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Babette Babich: A Nietzschean Scholar on the Physiology of Aesthetics

Since we are marking Babette Babich's achievements with a Scholar's Session, let me begin with a philological observation about the terms "scholar" and "scholarship" themselves. These take their origin from Greek. *Scholé* – and its close cousin the Latin *otium* -- designate leisure. So far as they have to do with study, research, writing, and their communication through letters, lectures, and publication, this is because, as the literate Greeks and Romans understood it, these are among the activities – along with the other liberal arts -- that a person with some command over their own time would want to pursue. At the highest level, God is envisioned, as in Aristotle, as thought thinking itself – nous nousing nous – for we imagine the divinity to be constrained by no necessity whatsoever. Now of course you are thinking that this is a quaint ideal which has little to do with the scholarship associated with the colleges and universities where today's "scholars" work. We – those of us employed or seeking employment -- might describe much of our activity not as work, in the sense of self-generated free production, but as labor compelled by necessity. Filing reports, grading and evaluating student and colleagues, attending mind-deadening meetings and so on. And of course what we call our scholarly work is subject to evaluation, which typically involves quantitative measurement – how many articles, books, words, citations. All of this can incite competition, envy of the bad sort, and a perverse oscillation between

melancholy and megalomania as we negotiate our places in the great scholarly division of labor., I strongly recommend reading or rereading that scintillating chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology* on modern academics, writers, and artists: "The Animal Kingdom of the Spirit (*geistige Tierreich*), the Humbug, or where it's Really At" (I translate freely) which articulates the systematic play between the dedicated tone of "my *work*" and the egotistical "*my work*."

Now Nietzsche, as Babich well knows, was aware of all these tendencies. You hear it in Zarathustra's cynical farewell to nineteenth century scholars and in Nietzsche's aphorisms where he muses on the industrialization and frantic Americanization of European life and time. (*Gay Science* 329). He lays it down as a principle that any human being who cannot call two thirds of their time their own must be considered a slave; he goes further, observing that the ancient philosophers thought that almost all men, including the ostensibly free and noble, were actually slaves in a deeper sense.

Babich is a true scholar, not leisurely in the degraded modern sense in which it's assumed that "free time" means, eating, drinking, and gazing at the tube. Her scholarship is a calling and an *energeia*. I'd say "passion" –but etymologically that suggests passivity. I mean to say rather that she is fully alive and dedicated to her calling. She "exceeds expectations" in encouraging students, colleagues, and readers to set new and higher ones for themselves.

Babich's engagement with Nietzsche is continuing and wide-ranging. I am in awe of her learning and her list of publications. It is vast, stupendous, huge. Nietzsche is a constant presence in her work, even when titles suggest other themes and topics. Her work on Nietzsche is frequently intertwined with her work on Heidegger and gender, so the division of labor among the three commentators today is complex. I cannot pretend to survey all of this, and the protocol of our "scholarly" meeting requires focus, so I'll address what I see as one of her central ways of not only inhabiting, articulating, and contextualizing Nietzsche's thought. [[I lack both the expertise and the time to explore her renewing and rethinking it in the light of our cultural and technological history since the time that the man with inscrutable handwriting made his experiments with a typewriter.]] I cite with gratitude another set of major accomplishments: Babich's tireless and productive editorial and organizational work: enabling the annual meetings of the Nietzsche Society at SPEP, editing or co-editing *New Nietzsche Studies* which has published fascinating studies and indispensable translations, and the massive two volumes on Nietzsche and science.

Why a "new Nietzsche"? Back in the early 60s when I started reading Nietzsche, the most enlightened version widely available in English was Walter Kaufmann's (1950) – whose postwar intervention was important in dispelling accusations of war responsibility. Kaufmann's Nietzsche got a safe niche in Cold

War intellectual history. Then came analytic attempts at salvaging bits and pieces of Nietzsche as an eccentric, perspectivist supplement to the analytically reconstructed canon, like Arthur Danto's (1964). Both types of reading were attractive to those cultural movements that fed off the image of "existentialism" as a radical individualism, along the ethical, if not political, lines of Sartre's widely read lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism." Then things changed, perhaps provoked by the cultural explosions of the late 60s. We read Heidegger more deeply, his Nietzsche lectures became available, and new French thought drew from Nietzsche in its pluralism and break with Hegel and his heirs— I mention just Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze. In 1977, David Allison published the significant collection *The New Nietzsche* and we anglophones were off to the races.

