NIETZSCHE'S POETHICS: POETRY AS A WAY OF LIFE IN *THE GAY SCIENCE*

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Abstract

The notion of poethics has been used to approach the way in which forms of language and forms of life are interdependent and to reveal the ethical dimension of poetics. However, the interaction must go both ways; there must not only be an ethical dimension to poetics, but also a poetic dimension to ethics. To what extent is ethics dependent on poetics? In this essay, I argue that Nietzsche's life-affirming ethics can be understood only in this poethical framework. The specificity of Nietzsche's ethics, and why it is so difficult to locate on the spectrum of ethical theories, lies in the fact that his ethics is a poetics. By focusing mainly on The Gay Science, *I explore the interaction between ethics and poetics that lies at the heart of Nietzsche's ethical thought. Both poetics and ethics involve the question of value, and a poetic ethics (a poethics) reveals that the creation of ethical value is something necessarily poetic. Nietzsche's ethics of creation is not a mere theory, but a poetic way of life.*

Keywords: Nietzsche, poethics, poetry, ethics, morality, immoralism, value

> *Why is it then that I have never yet encountered anybody, not even in books, who approached morality in this personal way and who knew morality as a problem, and this problem as his own personal distress, torment, voluptuousness, and passion?* (Nietzsche 1974, 283–84)

Nietzsche's philosophy is well-known to be rather critical of morality, and especially of Christian morality. As many have noted, this criticism leads to a certain tension: while Nietzsche is suspicious of morality, he also seems to be promoting an affirmative ethics.[1] Nietzsche's "immoralism" must not shadow a positive and constructive dimension in which he aims to offer an ethical theory. Or perhaps, as often with Nietzsche, not a theory as such but some lines of thought to explore; not doctrines but signs, to Werner Stegmaier's vocabulary (Stegmaier

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[1] See for instance Maudemarie Clark's chapter "Nietzsche's Immoralism and the Concept of Morality," in which she outlines the various positions regarding the tension between immoralism and ethics in Nietzsche. (Clark 2019, 23–40)

2006). The line of thought I will explore in this essay is the relation between ethics and poethics. This relation reflects a kind of aestheticism and Robert Solomon argues that "Nietzsche's 'immoralism,' accordingly, has often been taken to rather be akin to aestheticism, that is, the thesis that ethics and ethical judgments reduce to or can be translated into aesthetics and aesthetic judgments." (Solomon 2003, 88) According to this aestheticism, ethical judgments should be grounded in aesthetic judgments. However, this view does not explain how these judgments are created: what makes the value of these aesthetic/ethical judgments?

To explore this aestheticism, I will focus specifically on poethics understood in the etymological sense of *poiesis* as making or creating. At this junction of poethics and ethics, we find what recent literary theorists have called a poethics. While it is rather common to consider that there is an ethical dimension to poethics, the poetic dimension of ethics is less intuitive. I will argue that Nietzsche precisely advocates for the poetic dimension of ethics. For him, ethical judgments are poetic in the sense that they are created (rather than given by God or the moral law for instance), and he insists on the necessity to create values in order to create oneself. In this essay, I explore the relation between poethics and ethics in three steps. First, I briefly discuss and define the notion of poethics by exploring the ethical dimension of poetic creation. Second, I discuss Nietzsche's ethics of creation and self-creation, focusing on the idea of value that bridges towards poethics. Third, I conclude by discussing Nietzsche's poethics, and how it reveals that ethics needs to be grounded in poethics.

1. Defining Poethics

French linguist Henri Meschonnic brings to the fore the relation between ethics and poethics in his definition of poetic thought: "Poetic thought comes to being, in an unforeseeable manner, only when a form of life transforms a form of language and when a form of language transforms a form of life, both inseparably.[2]" (Meschonnic 2001, 41-42) Poethics, understood as the transformation of a form of language acquires an ethical dimension insofar as it transforms a form of life. Reciprocally, ethical thought (understood as the transformation of a form of

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[2] My translation: "la pensée poétique advient, imprévisiblement, quand et seulement quand une forme de vie transforme une forme de langage et quand une forme de langage transforme une forme de vie, les deux inséparablement."

life) acquires a poetic dimension. While the first interaction seems quite usual in the sense that transformative forms of language often aim at ethical change, the converse seems less intuitive. To what extent does the transformation of a form of life involve the transformation of a form of language?

