NIETZSCHE ON THE REAL

1

Nietzsche deploys his critique in particular against philosophical reason. Philosophers are accused of lacking a ‘historical sense’ and of harbouring ‘a hatred even of the idea of becoming’. Their technique is deadening since ‘nothing actual has escaped from their hands alive’. They ignore history as process, as ‘[D]eath, change, age, as well as procreation and growth’, which are for them ‘objections – refutations even’, so that ‘[W]hat is, does not *become*; what becomes, *is* not’.

According to Nietzsche, philosophers believe, even to the point of despair, in that which is. But since they cannot get hold of it, they look for reasons why it is being withheld from them:

A. ‘It must be an illusion, a deception which prevents us from perceiving that which is (*das Seiende*): where is the deceiver to be found?’ – ‘We’ve got it’, they cry in delight, ‘it is the senses! These senses, *which are so immoral as well*, it is they which deceive us about the *real* world. Moral: escape from sense-deception, from becoming, from history, from falsehood’. (*Twilight of the Idols*, transl. R. J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, 35)

2

Nietzsche insists that it is reason which puts the lie into the senses: ‘the lie of unity, the lie of materiality, of substance, of duration […] “Reason” is the cause of our falsification of the evidence of the senses’. But in so far as the senses ‘show becoming, passing away, change, they do not lie’. It is philosophical thought too which mistakes the last for the first by putting ‘the “highest concepts”, that is to say the most general, the emptiest concepts, the last fumes of evaporating reality, at the beginning *as* the beginning’. These highest concepts must be free of the constraints of becoming and must be *causa sui*:

B. 'Origin in something else counts as an objection, as casting a doubt on value. All supreme values are of the first rank, all the supreme concepts – that which is (*das Seiende*), the unconditioned, the good, the true, the perfect – all that cannot have become, *must* therefore be *causa sui*. […] Thus they acquired their stupendous concept “God” […] the last, thinnest, emptiest is placed as the first, as cause in itself, as *ens realissimum'* (ibid. 37)

3

It is reason and language together which delude us therefore, as the 'metaphysics of language', in that they form our naïve view of subjects and of an ordered and coherent world. Nietzsche continues that ‘metaphysics of language – which is to say, of reason’ sees the doer behind the deed and:

C. 'believes in the ego, in the ego as being, in the ego as substance, and projects its belief in the ego-substance (*die Ich-Substanz*) onto all things – only thus does it *create* the concept ‘thing’. […] Being is everywhere thought in, *foisted on*, as cause; it is only from the conception ‘ego’ that there follows the concept Being.' (ibid.)

4

For Nietzsche, the ‘error of Being’ is linked with the illusion, borne on language, of the substantiality of the self, and of its existence in a world predicated upon causality and relation: a world which sustains metaphors of a Beyond or of ‘the thing in itself’, but which is finally a chimera generated by the false and non-natural, non-immediate constructions of reason. And the concept of the divine, in alignment with the Kantian thing-in-itself, stands at the heart of that illusion:

D. 'The thing itself, to say it again, the concept ‘thing’, is merely a reflection of the belief in the ego as cause… And even your atom, *messieurs* mechanists and physicists, how much error, how much rudimentary psychology, still remains in your atom! – To say nothing of the ‘thing in itself’, that *horrendum pudendum* of the metaphysicians! The error of spirit as cause mistaken for reality! And the measure of reality! And called *God*! (ibid., 50)