Babich has become a critical scholar in the new Nietzsche archipelago, a rhizomatic network that happily resists continuing efforts to extirpate or contain the Nietzsche contagion. The new Nietzsche sometimes seems like Heraclitus' sun — new every day. Nietzsche called himself a thinker for the day after tomorrow. Part of the joy in reading Babich on Nietzsche is discovering ever new Nietzsches, a becoming-Nietzsche or Nietzsche to come, perhaps a Nietzsche unencumbered by old debts, a Nietzsche beginning to appear under the aspect of the *Unschuld des Werdens*. And surprisingly she often lets us see a new Nietzsche by returning to some of his earliest and most originary engagements with language, music, poetry,

and the Greeks. Yet Babich's Nietzsche is also, as a new book title implies, *The Digital Dionysus*, a Nietzsche who can illuminate *The Hallelujah Effect* where he joins Beethoven once again while meeting Leonard Cohen, kd lang, Bob Dylan, and Caly Rae Jensen. "Life without music would be a mistake": Babich opens Nietzsche up to the musical future about which he often fantasized.

Babette has written penetrating and original studies of Nietzsche on music, rhythm, and prosody; on his relation to Beethoven and Wagner; his decisive early engagement with Hölderlin; on Heidegger's Nietzsche; on enigmatic but significant chapters of *Zarathustra*, such as "On Great Events." And the work keeps on coming.

We need a "Reader's Guide," but I will not provide one – or even a cartography. Babich wants to help us *read* Nietzsche, to *hear* Nietzsche with our eyes after shattering our ears as she quotes Zarathustra. To do this, we must hear the music of his writing, his language, and immerse ourselves in the dissonances and resolutions of his aphorisms. We must come to understand music as Nietzsche understood it to hear the music of his texts. Babich asks "how does the text work as it does?" Perhaps all of her writing on Nietzsche is best understood as seeing how his texts require us to engage with that question, in the music drenched *Birth of Tragedy* or *Zarathustra*, which she calls "a book that destroys as it gives," and a "Trojan horse" or double/multiple edged *pharmakon*. Babich has teased us with

intimations of what I hope will be a full scale reading of what Nietzsche called the “greatest gift” ever given humanity. *Zarathustra* should be heard as philosophical music, a genre that we might come to understand, Babich reminds us, by reading/hearing Parmenides, Heraclitus, Pythagoras through Nietzsche’s philological/musical discoveries. *Zarathustra*, she reminds us, is a story of *Untergehen*, down-going. One of Babich’s great scholarly interventions is her reading of Nietzsche’s adaptation and transformation of non-Christian stories and themes from Empedocles and Lucian, whose coinage *hyperanthropos* anticipates or provokes the term *Übermensch*.

Here as elsewhere, I learn from her rigorously philological and archaeological method or path in reading Nietzsche. Eventually, I believe, Anglophone Nietzsche scholarship must take account of her original readings of Nietzsche’s early writing and teaching on the music of the Greek language, of his deep youthful immersion in Hölderlin’s poetry and poetics, and her patient and illuminating study of his use of Lucian, Diogenes Laertius, and other Hellenistic sources. These *should* alter and expand the horizons of Nietzsche scholarship in our all too monolingual precincts. Babette vigilantly refuses to repeat uncritically the many unexamined legends and commonplaces that still dog our reading. The legends and commonplaces include not only political caricatures, but the

marginalization of his first book *The Birth of Tragedy*, and an overly simple view of his attachment and separation from Wagner and his music.

There are so many Nietzsches, so many masks, readings, interpretations, and performances. How does Babette's critical reading help us make sense of the carnivalesque profusion of possibilities: heroic Nietzsche, tragic Nietzsche, Nietzsche the (possibly failed) systematizer, the provocateur, the buffoon (*Hanswurst*), the Antichrist? Importantly, Babette refuses to let her perspective be occluded by the conventional biographical narratives. When a human being tests the limits of science, philosophical thought, and art in an obsessive lifelong quest, we should be very cautious about imagining that we can understand such a life without understanding his thought – a process that will be hopelessly skewed if we begin with clichés about the life.

