilization. Zarathustra's speech in the marketplace - and the Global is nothing but a marketplace - describes the last human as the one who makes the Earth small by measuring the immeasurable.

In contrast Zarathustra speaks of "new peoples" who will serve the sense of the Earth. They have comprehended futurity: "Unexhausted are the human and the human earth even now." The Earth itself, Zarathustra prophesies, will yet become a "site of convalescence" (I.22.2). "On Old and New Tablets" pronounces this about the future, using the provocation of the earthquake: "it will not be long before *new peoples* arise and new sources rush downwards into new depths. For the earthquake - that covers many wells with debris, and creates much languishing; but it also brings inner strengths and secrets up to the light. The earthquake makes manifest new sources" (III.12.25). We can read the shaking of the Earth as any major change or convulsion, events that scramble our situation, confronting us with the precarity of the customary and the unexpected opportunities suddenly revealed.

Will the overman's be men and women dwelling in the overstory, in the great tree of humanity? I mean this as an *open* question, not a conclusion. Will there be other metamorphoses beyond the camel, lion, and child that Zarathustra announces? In a late expedition in a Brazilian jungle Patricia Westerford, the *Overstory's* pioneering tree scientist encounters a remarkable tree whose bark has mysteriously and naturally assumed a woman's face and form. With Ovid in mind she thinks of such phenomena as "Memories posted forward from people standing on the shore of the great human departure from everything else that lives" (O 394). Later we see Patricia, now aged and infirm, at what may be her last lecture. After laying out the coming terrors of climate change, she hesitates before the audience, pondering whether she should conclude by taking fatal poison she's prepared from forest substances. Patricia has completed her work. As Zarathustra says, it's important to die at the right time and that death be celebrated with new festivals. The novel wisely leaves us free to imagine both endings.

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Citations from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* are by division, chapter, and numbered subchapter