We can distinguish two trends in contemporary thought on poethics that highlight different features and influences. A first one is of Heideggerian allegiance and focuses on the *ethos* of poethics through the idea of being in the world ("poetically man dwells"). A second one focuses on the interactions between forms of language and forms of life, in the spirit of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Despite these different influences, both trends explore the ethical dimensions of poetic theories.

Jean-Claude Pinson, French poet and theorist, is a prime example of the first above-mentioned trend in poethics. He defines poethics as follows:

> In this perspective, I brought to the fore the word "poethics" to underline that poetry is not only an art of language (of interest for poethics). At the level of existence, of ethos (the customary way of being in the world), poetry carries the greater ambition of being the search for another light, another language to make sense to our stay, to our inhabiting the earth.3 (Pinson 2013, 11)

Pinson primarily focuses on the idea of poetry as a way of inhabiting the earth. Poetry is not concerned only with language and poethics must not be reduced to a tool for transforming language. Poethics must consider the *ethos* that is involved in the search for a way of living, of inhabiting the earth. This view is inspired by Martin Heidegger's famous reading of Hölderlin in "Poetically man dwells" in which he considers the relation between dwelling and poetry to be found in the idea of building: "Poetry is what really lets us dwell. But through what do we attain to a dwelling place? Through building. Poetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building." (Heidegger 2013, 213) As a form of making, poetry becomes a form of building a world in which one can live. Without poetry, Heidegger argues, there is no way of being in the world because there is no way of building a place to dwell: "Man does not dwell in that he merely establishes his stay on the earth beneath the

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3 My translation: "Dans cette optique, j'ai été conduit à mettre en avant le mot de "poéthique", pour souligner que la poésie n'est pas seulement un art du langage (celui qui intéresse la poétique). Elle me semble porteuse d'une plus grande ambition, se voulant, au plan de l'existence, de l'*ethos* (de la façon coutumière d'être au monde), recherche d'une autre lumière, d'un autre langage pour donner sens à notre séjour, à notre habitation de la terre."

sky, by raising growing things and simultaneously raising buildings. Man is capable of such building only if he already builds in the sense of the poetic taking of measure. Authentic building occurs so far as there are poets, such poets as take the measure for architecture, the structure of dwelling." (Heidegger 2013, 225) According to Heidegger, poetry is a perquisite for life insofar as it creates the conditions in which human beings can live and dwell. In other words, as Aurélie Foglia further argues, commenting on Pinson's poethics: "Poetry proposes a mode, or even a model, of existence.[4]" (Foglia 2019, 822) Poetry is a mode of existence in the sense that it provides suggestions as to how to live, but it is also a model of existence in the sense that we must strive to live according to the standards of poetic living. When one fails to live poetically, one is merely surviving rather than living; one fails to dwell but only passes through. As we will see in the next section, this opposition between living and surviving is a central element of Nietzsche's ethics.

However, Pinson distances himself from Heidegger in considering that the poet remains in contact with the ordinary world, belonging to what he calls "poétariat." Building on the term "proletariat," Pinson suggests that the poet is no longer modelled on the Romantic genius, but on the factory worker (Pinson 2015). While Heidegger attributes an exceptionality to the poets who do not meddle with the mundane affairs of the everyday world, Pinson considers that they precisely dwell in this ordinariness. Pinson argues against the sacralisation of poetry that is at play in Heidegger and thus comes closer to the second—Wittgensteinian—trend in poethics that is represented in the Anglophone world by Joan Retallack. She defines poethics as follows: "Hence my use of the word *poethics*. Every poethics is a consequential form of life. Any making of forms out of language (poesis) is a practice with a discernible character (ethos). Po*ethos* might in fact be a better word for this were it not for persistent contentions that matters of ethos are inherently value free." (Retallack 2003, 11) This definition is closer to Meschonnic's and Wittgenstein's thought: Retallack focuses on the relation between forms of language and forms of life, showing how any transformation of a form of language involves a transformation of a form of life. This idea does not contradict Pinson's understanding of poethics but takes *ethos* (and hence ethics) in a more pragmatic way.

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[4] My translation: "[La poésie] propose un mode, voire un modèle d'existence."

