

# Desertification and Metaphysics in Nietzsche and Abbey

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The thought of Friedrich Nietzsche has been called anti-anti-naturalistic. It is not mere naturalism, nor is Nietzsche's body of work simply aligned with the reaction against naturalism. While a tacit admiration for such figures, such "strong, independent spirits" as Plato and Kant (Kant the paradigmatic anti-naturalist, Plato a more difficult case) is surely present, Nietzsche's desire to make something new in and of the history of philosophy led him to roundly criticize their ilk. A conscious rhetorical distancing, from either of two given forces within history, and central to Nietzsche. The problem of nature and naturalism is the paradox of a dual immanence, of culture in nature and nature in culture. The 'sourcing' of the one into the other is, alternately, naturalism and antinaturalism; nature as giving the rule to culture, or culture apart from nature and in many ways governing it indeed. Nietzsche is inclined to read a false antinomy into this distinction, thus revealing in his reading of nature his prototypical methodology.

Edward Abbey, 20th century heir to Thoreau, enjoys a Nietzschean encounter with the two "natures" aforementioned in his *Desert Solitaire*. The book's lyricism and readability has rendered it ripe for cooption by those disinclined to read the philosophy out of the prose, establishing a firm bond with both Thoreau and Nietzsche. For these writers style is substance, in this they stand out in the history of philosophy. Both Nietzsche and Abbey, on whom I will focus, always mean what they say, though deciding exactly what it is they are saying is a task of great difficulty, and of a very different kind from that found in the case of Kant or Hegel. The Nietzschean methodological move mentioned above is one I wish to read into Abbey, and its implications, one I see as arising explicitly out of the anti-anti-naturalistic

stance.

Early in *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey states his anti-anti-naturalistic intentions:

Like a god, like an ogre? The personification of the natural is exactly the tendency I wish to suppress in myself, to eliminate for good. I am here not only to evade for a while the clamor and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus but also to confront, immediately and directly if it's possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us. I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, anti-Kantian, even the categories of scientific description. To meet God or Medusa face to face, even if it means risking everything human in myself. I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a nonhuman world and yet somehow survives intact, individual, separate. Paradox and bedrock.<sup>iii</sup>

The Nietzschean tension of the dual immanence of nature is here palpable; the desire of the subject to merge with nature (the world, Other) and still maintain its own integrity, its self-intelligibility. Is this, though a paradox, possible? The advantages of both are obvious, and Nietzsche (and Abbey after him) seems to be asking, in his particular way, can we not have both?

Nietzsche's method would seem to say, 'perhaps.' Not in a concrete manner, however, for part and parcel of Nietzsche's method is the critique of "the doer behind the deed," ensuring that "The form is fluid, but the 'meaning' is even more so."<sup>iv</sup> This conjoined with his assertion that

...purposes or utilities are only *signs* that a will to power has become master of something less powerful and imposed upon it the character of a function; and the entire history of a "thing," an organ, a cus-

tom can in this way be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related to one another but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion.<sup>v</sup>

results in a picture of understanding (and meaning)-in-the-world. This 'resolution' of the anti-anti-naturalistic paradox seems to create another antinomy that, unlike the dialectical Kantian antinomy, is held up vibrating with conflict into the air, a sort of totem. The problem of nature's dual immanence becomes analogous to, if not largely equivalent with, the problem of meaning, interpretation, and truth. Truth in the old sense, a static 'form' behind the world (whether that be nature or culture) is something Nietzsche, as is obvious, discards. He still speaks of 'truth,' though in a manner similar to his use of the word meaning.

That is, the fluid sign-chain of interpretation that is a given subject's moment in history can be adapted in ways that are not all created equal. He condemns a tendency he sees in "modern historiography;" "...it rejects all teleology; it no longer wishes to 'prove' anything; it disdains to play the judge and considers this a sign of good taste..."<sup>vi</sup> All this would seem to arise necessarily out of the aforementioned, and Nietzsche admits to this in the same breath he critiques it. Nietzsche writes that the will to power in man "would rather will *nothingness* than *not* will."<sup>vii</sup> And concludes the *Genealogy* with an assertion that "Man, the bravest of animals and the one most accustomed to suffering, does not repudiate suffering as such; he *desires* it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a *meaning* for it, a *purpose* of suffering."<sup>viii</sup> Thus a necessity of meaning is, paradoxically, injected into the picture of an always already interpreted, "relativistic," world. What demands this meaning (Derrida: "coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire."<sup>ix</sup>) is the will, and it is the will to power by which it can be measured, evaluated, interpreted.