Today I will focus on only one of the Nietzsches, and then only on one aspect of that one. I am thinking of Nietzsche the aspirational but failed systematic philosopher. We know that Nietzsche announced various great philosophical projects, whose most frequent names were “The Will to Power” and “The Transvaluation of Values.” Babette has helped to explain the status of the posthumous publication bearing the former title and has clarified the very notion of transvaluation by reading it in the light of the doxographic tradition that Diogenes the Cynic was accused of debasing or devaluing the currency. Would Nietzsche

have done a better job of completing a system if the brain tumor, drug abuse, or whatever had not struck when it did? In any case the systems are sadly incomplete.

First a remark about Nietzsche's context. It may seem surprising that a philosopher who questioned the authenticity of the will to a system as late as *Twilight of the Idols* was then and later writing and rewriting plans for "The Will to Power" and the "Transvaluation." Here we should remember that the nineteenth century was the great age of philosophical systems, the most recent flowering of a tendency evident in the medieval summas, and the seventeenth century rationalists. Nietzsche wanted to rival and surpass the systematizers of his day: *bestselling*, widely read philosophers like Eduard von Hartmann, Herbert Spencer, August Comte, and others. Perhaps the greatest tension in Nietzsche's work was that between his musical writing in which his texts unfold their complexities, opening abysses of meaning, and his urge to create system.

In addition to those I've mentioned, Nietzsche announced or intimated at least two additional systematic projects: a "philosophy of the Anti-Christ" (to which I've given some thought lately) and what I will concentrate on today, a "physiology of aesthetics." Now I want to say a few words about how Babette's pathbreaking work could help us understand what such a systematic aesthetics might be. Nietzsche's best known promise of such a study appears in the *Genealogy of Morals*, in a section criticizing Kant and Schopenhauer for their

claims that paradigmatic experiences of art are free of all desire. Taste is either pure or pathological. My response to tickles, caresses, and strokes, to coffee ice cream, or the odor of rotten apples (Schiller's incentive for poetic inspiration) is pathological, a pathos I suffer as a consequence of the details of my physical constitution, medical condition, specific history, cultural conditioning, and the like. Whether these or similar feelings are agreeable or not may be of interest to my physician, my psychoanalyst, certainly to those I live with as we attempt to accommodate one another's tastes. Nietzsche comments:

The peculiar sweetness and fullness characteristic of the aesthetic condition might have its origins precisely in the ingredient "sensuality" (just as that "idealism" characteristic of marriageable girls stems from the same source) – that sensuality is thus not suspended at the outset of the aesthetic condition, as Schopenhauer believed, but rather only transfigures itself and no longer enters consciousness as sexual stimulus. (I will return to this viewpoint at another time in connection with still more delicate problems of the thus far so untouched so unexplored *physiology of aesthetics*.) (GM III.8)

Nietzsche never fully developed this projected "physiology of aesthetics" (although a number of later aesthetic theories, associated for example with Freud, Dewey, or Merleau-Ponty, can be seen as broadly consistent with his aspirations if

not with the breadth of his vision). The project appears in germ as early as 1869 when he writes to Rohde that Wagner's work is helping him to overturn or transcend Lessing's aesthetics – even though this involves “inner anguish and shame.”

In her study of his philosophy of science, Babich speaks of Nietzsche's “eco-physiological” epistemology, emphasizing the fully embodied, contextual – and therefore perspectival – dimensions of all knowing. I would like to hear the same tendency in the project of a “physiology of aesthetics.” The physiology of aesthetics should be sensitive to both the affective and the dynamic, the receptive and the creative, the situation of the reader, viewer, or listener, and that of the artist or performer. It would be not only an analytics but a poetics, a true “gay science,” drawing on the Troubadors' sense of that term. Nietzsche's own science, Babich reminds us, was first of all a science of aesthetics. She is right to speak out against the marginalization of the *Birth of Tragedy*, which tells us upfront that it aims to stake out the grounds of that science.