Furthermore, Retallack considers her poethics to argue for the significance of art: "A poethics can take you only so far without an *h*. If you're to embrace complex life on earth, if you can no longer pretend that all things are fundamentally simple or elegant, a poethics thickened by an *h* launches an exploration of art's significance *as*, not just *about*, a form of living in the real world." (Retallack 2003, 26) Retallack argues that a poethics must be thickened with an *h* in order to reveal the significance of art. Without this *h*, poethics remains at a superficial and artificial level of simplicity and elegance. With an *h*, it gains significance as a way of life. Art is no longer taken in the mimetic/representational conception but becomes an ethical/existential enterprise. Rather than being about the world, art is a way of being in the world. Following this idea, Retallack's notion of poethics comes closer to Pinson, but without the Heideggerian vocabulary that pervades his theory. Retallack's theory remains closer to Wittgenstein and thus avoids the sacralisation of poetry that is at play in Heidegger. It focuses on the pragmatic and ordinary level of understanding how poetry gains significance in our everyday practices.[5]

This view is shared by Paul Audi who explores the notion of *aesth/ethics* in a phenomenological and Nietzschean way. He considers that ethics and aesthetics are one, not in the sense Wittgenstein suggests in the *Tractatus*, but in the sense that living ethically must involve an aesthetic dimension:

> Because if ethics essentially consists in working on oneself to get away with life in the best possible or the most efficient way, this working on oneself is itself aesthetic in the sense that it aims to produce a *form*—i.e. in that case a *style of living* that opens itself as such, that presents itself as a pure disposition to the jouissance of living.[6] (Audi 2010, 128–29)

This understanding of ethics brings to the fore its aesthetic dimension. In contrast to Pinson and Retallack, Audi suggests here not only that there is an ethical dimension to aesthetics, but also that there is an aesthetic dimension to ethics

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[5] Meschonnic criticises this sacralisation of poetry. He argues that the problem with sacralization is that "As soon as poetry is confused with the sacred it is lost. It accomplishes a programme." (Meschonnic 1995, 126) (My translation: "Et dès que la poésie est confondue avec le sacré, elle est perdue. Elle accomplit un programme."). Poetry should not be considered a programme or an ideology, but way of shaping our forms of language and forms of life.

[6] My translation: "Car si l'éthique consiste essentiellement en un travail sur soi dont le but est de se tirer d'affaire dans la vie le mieux possible, ou le plus efficacement possible, ce travail sur soi doit lui-même être qualifié d'esthétique, dans la mesure où il vise à produire une *forme*—c'est-à-dire en l'occurrence un *style de vie* qui s'ouvre comme tel, qui se dispose, qui est lui-même une pure disposition à la jouissance du fait de vivre."

that can be found in the locution *style of living*. As we will see in the next sections, this idea is central to Nietzsche's ethics of self-creation.

Although he uses the term aesthetics, Audi's theory is also concerned with creation (and hence with poethics):

> Creating, let us say it once again, is this aesth/ethic event that consists in giving back power to life by opening the field of possibilities. Although this opening depends on a certain production, it cannot be reduced to it. Because producing means producing an object from the world and in the visible horizon of the world. Whereas creating means creating a possible out of life and on the invisible level of life.[7] (Audi 2010, 163)

Creation is an aesth/ethic event that opens a field of possibilities. The reason why Audi rejects the notion of poethics (and especially of *poiesis*) lies in the fact that he does not want to reduce creation to the mere production of an object. He gives a higher status to creation that is not only concerned with the making of an object, but with the making of a perspective (in a Nietzschean sense). He is less interested in the *work* of art than in the *working* of art, in what art can produce. This idea connects to a conception of poethics that escapes the traditional mimetic/representational framework to focus on the performative and transformative dimension of art.

Retallack, Pinson, and Audi all combine aspects of aesthetic and poetic theory with the ethical. While Pinson and Retallack focus on finding the ethical in the poetic, Audi's Nietzschean reading also envisages the opposite, namely the aesthetic that lies in the ethical. This is a point on which Nietzsche insists: he focuses not only on the ethical dimension of the poetic, but also on the fact that the ethical itself is poetic. To understand Nietzsche's ethics, as I will argue in the next sections, one must understand his poethics.