The discussion of suffering above arises in the context of remarks on the adoption of ascetic ideals as man's best option to date, this after sixty pages of criticism. Adoption of the ascetic ideal is a case of willing nothingness, rather than facing the alternative. There is, for Nietzsche, a better option. In *Beyond Good and Evil* he writes:

To translate man back into nature; to become master over the many vain and overly enthusiastic interpretations and connotations that have so far been scrawled and painted over that eternal basic text of *homo natura*; to see to it that man henceforth stands before man as even today, hardened in the discipline of science, he stands before the *rest* of nature, with intrepid Oedipus eyes and sealed Odysseus ears, deaf to the siren songs of old metaphysical bird catchers who have been piping at him all too long, 'you are more, you are higher, you are of a different origin!' - that may be a strange and insane task, but it is a *task* - who would deny that? Why did we choose this insane task? Or, putting it differently: 'why have knowledge at all?'<sup>x</sup>

It, the interpretation *for* meaning, becomes at once the assumption of the most (best?) insane question and its most rigorous and committed actualization. Committed, again in the sense that "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming...,"<sup>xi</sup> gives a dynamic picture of interpretation. Perhaps to reach the ideal of the elimination of the doer, and to in turn embody that ideal to the point that it drops away, one must suffer through this insane task. Here the desert may be necessary.

All this is inextricably bound up with the paradoxical "nature" of nature, as described by Abbey. It arises out of the problematic situation that is being-in-the-world. Nietzsche and Abbey share a proclivity, a desire, to point out that the task of "translating man back into nature" is as necessary as it is insane. Abbey writes "A civilization which

destroys what little remains of the wild, the spare, the original, is cutting itself off from its origins and betraying the principle of civilization itself.<sup>xii</sup> It moves to eliminate suffering, and the desert. What this principle is, I will come to momentarily and it will surely and again be shot through with paradox. Perhaps this, this problem of the dual immanence of nature, this source of paradox, is the original "riddle of the sphinx."

The desire for 'coherence in contradiction,' for meaning in interpretation, for truth in becoming, is pulled out of the dual immanence of nature. Humans are in nature, "in all her prodigal and indifferent magnificence which is outrageous but noble."<sup>xiii</sup> That is, in something vast and without purpose. It is human desire, will to power, the "nature" in man that obliges, forces with violence the interpretation with an intent that results in coherence, both within a subject and between subjects. This invariably does violence to the unordered 'order,' what Nietzsche called 'the primordial unity,' that is mere being-in-the-world. However, this "mere" is not sufficient, it does not satisfy the demand of the will to power, does not allow for the meaningful, meaning creating discharge of the will to power.<sup>xiv</sup> This violence is inevitable. Nietzsche writes:

Consider any morality with this in mind: what there is in it of 'nature' teaches hatred of the *laissez aller*, of any all-to-great freedom, and implants the need for limited horizons and the nearest task-teaching the narrowing of our perspective, and thus in a certain sense stupidity, as a condition of life and growth.<sup>xv</sup>

This self-limiting, self-imposed adoption of 'morality,' of an ideal, is the necessary and agonistic resolution of the dual immanence of nature. The violence it does to the subject's relation to the world is an inevitability, the concern only that it is taken through fully and with commitment. Nietzsche writes:

"You shall obey - someone and for a long time: else you will perish and lose the last respect for yourself" - this appears to me to be the moral imperative of nature which, to be sure, is neither "categorical" as the old Kant would have it (hence the "else") nor addressed to the individual (what do individuals matter to her?), but to peoples, races, ages, classes - but above all to the whole human animal, to *man*.<sup>xvi</sup>

This demand, instantiated by nature through culture (and nature's immanence in culture), creates in the conditions of the meaningful existence of humanity, and therefore human existence as such, a paradox. One that cannot be escaped.