I will follow a clue from Nietzsche's various sketches of systems that typically follow a quadripartite division. In what I take the liberty of calling Babich's reconstruction of Nietzsche's physiology of aesthetics project I discern four central themes: atmosphere (*Stimmung*, milieu); framing or diagram; the

participant observer, or the audience as drawn in by the work; and the artist's creative activity. The four part division is an ancient rhetorical strategy – you find it also in *Zarathustra*. Given time limitations, I will concentrate on the first two.

I think Babich would agree that what Nietzsche saw as most fundamentally questionable in Lessing's aesthetics was his sharp distinctions of spatial and temporal arts, his attempt to establish firm borders between the limits of poetry and painting. So in one of her extraordinary essays in *Words in Blood, Like Flowers*, Babich writes about Nietzsche's exploration, as early as 1864, of "mutually inveigling metaphors of light and sound" (117). Babich has done some path-breaking research in exploring the early essays on Hölderlin, where Nietzsche maintains that sight and hearing are as closely related to one another as taste and smell. In one essay she leaps brilliantly from this analysis to what she rightly calls Nietzsche's best poem, on Venice, "a song to the magic of the violet, bronzed night of the Italian city of bridges," which blends music, over the water, the sight of gondolas and bridges, the soul singing to itself – and ends with the plaintive "Was anyone listening?" Another name for understanding the aesthetic effect of the fusions, chiasmi, and interplays of what are conventionally – or by Lessing -- taken to be separate senses is atmosphere and its cognates such as milieu, ambience, *Stimmung*. Although the term atmosphere, so far as I can determine, does not

appear frequently in Babich's writings, the concept is fully there. What could be more atmospheric than Nietzsche's Venice poem? In the second *Unmodern Observation* on history, Nietzsche lays down the principle that every living cultural formation requires its own specific, supporting atmosphere. Atmosphere is constituted by synaesthesia and by a real or virtual plurality of subjects.

If aesthetic experience or atmosphere is sweet, it is to go back to the *Genealogy*, peculiarly sweet, and that peculiarity he reminds us, and Babich emphasizes, has to do with its ties to sensuality, to eros the bittersweet. Pain and joy must be conjugated together in an eco-physiology of aesthetics. The Greeks have all too often been categorized as naifs or children, when they should have been recognized as superficial out of profundity. Babich explicates in remarkable fashion Nietzsche's insight, inspired by Sophocles and Hölderlin, that their great accomplishment was a tragic art and culture that could resolve the pain and dissonance of life into a transfiguring joy – like the resolution of lovers' quarrels.

Babich reads the *Birth of Tragedy* as Nietzsche intended – as a contribution to the science of aesthetics. Here we want to be careful with both terms, “science” and “aesthetics.” She reminds us – and this is quite exceptional in anglophone Nietzsche scholarship – that the presupposition for the *Birth* is Nietzsche's earlier

thesis/discovery concerning Greek prosody, namely that the language of poetry, prose, and song does not employ stressed syllables in the way of modern European languages, but is marked by timed sequences. Perhaps following a certain Kantian inspiration, Nietzsche is consistently sensitive to modes of temporal experience. Zarathustra asks if he must shatter his listener's ears so they will hear with their eyes – so far as I know Babich is the only scholar to articulate what may be involved in this enigmatic query. Perhaps her poetics of music and speech can help to show that Bob Dylan *is* indeed a great poet.

The *Birth* begins to develop a “physiology of aesthetics” in so far as Nietzsche identifies two primordial drives, Apollinian and Dionysian, associating them with the embodied experiences of dream and phantasm on the one hand, and intoxication, frenzy, and sexual excitement on the other. The *names* of the gods remind us that archaic thought understood these heightened states as given to us by external powers. Modern aesthetics, however, tends toward the contrary view: that these experiences are private, subjective, and individual. It seems that they are brought to us either from “out there” or manufactured internally by ourselves. A *physiological, an eco-physiological* science of aesthetics would articulate the way in which, when framed and formed, these drives are structured in an embodied experience that engulfs us in an atmosphere set up by art and artists. So the frame

and form of the Greek theater – its *dispositif* or diagram (as Foucault and Deleuze will call it) -- including its view of surrounding mountains and clouds, and its complex reflexivity of double spectacle as the audience identifies virtually with the chorus, for whom the action on the raised *skene* is a dreamlike projection (BT 8).