2. Nietzsche's Ethics of Creation

As we have seen, poethics highlights the relation between a form of language (poethics) and a form of life (ethics). The specificity of Nietzsche's position

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[7] My translation: "Créer, répétons-le encore une fois, est cet événement d'ordre esth/éthique qui consiste à redonner de la puissance à la vie, en lui ouvrant le champ des possibles. Certes, cette ouverture passe par une certaine production, mais elle ne s'y réduit guère. Car produire, c'est produire un objet, à partir du monde et dans l'horizon visible du monde; alors que créer, c'est créer du possible à partir de la vie et sur le plan invisible de la vie."

on this question is that he offers a different perspective in which ethics is eminently poetic. As James Sloane Allen suggests, Nietzsche's ethics of style is an art of life: "an aesthetics with ethical consequences, and an ethics with aesthetic form." (Allen 2006, 396) The relation between ethics and aesthetics (or poethics) goes both ways. It is not only poethics that involve an ethical dimension, but also ethics that requires a poetic dimension. Before understanding this relation, we need to have a clearer picture of Nietzsche's ethics.

As mentioned in the introduction, there is a tension—especially regarding morality—in Nietzsche's works between the critical and the positive dimensions of his philosophy. He considers himself as an immoralist but also provides positive ethical judgements, which might sound contradictory at first. Much has been said about this tension and attempts to solve it either restrict the scope of his immoralism or show the difference between ethics and morality. As Maudemarie Clark argues, Nietzsche rejects morality in the narrow sense of Christian and other nihilistic forms of morality, without rejecting the idea of morality in a broader sense of ethical life: "He is an immoralist, only if one is using 'morality' in the narrower sense; he does not reject all regulatory systems that rely on 'informal sanctions and internalized dispositions.' Yet he does reject both the authority and the value of the form of ethical life that now goes by the name 'morality' and which he thinks claims to be the only form of ethical life." (Clark 2019, 63) According to Clark, Nietzsche criticises morality *qua* absolute system but affirms his own morality *qua* life ethics. Nietzsche's immoralism (his critique of Christian morality) is therefore not an obstacle for the elaboration of a positive ethics.[8]

If we consider that there is a distinction between morality and ethics in the abovementioned way, one of the tasks of Nietzsche's ethics is to reconsider the value of morality. In aphorism 345 of *The Gay Science*, following the question raised in the epigraph of this essay, Nietzsche considers that the centrality of the question of value: "Thus nobody up to now has examined the *value* of that most famous of all medicines which is called morality; and the first step would be—

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[8] This question, as Jeffrey Church argues, brings Nietzsche on the field on metaethics, aiming to understand what position Nietzsche is advocating for: "Much of the scholarly discussion on Nietzsche's ethics has recently focused on his metaethics. Scholars have debated about whether his metaethical views are best construed as realist, antirealist, fictionalist, and so forth." (Church 2016, 82) My argument does not focus on this metaethical debate, but rather attempts to show how Nietzsche's ethical views place the poetic at its core.

for once to *question* it. Well then, precisely this is our task." (Nietzsche 1974, 285) What gives value to morality? And is this value well-placed? The answer to the second question is obviously no, as Nietzsche is well known for his criticism of morality. If we look at the value of these nihilistic moralities, Nietzsche argues, we will realise that they do not have value, that they are groundless, that their justification is arbitrary and artificial. Once that God is dead, morality loses its foundation and Nietzsche argues that we need a new ethics. Peter Berkowitz argues that this new ethics is an ethics of creativity: "What follows the painful self-discovery that conventional morality lacks authoritative or lofty foundations, according to Nietzsche, is the task of understanding the imperative or necessity to undertake self-creation. The opinion that conventional morality is groundless is one of the grounds of Nietzsche's ethics of creativity." (Berkowitz 1996, 17) As we will see, this ethics of creativity leads to the idea of self-creation. What is important in an ethics of creativity is not the adherence to moral laws, but the capacity for the human subject to thrive and flourish.

Such a view might lead some to consider Nietzsche's ethics to be immoral in the sense that it could provide a justification for immoral actions on the grounds of self-affirmation. However, this view is largely misguided as the flourishing of a human being needs not feeding off the demise of another. To the contrary, Jeffrey Church argues that "to lead a good life requires taking comprehensive responsibility for all humanity, not just fulfilling one's natural capacities. In this way, Nietzsche's ethics means that the satisfaction of few and many are interdependent." (Church 2016, 96) Without going as far as Church's Kantian reading of Nietzsche and without making the flourishing of the human subject a categorical imperative, we can understand why and how the flourishing of community is necessary for the individual to thrive. As Solomon argues, Nietzsche's ethics is an ethics of virtue in which what can be considered immoral is not necessarily virtuous:

> What counts for much less is obedience of rules, laws, and principles, for one can be wholly obedient and also dull, unproductive, unimaginative, and a philistine. Once again, this does not mean that the 'immoralist'—as Nietzsche misleadingly calls him—will kill innocents, steal from the elderly and betray the community, nor even, indeed, run a car through a red light. (Solomon 2003, 131)

It is one thing to say that one must not follow rules, laws, and principles blindly, it is another to praise killing, stealing, and betraying. Following a rule is not necessarily bad, it is sometimes (and quite often) the thing to do. Furthermore,

as Thomas Brobjer argues, to act immorally can be to act cowardly and thus not a way of affirming oneself: "According to an ethics-of-virtue perspective, one does not, or should not, act 'immorally' because it is unworthy, because it decreases one's self-respect, and because often it is cowardly. In other words, the criteria of action are flourishing, esteem, and self-esteem." (Brobjer 2003, 72) Acting ethically involves the notion of self-esteem: one must flourish but this flourishing cannot occur against one's self-esteem, and perhaps not against another's esteem.

These views somewhat mitigate the provocative force of Nietzsche's claims, but they do not, I believe, mitigate the strength of his philosophical propositions. What is central is the question of value: on what value must we ground our ethical judgment? Nietzsche's problem is not with the notion of value itself, but with the value that has been chosen by nihilistic forms of morality. These forms of morality devaluate what is valuable, as the aphorism 292 of *The Gay Science* shows:

> I do not wish to promote any morality, but to those who do I give this advice: If you wish to deprive the best things and states of all honor and worth, then go on talking about them as you have been doing. Place them at the head of your morality and talk from morning to night of the happiness of virtue, the composure of the soul, of justice and immanent retribution. The way you are going about it, all these good things will eventually have popularity and the clamor of the streets on their side; but at the same time all the gold that was on them will have been worn off by so much handling, and all the gold *inside* will have turned to lead. Truly, you are masters of alchemy in reverse: the devaluation of what is most valuable. (Nietzsche 1974, 234–35)

This passage is surprising as Nietzsche is giving advice on how to promote morality. He points out that the way in which moralists have been talking about things is depriving these things from their worth. By continuously talking about "the happiness of virtue, the composure of the soul, of justice and immanent retribution," moralists have emptied these notions from their value (their gold in Nietzsche's terms). We must therefore find a way of talking about things; we must find new forms of language for our forms of life.

It follows from this idea that morality negates what is valuable, and even negates what is the most valuable for Nietzsche, namely life. In aphorism 346 of *The Gay Science*, he argues that there is a tension between morality and human life:

> [H]ave we not exposed ourselves to the suspicion of an opposition—an opposition between the world in which we were at home up to now with our reverences that perhaps made it possible for us to *endure* life, and another world *that consists of us*—an inexorable, fundamental, and deepest suspicion about ourselves that is more and more gaining worse and worse control of us Europeans and that could easily confront coming generations with the terrifying Either/Or: 'Either abolish your reverences or—*yourselves*!' The latter would be nihilism; but would not the former also be—nihilism?—This is *our* question mark. (Nietzsche 1974, 286–87)

In this either/or, Nietzsche points out the danger of nihilism, the danger of negating oneself. To put it schematically, there is a tension between morality that helps us survive (reverences) and what makes us what we are. This dichotomy is constructed around the central component of Nietzsche's ethical thought, namely life. As Thomas Stern concisely puts it: "Nietzsche's basic ethical position is as follows: *it is ethical to further the goals of Life and it is unethical to impede them.*" (Stern 2020, 11) We can see from this consideration of life as the central value of ethics that killing will not be the most ethical thing to do in order to flourish and strive as a human being. However, understanding what life is and what furthering the goals of life means is not so easily achieved. The question Nietzsche raises here is that of the distinction between living and surviving. What is life in respect to this distinction? Negating ourselves is obviously a nihilistic thing to do, but wouldn't negating the means for our survival also be nihilistic? Can we privilege living over surviving or is surviving the ground on which living can occur?