This paradox is inherent in existence as such because it gives man the power to interpret, to create meaning; it gives the will to power. As Nietzsche writes:

In man *creature* and *creator* are united: in man there is material, fragment, excess, clay, dirt, nonsense, chaos; but in man there is also creator, formgiver, hammer hardness, spectator divinity, and seventh day: do you understand this contrast?<sup>xvii</sup>

If the creative potential in man is the only way of defining himself, the only interpreter, and this only comes out of a conscious turning away from his immanence in nature, then the paradoxical circle is complete. Humanity's meaning, existence, is founded on a turning away from that is at the same time a turning towards. The promise of meaning that is the primordial unity is merely a promise; humanity must, in this case, create their own promises in action. They must desertify, go into the desert that is heartless, that is a brick-walled riddle, thereby escaping a society which invariably enforces the old modes of meaning-creation. Embracing suffering as meaning, either physically or in the mind, is the desert. It is only subsumed in paradox, within

the desert, that meaning and interpretation, a new metaphysics, begins. Though the desert is always something to be eventually left, or forgotten.

When, in the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche mentions desert, it is briefly. A quarter of the way through his treatment of ascetic ideals in the Third Essay, he writes of the value of ascetic ideals for the "free spirit," that they provide motivation to "...all those resolute men who one day said No to all servitude and went into some *desert*: even supposing they were merely strong asses and quite the reverse of a strong spirit."<sup>xviii</sup> Nietzsche does not deny that this strength of mind, of will, is valuable and something to be admired, even if the direction of that will, its reason, is misguided. This relates strongly to Nietzsche's stance on ascetic ideals; he does not condemn them as such, they represent what to date has been the best option for humanity, the best method for the 'insane task.' The desert, as mentioned in the epigraph, need not even be a place. It is in Nietzsche a place for and of the consciousness, 'heartless,' where "no actor of the spirit could possibly endure life."<sup>xix</sup>

Abbey has certainly been painted as just such a strong ass. His book illustrates that the difference between being an ass and a spirit is exceedingly fine. As Abbey writes, "there is a way of being wrong which is also necessarily right."<sup>xx</sup> What this is for Nietzsche, as regards ascetic ideals, is that the cooption of such ideals is as aforementioned not necessarily negative, though the dominant ideals of the modern age most certainly are. It is the purity and strength of these ideals' initial presentation, such as in the Old Testament where the desert looms large, that Nietzsche finds so appealing. It is the perversion of these ideals that he finds so odious, and therein lies his condemnation of Plato, Christianity, and "the Germans." It is echoed in Abbey's condemnation of contemporary industrialism: "This is a courageous view, admirable in its simplicity and power, and with the weight of all modern history behind it. It is also quite insane. I cannot attempt to deal with it here."<sup>xxi</sup>

Indeed. And in much the same way as Nietzsche

does not critique Kant on Kant's own terms, impenetrable task that it was constructed to be, Abbey does not engage with his object of ire in its own realm. He retreats, literally, to the desert, using it like Thoreau did as a symbolic catalyst towards the state Nietzsche described as a *desert*. Abbey's "isolation" was as profound as Thoreau's; the latter was often seen galumphing across the fields to the Emerson's on hearing the dinner bell. However, Abbey's reflections on the desert parallel Nietzsche's, in a way that reflects the latter's ultimate criticism of ascetic ideals. Just as Abbey's conclusion that the desert has no heart, that "its surface is also the essence"<sup>xxii</sup> results in a different view of truth implicit in the ceasing to be of any quest, so too does Nietzsche see in the externalizing tendencies of the ascetic ideal a violation, a tacit 'doer' tacked onto the deed. Nietzsche writes "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!" Abbey calls the industrial ideal 'courageous' for this reason; it has a profound faith in itself and the ends it pursues. Despite this, there are reasons to reject it. Similarly with Abbey's quest to 'understand the desert,' as long as he looks for a 'meaning' or 'truth' behind what he is standing in, Abbey fails to 'see' the meaning of most value: the one that views each moment as itself the meaning. This in turn reveals the infinite chain of meanings/interpretations present in-the-world.

Nietzsche sees an ascetic journey, whether actual or psychic, as at base false. It extrapolates an exterior 'meaning' from being-in-the-world, which is invariably a kind of trick. Just as Abbey's creation of a desert in his mind distracted him and alienated him from the desert he was standing in, so too do ascetic ideals isolates man from his own life. In this way, Abbey's initial asceticism in *Desert Solitaire* can be seen as similar to that of industrialism. The ascetic move must be overcome, and perhaps the desertifying move through asceticism is the only way to found such a new metaphysics of immediacy.