So I pass on to framing and diagram, as a second category of a “physiology of aesthetics.” I am taken by Babich’s acute sense of the diagrammatic character of architecture, designed landscapes, and public sites. Her analyses build on Nietzsche’s account of the Greek theater, Heidegger’s *Erörterung* of the Greek temple, and on the phenomenological traditions that follow in their wake. I was honored when five years ago, at my retirement event, Babich presented a richly illustrated talk on Nietzsche and Lou Salomé’s visit to Sacro Monte in Italy’s Piedmont. Not least, this talk – now an essay in *New Nietzsche Studies* -- displayed photographic and art-historical talents that are quite rare among philosophers. This was also an exemplary methodological engagement with Nietzsche studies, which all too often resorts to crude, simplistic, and unexamined biographical assumptions.

Here’s the situation that Babich re-examines in “*Genius Loci: Nietzsche and Lou and the ‘Dream’ of Sacro Monte*”: Lou and Nietzsche met Paul Reé and his mother while all were traveling in Italy. Nietzsche and Lou spent most of one day

together visiting the shrines of Sacro Monte. The others were concerned when they returned much later than expected. Lou's later account records that Nietzsche called that excursion "the most exquisite dream of his life." The biographers have a field day with this, looking for any suggestion of an explicitly romantic interlude – a kiss? more? – between the two. It becomes a Rorschach test for erotic and romantic speculation. Here Babich steps back, hesitates, and asks us to consider the event from the standpoint of what she calls *phenomenological aesthetics* – which I am considering under the aspect of a *physiology of aesthetics*. I might qualify this phenomenological aesthetics as having an archaeological dimension, in the sense in which Deleuze opposes archaeology and history, that is structures, places, and lasting evidence as contrasted with later recollections and constructions susceptible to various forms of deception and self-deception.

Babich gives us a very rich account of the site, informed by her own visit and photography. Sacro Monte (and some similar sites) were carefully designed spectacles, in this case "*sites of the sacred, for the sake of the faithful.*" Such a site requires an actual visit to be understood. A virtual reality trip there, one involving all the senses including mobility and tactility, as well as the interpersonal sharing of the experience, is currently beyond our technological reach. Sacro Monte consists of a large number of chapels, each one a carefully designed interior,

chambered space with three-dimensional polychrome figures. They illustrate the life of St. Francis. Architecture creates a series of closed yet seemingly infinite spaces, using many variations of perspective, sculpture, and painted *trompe l'oeil* frescoes on the walls -- a series of immersive dream scenes. Each chapel generates its own affective atmosphere. Babich rightly reminds us that to give a comprehensive sense of experiences like this we need to take account of the wider atmosphere, the geographical *Stimmung* of mountain, lake, and sky. The great garden theorists of the eighteenth century knew this well when, like Alexander Pope, they wrote of the “genius of the place” (*genius loci*). Nietzsche’s writings, including his letters, are filled with atmospheric descriptions and evocations.

Babette carries her analysis of framing further in elaborating on André Malraux’s thesis that the museum has come to frame all art, even retrospectively the art of the past. I’ve argued elsewhere that Malraux ought to be understood as a Nietzschean and proto-Foucauldian. Babette develops the problematic of framing in an essay on art and the museum, where she discusses Heidegger, Gadamer, and Meyer Schapiro with reference to Heidegger’s *Origin of the Work of Art* essay, Van Gogh’s notorious painting of two shoes (paired or unpaired), and Greek temples in various stages of ruin and preservation. There she observes that even a work like Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s *The Gates* (in Central Park 2005) carries with it the framing effect of the museum. The twenty plus miles of serpentine paths

with their orange banners recreate the space as a temporary installation, a pop-up artwork. Of course, in terms of framing we could carry the analysis back further through several archaeological stages, in which Olmsted and Vaux performed a brilliant topological inversion and transformation of the eighteenth century British picturesque garden with its hidden frame.

[[Lest you think that the concept of the diagram pertains only to the visual and spatial arts, note that speaking in *The Hallelujah Effect* of the song's "secret chord," Babich observes that "Cohen's Hallelujah is a song about its own progression, and as a song about itself, it diagrams the architecture of its music from the start, in the words themselves as a song" (53).]]