These questions illuminate Nietzsche's positive ethics: we should privilege living over surviving. In this sense, our choices should go in the direction of life affirmation. This question is of central significance to Nietzsche's philosophy as it considers philosophy to be a therapeutic enterprise to show us the best a way of life.[9] As Keith Ansell-Pearson argues: "If there is one crucial component to Nietzsche's philosophical therapeutics in the texts of his middle period that he keeps returning to again and again it is the need for spiritual joyfulness and the task of cultivating in ourselves, after centuries of training by morality and religion, the joy in existing." (Ansell-Pearson 2016, 125) In the middle writings, and especially

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[9] Much has been written on Nietzsche and the idea of philosophy as therapy, be it as a therapy of the soul (Hutter 2006; Ure 2008; Pearson 2010) or as a therapy of culture (Ahern 1995; Wotling 1995). These views rely on the fact that philosophy itself is in need of therapy for Nietzsche, in order to become a way of life (Nehamas 2000; Mills 2019).

in the *Gay Science*, the central value of philosophical therapeutics is to bring human beings to live a joyful life through self-cultivation. This joyful life is not a mere nihilistic survival, but an affirmation of life. In this sense, the traditional virtues are not completely abandoned by Nietzsche, as Ansell-Pearson and Rebecca Bamford argue: "The individual virtues (moderation, justice, repose of the soul, etc.) may well continue to be esteemed in a revitalized ethics, but for different reasons than would be given from a customary moral perspective; virtues will have a vital role to play in ethical training and learning the 'art of living.'" (Ansell-Pearson and Bamford 2021, 4) Traditional virtues might have a vital role to play towards self-affirmation. Philosophy as a way of life involves following some virtues that help human beings to flourish.

Furthermore, human beings need to be self-aware and know themselves in order to flourish. As Tobias Kuehne argues:

Cashed out in ethical terms, this means that the free spirits conduct remains ethical as long as he musters the courage to uphold his commitment to uncovering deceptions, even about himself. He therefore embodies a paradox: his ethics consists precisely in the sustained process of trying to find an ethics without ever coming to rest in a dogmatic theory, a grueling 'mode of existence [that] is not for the faint of heart.' (Kuehne 2018, 93)

Following the idea of a philosophical therapeutics that leads to the best way of life, human beings cannot deceive themselves. That is one of the problems of traditional morality as it brings the subject to negate its own existence and to live only according to rules that deceive it.

Against nihilistic forms of morality, Nietzsche offers an ethics of life affirmation. In this ethics, Christine Daigle considers the eternal return and the will to power to be two elements to guide choices.[10] In a more general sense, these choices should enhance health. The notion of health is a complex one in Nietzsche's philosophy and does not always overlap with our current conception of

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[10] "In the determination of what a good human life is, that toward which every human must strive, the notions of will to power and eternal return serve as guides for choice. A choice will be good if it promotes life as will to power. A choice will also be good if one can will that it eternally recurs. The two considerations go hand in hand, as one can will that one"s choice eternally recur only if it leads to the flourishing life one pursues, a flourishing life that will come about through the realization of ourselves as will to power." (Daigle 2006, 10)

health. David Parker argues that there is a question of intensity that comes into the equation and that Nietzsche's conception of health must bring the healthy subject to live "*more*, more intensely, gratefully and joyfully." (Parker 2004, 313) To affirm one's life means to bring oneself to live more intensely. However, in order to do so, one must overcome many resistances. This process requires, Christine Swanton argues, "a creative an productive orientation toward the world." (Swanton 2015, 196) One must not be a passive subject but an active and creative agent. Nietzsche's positive ethics is not only an ethics of self-affirmation, but more specifically an ethics of self-creation. As he argues in aphorism 290 of *The Gay Science*:

> To 'give style' to one's character— a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. […] For one thing is needful: that a human being should *attain* satisfaction with himself, whether it be by means of this or that poetry and art; only then is a human being at all tolerable to behold. Whoever is dissatisfied with himself is continually ready for revenge, and we others will be his victims, if only by having to endure his ugly sight. For the sight of what is ugly makes one bad and gloomy. (Nietzsche 1974, 232–33)

I would like to point out three elements in this quote. First, ethics (as way of life) moves towards aesthetics with the idea of self-stylisation: self-creation is shaped as self-stylisation. Second, it is through art and poetry that human beings reach this self-stylisation. Third, this stylisation is related to an ethical judgment. An aesthetic judgment (ugly) becomes an ethical judgement (bad and gloomy). In this interaction lies the poethical dimension of Nietzsche's philosophy. Creating oneself is not only an ethical task, but also a poetic one. Nietzsche's ethics involves a necessary poetic component.