But can this occur? Can this return to bedrock really,



as Abbey dreams, resolve the paradox of the dual immanence of nature? Will it allow the subject to become self-identical with the world at large? This last bit of rhetoric demonstrates how quickly absurdity is here reached. It must be remembered that, as Abbey writes, "the desert is also a-tonal, cruel, clear, inhuman, neither romantic nor classical, motionless and émotionless, at one and the same time - another paradox - both agonized and deeply still."<sup>xxiii</sup> The desert is irreducible and irresolvable, a paradigm of nature as it is faced by culture, by man. It may be that in Nietzsche the origin of the nature/culture bifurcation, which for Derrida<sup>xxiv</sup> among others is foundational to philosophy as we have known it, begins when this base paradox is denied, when simplification and unneeded consolidation occur in one direction or another. This casts Nietzsche's moral critique in a very foundational light, one which (paradoxically) admits that at the deepest level of critique is the simplest of maxims. Not mere *laisser aller*, but a self-ordered relevance within the world that is simpler because it is sensical, sensible in the generic valence. Philosophy, after all, can be simple, and never easy. Like the desert.

This is reflected in the works under consideration. Both Nietzsche and Abbey were brilliant stylists, and *Beyond Good and Evil*, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, and *Desert Solitaire* represent the apex of their mutual attempts to embody their philosophies within their literary efforts. Much has been made of how both authors contradict themselves often, and how this lends itself to oversimplified misinterpretation by those readers not as exacting as Nietzsche himself called for. There are profound differences between the two, Nietzsche far outreaches Abbey as a thinker (or missionary), while the genres in which they were working makes a literary comparison facile and pointless. Most important are the intersections, their stances concerning nature as detailed above, and the variegated paradox it dictated, as one commentator has noted, applies to Nietzsche as much as Abbey:

The polyphonic voice of *Desert Solitaire* makes it difficult for opponents to identify and attack the center out of which Abbey's discourse flows; the multiple voices help defuse the resistance of the skeptical reader...Because Abbey's celebratory tone bonds...to an ironic one which acknowledges the problematic status of a reverent attitude in the postmodern world, the book becomes an alloy of distinctive strength.<sup>xxv</sup>

The so-called 'multiple voices' of both Abbey and Nietzsche are not separate devices after the fashion of Kierkegaard, but rather a manifestation of the enormous breadth of these two writers. They are, to paraphrase Whitman, 'vast, and contain multitudes.' This, the enormous, contradictory nature of which both Abbey and Nietzsche sees themselves as immanent in, is the source of this "postmodern," decentered method of speaking so central to both. Morris is correct in seeing this as a great strength.

This is what is most 'basic' to Nietzschean metaphysics, a critiqued metaphysics etched by blown sand, from the desert that is man's strength, his move through suffering to meaning-in-the-world. The ability to see, to move as Abbey did outside the culture that created him and take up something that, while it is likely harder, is also surely better. As Nietzsche wrote in the *Nachlass*, "I also speak of a 'return to nature' although it is not actually a 'return back,' but an 'advance towards' the strong, bright, frightful nature and naturalness of men who can play with great tasks, because they would become tired with small ones and feel disgusted."<sup>xxvi</sup> The conscious move into the desert is, as it was for Abbey, a move chasing an abstract and therefore false ideal which in the end brings about the dissolution of such ideals by virtue of the sheer harsh force brought to bear on the subject. The desert, in Abbey and Nietzsche, is a purifying place, cutting being-in-the-world down to just that, for its own sake.

## Notes

- i Friedrich Nietzsche. *On the Genealogy of Morals* in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 2000); 545.
- ii Edward Abbey. *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (New York: Touchstone, 1990); 243.
- iii Abbey; 6.
- iv OGM; 514.
- v OGM; 513.
- vi OGM; 593.
- vii OGM; 533.
- viii OGM; 598.
- ix Jacques Derrida. "Structure, Sign and Play in the discourse of the Human Sciences" in *Writing and Difference*. trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978); 279.
- x Nietzsche. *Beyond Good and Evil* in *Basic Writings*; 351-2
- xi OGM; 481.
- xii Abbey; 169.
- xiii BGE; 291.
- xiv BGE; 291.
- xv BGE; 291-2.
- xvi BGE; 292.
- xvii BGE; 344.
- xviii OGM; 543.
- xix OGM; 545.
- xx Abbey; xii.
- xxi Abbey; 47
- xxii Abbey; 27.
- xxiii Abbey; 255.
- xxiv see Derrida. "Structure..."; 283-4.
- xxv David Copland Morris. "Celebration and Irony: The Polyphonic Voice of Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*" in *Western American Literature*; 25.
- xxvi quoted in Wayne Klein's *Nietzsche and the Promise of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); 177.

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