I condense toward the end. Just a few words about the participant observer: Having added Gadamer's account of the alienating effect of institutions like the traditional museum to Malraux's, Babich turns to Heidegger's attempt to bring *things* back into the world of art (not identical with the artworld). Paintings are mere *things* when crated, shipped, or stored, comparable then to sacks of potatoes. They also reveal *things* in their truth, as van Gogh's painting does. Yet if such truth happens in art, it does so only so far as there are receptive and active preservers. Without such preservation, visiting an ancient Greek temple, for example, is just an encounter with the trace of a vanished world. Babich meditates on this theme, and complicates it in illuminating fashion, by musing on her visit to the Greek temple

at Bassae. When she arrived, she found that the conservators had gotten there first (but after Heidegger's visit) and had covered the temple with a giant tent-like structure. Rather than just the trace of a vanished world, the temple has been put out of play to a further degree, provoking Babette's elegiac musings. In considering this variation on the "*et in Arcadia ego*" theme, she writes in lapidary style: "There is no mystery that does not turn us on ourselves" (226).

In this sketch of Babich's adaptation of a Nietzschean "eco-physiology of aesthetics" I will only gesture at the role of the artist. The artist is an erotic, a creature/creator of desire. The artist, the artist as such, as Babich puts it in her beautiful commentary on *Gay Science* "The Problem of the Actor," realizes "the external in himself...the eternal joy of becoming." Yet the *actor* has a problem to which artists are susceptible. They are *vulgar*, requiring the approval and admiration of others which can lead them to artistic or ethical compromise and ruin. Elsewhere Nietzsche said that this was the century of the *Menge*, crowd, or multitude, those entranced with the spectacle. That's why Rousseau warned against them and warned that once they were admitted to the state they would end up ruling it (from Reagan to the reality TV star). Artists must struggle to be open to the bittersweet erotic pain and joy of their calling – which is after all an image of the task set for us by this life which is a constant dying.

I'll conclude these all too sketchy comments with a few questions for Babette. Too many of course for responses now, but perhaps you will find time for one of your choosing:

- 1- Your discussion of Nietzsche and music is exemplary. You challenge the too easy conventional reading that Nietzsche abandoned Wagner for Bizet, arguing instead that Beethoven – virtuoso and theorist of dissonance -- was his most consistent point of orientation. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche devotes a good part of what seems to be a “political” chapter on “Peoples and Fatherlands” to a variety of European musical traditions, associating them with ethnic groups and national states. Music is an art of time, the pre-eminent art of time – yet is there also something territorial (even political) about music in Nietzsche’s thought?
- 2- I love your citing Nietzsche on the “innocence of tones” (*Unschuld der Töne*). As I understand it, this has to do with his discovery of the unstressed nature of Greek language, song, and music; it contributes to his freeing tragedy from the teleological pattern that Aristotle so heavily imposed on it. Can we expand on this, as you seem to hint? Can we draw on Nietzsche’s genealogy of debt and sin, to say that these are tones that no longer have a

debt to pay – that they do not require redemption by Anaximander’s “order of time”? (cf. *Hallelujah Effect*, 236-37).

- 3- In *The Hallelujah Effect* (247) you write “For Nietzsche, regarded from the perspective of the creative artist, ‘art’ has a melancholy aspect.” The analysis of melancholy is traditionally physiological, involving a theory of bodily humors in which melancholy is black bile. Would a physiology of aesthetics have to include or comprehend an “anatomy of melancholy”? Would it replace the humors with concepts drawn from more contemporary neurological studies?
- 4- You cite some conversations with my former teacher, Jacob Taubes. He is known now for his influential research in political theology (he was provoked in part by Carl Schmitt, drew on Overbeck, has been absorbed by Agamben). In Taubes’s final lectures on Paul, this research includes insightful praise of Nietzsche. While much of your Nietzsche-inflected work does treat social questions broadly conceived, especially with regard to mass media and social media, does Nietzsche also have at least the sketch of a “philosophy of the Antichrist” that would put him in dialogue with the tradition of political theology? Or to put this differently, why is Dionysus the name of the Anti-Christ?

As she lucidly explains, for Nietzsche affirmation of life is affirmation of suffering, joy is always intertwined with pain and sorrow, eros the bittersweet rules.