3. From Ethics to Poethics

This poetic component is to be found in the notion of creation, through the etymological sense of *poiesis*. As Berkowitz argues, after the death of God, there is a risk of complete relativism. However, Zarathustra (and Nietzsche) "discovers an ethics of creativity that views most everything as worthless and only one thing as needful. That one thing, the highest and sole worthy goal of a good life, is the absolute liberation and the supreme empowerment of the creative will." (Berkowitz 1996, 208) The notion of creation avoids Nietzsche from falling into an "anything

goes" form of relativism. What is central to his poethics is the idea that one must create oneself and create values to affirm oneself. As Peter Durno Murray argues, "The creation of value and its universalization involves a disorientation of the self, occurring as a sense of 'being outside oneself' (*Ausser-sich-seins, ekstasis*). This is described as a 'self-splitting' event which, for Nietzsche, is to become liberated from one's acculturated beliefs and to gain some permanent critical distance from one's socialized existence." (Murray 2018, 27) The creation of values gives a critical distance to the human subject who must continuously create itself anew.

This creation is a poetic process in an ethical framework. One of the reasons for this necessity is that the world is not a given but a perspective of the subject. Central to Nietzsche's poethics is the idea that the world (reality) cannot be seen in itself but always only through a human perspective, as he expresses it in aphorism 57 of *The Gay Science*: "That mountain there! That cloud there! What is 'real' in that? Subtract the phantasm and every human *contribution* from it, my sober friends! If you *can*! If you can forget your descent, your past, your training—all of your humanity and animality. There is no "reality' for us—not for you either, my sober friends." (Nietzsche 1974, 121) There is no reality if by reality one understands a mind-independent essence. All we see is dependent on human contributions. All we see is mediated through factors such as humanity and animality. As Peter Sedgwick argues: "Our concepts are not pictures or representations of the world but instrumental mechanisms that answer to the demands of life. Because of this, there is no neutral 'representation' of reality available to us. All concepts are always already evaluations." (Sedgwick 2013, 59) Nietzsche moves from a representational framework to an expressivist one.[11] Charles Taylor argues that this expressivist framework "shows us language as the locus of different kinds of disclosure. It makes us aware of the expressive dimension and its importance. And it allows us to identify a constitutive dimension, a way in which language does not only represent, but enters into some of the realities it is 'about.'" (Taylor 1985, 273) An

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[11] Nietzsche's expressivism, and more specifically his poetic expressivism, connects him not only to pre-romantic and romantic influences such as Johann Georg Hamann, Johann Gottfried von Herder, or Friedrich Schlegel, but also to more contemporary debates in expressivism, such as Robert Brandom, Huw Price, and Simon Blackburn (Mills 2022). Robert Pippin and Aaron Ridley also use the term expressivist to characterise Nietzsche, but they focus on philosophy of action rather than language (Pippin 2015; Ridley 2018) However, in the connection between forms of language and forms of life, an expressivist conception of language might join an expressivist view of action.

expressivist framework considers language to play an active role in constituting reality and not to be the mere passive reflection of a language-independent reality. According to this view, by considering that there is no representation of reality, the poet precedes representation and shortcuts its ways of functioning. Poetry precedes the traditional categories of thought, as Joshua Hall argues that "poetry and poets occupy a space anterior to the bifurcation of existence into logical truth and falsity." (Hall 2018, 246) Truth and falsity are part of the representational framework. By placing itself before this logical bifurcation, poetry places itself before representation. Poetry suggests a different mode of being, a different way of life in which traditional categories of thought do not play such a central role.

Nietzsche's expressivism is best represented in aphorism 58 of *The Gay Science*. In this aphorism that is worth quoting in full, Nietzsche argues that what things are called is more important than what they are:

> *Only as creators!*—This has given me the greatest trouble and still does: to realize that what things *are called* is incomparably more important than what they are. The reputation, name, and appearance, the usual measure and weight of a thing, what it counts for—originally almost always wrong and arbitrary, thrown over things like a dress and altogether foreign to their nature and even to their skin—all this grows from generation unto generation, merely because people believe in it, until it gradually grows to be part of the thing and turns into its very body. What at first was appearance becomes in the end, almost invariably, the essence and is effective as such. How foolish it would be to suppose that one only needs to point out this origin and this misty shroud of delusion in order to *destroy* the world that counts for real, so-called '*reality*.' We can destroy only as creators. —But let us not forget this either: it is enough to create new names and estimations and probabilities in order to create in the long run new 'things.' (Nietzsche 1974, 121–22)

Against the representationalist framework that considers what things are to be of primary significance (thus following traditional metaphysics), Nietzsche operates a shift from essence to discourse (from nature to culture). In this shift lies the possibility of creation: creating new names can create new things. But this creation is, Nietzsche insists, always related to a destruction. To create new names and things, one must destroy old names and things (and reciprocally, as destruction is dependent on creation). By placing on par names, estimations, and probabilities, Nietzsche considers that the creation of new names is a creation of new values insofar as it involves estimations and probabilities.

What is crucial in both ethics and poethics is the question of evaluation. If the aim of philosophy for Nietzsche is to create values (and to create oneself), this

creation of values is something poetic. As Simon Robertson suggests regarding the notion of value in Nietzsche, "the predominant scholarly focus is with value narrowly construed, that is, that domain centering around what is *good*." (Robertson 2009, 81) But the notion of good here does not necessarily follow what is good in Christian morality for instance. One of the reasons for this change is that the "unit of evaluation" is not the same. This leads Simon May to argue that "In the Nietzschean ethic, by contrast, the 'unit of evaluation' is not an individual action but a lived life; and the 'evaluator' is not a single standard but a cluster of standards forming an individual's conception of the good (such as Nietzsche's own three criteria of life-enhancement)." (May 1999, 111) While traditional (nihilistic) forms of morality focus on actions, Nietzsche's ethics focuses on the lived life. This lived life cannot be reduced to a sum of actions, but the evaluation relies on a global understanding of the intensity of the lived life. One of the criteria to evaluate such a life is the notion of power. Is it a life that increases power? For Henrik Rydenfelt, "Nietzsche seems to base his evaluation on their capacity for increasing the power of those who adopt them. Thus, the features of greatness (of an individual)—virtues or perfections—are signs of power (already) attained, while values are to be evaluated as means to attain more power." (Rydenfelt 2013, 215) What distinguishes a good life from a bad life is the amount of power attained. Values are determined according to their usefulness in reaching this goal.

For Nietzsche, reality is related to the language we use and the values we follow. How we name things define what they are. This is why the poet gains special significance, as Nietzsche suggests in aphorism 301 of *The Gay Science*:

> The higher human being always becomes at the same time happier and unhappier. But he can never shake off a *delusion*: He fancies that he is a *spectator* and *listener* who has been placed before the great visual and acoustic spectacle that is life; he calls his own nature *contemplative* and overlooks that he himself is really the poet who keeps creating this life. […] As a poet, he certainly has *vis contemplativa* and the ability to look back upon his work, but at the same time also and above all *vis creativa*, which the active human being lacks, whatever visual appearances and the faith of all the world may say. We who think and feel at the same time are those who really continually *fashion* something that had not been there before: the whole eternally growing world of valuations, colors, accents, perspectives, scales, affirmations, and negations. (Nietzsche 1974, 241–42)

Contemplation and creation go hand in hand. We need to continuously fashion the world we see while we fashion ourselves. Contemplation is creation; it is

poetic. And this creation is related to the creation of values, as Thomas Miles argues: "Perhaps the 'creation' of any kind of value may be understood in a similar way: one does not simply excel in relation to prevailing values, one sets a new standard for value which others are now challenged to meet." (Miles 2013, 86) In the same way artistic creation must go further than existing creations, so do other kinds of values (and hence ethical ones too). A creative value is therefore not an absolute that one can reach through excellence, but a new standard that challenges others and that will be, in turn, challenged by others.

As Nietzsche further argues the same aphorism, there is no value in itself, but only the value we bestow on the world: "Whatever has *value* in our world now does not have value in itself, according to its nature—nature is always value-less, but has been *given* value at some time, as a present—and it was we who gave and bestowed it. Only we have created the world *that concerns man*!" (Nietzsche 1974, 242) Nature is always value-less, and we give value to nature through our interactions with it and through the names we give to things. Nature has no intrinsic value and one way to bestow values can be learned from artists and poets: "How can we make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable for us when they are not? And I rather think that in themselves they never are. […] For with [artists] this subtle power usually comes to an end where art ends and life begins; but we want to be the poets of our life—first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters." (Nietzsche 1974, 239–40) In this passage from aphorism 299 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche suggests that to be poets of our life means that we must live as poets do, that we must give value to things. This value is not only aesthetic, but also ethical. This is where poethics and ethics merge. Living our life ethically means living our life poetically. Thus, Nietzsche's ethics can be understood only through his poethics. This is what makes his ethics so specific: it is a poethics in which poetry offers a model for our self-creation.

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