The Pathology of a Genealogist


David Krell’s fine book is an account of Nietzsche’s infectiousness on the history of the last one hundred years of philosophy. In addition he gives a kind of genealogy of his own encounter with, and reading of, the texts of Nietzsche and the texts of others on those of Nietzsche.

If Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra is a “return of language to the nature of imagery” (Ecce Homo, “Why I Write Such Good Books”; Thus Spoke Zarathustra, #6), Krell’s Infectious Nietzsche is a mirror-image of the same. Its prose is poetic and imaginative—as readers of his other works would expect. Krell’s thinking on and through the Nietzschean texts is analogous to the work which the pathologist does in the field of medicine. Krell presents in the register of philosophic discourse the pathology of a genealogist named Nietzsche. “What unifies the book is the preoccupation with questions touching health and illness throughout—both as material for genealogical critique and as a challenge to the genealogist. For issues of health and illness seem to impinge on the life of every writer, from Plato to Pierre, whether what is written is genealogical analysis, historical study, philosophy, or fiction” (Preface, xi).

Krell’s Nietzsche “remains first and foremost a genealogist” (x). Indeed he is “an infected and infectious one” (Introduction, xiii). Infectious Nietzsche unfolds in twelve chapters. The first three chapters center on Critica genealogica. They show Krell’s earliest encounters with Nietzsche beginning in 1969. From the outset the Nietzschean project is one of descensional reflection. “The genealogical method of suspicion subverts all grounds, abandoning us to a realm that can only be underground” (xiv). This underground—will to power—is contested by others (Granier, Deleuze, Foucault) to whom Krell gives voice, but he insists “will to power remains the single most important factor in genealogical analysis. Will to power as art, rather than as knowledge, soon takes us to the experience of eternal recurrence of the same” (xiv). Krell muses on the Dionysian/tragic character of the Nietzschean thought of thoughts, following its ambiguous contours as burden, task, and consolation, and
concludes: "one must learn to think eternal recurrence of the same as downgoing, thinking the thought within the parameters of a descensional reflection, a thinking that in its most soaring affirmation goes down" (xv).

In these opening chapters, Krell engages in a reading of the Deleuze/Foucault/Granier readings of the Nietzschean texts. He plays on and with the ups and downs of these readings. The chapter titles—"Inventories of Decadence," "The Decadence of Inventories," "The Decadence of Redemption"—play on this play. Indeed the very subheadings within the three chapters do the same—for example, "The Genealogy of Ground; the Grounds of Genealogy," "The Genealogy of Language; the Language of Genealogy," "Radiant Affirmation versus Paltry Consolation." All of this is carried out in the function of Krell's understanding of decensional reflection. He writes:

From beginning to end, Nietzsche's reflection is descensional, its trajectory decisively earthbound. His thought describes an epochal turn in the history of Western thought from Hegel to Heidegger, which I define provisionally as the descent of reflection from thought on das Absolute to thought on der Abgrund; the descent of reflection from the death of God to the death of human beings—the descent of reflection in both cases implying the demise of metaphysical logos. (78)

In the next two chapters Krell reads the founding fathers of the metaphysical logos ancient and modern, as well as their greatest descendents. "Chapters 4 and 5 treat of Nietzschean genealogy in relation to Plato's Phaedo, Descartes's Meditations, Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, and Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit and Lectures on the History of Philosophy" (xiii). Krell's reading is a post-Nietzschean one, and thus attuned to the aforementioned return of language to the nature of imagery. Chapter 4 bears the title, "The Cock: Reading Plato (after Nietzsche)," and chapter 5 "Der Maulwurf/The Mole: Reading Kant and Hegel (after Nietzsche)."

The fourth chapter contains reflections on that "frightful confrontation" bearing the names "Nietzsche and Plato" (83). The Nietzschean task understood "as overcoming Platonism" (83) is a response to the nihilism infecting metaphysics/philosophy:

If the history of Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato, if philosophy itself consists of variations on the theme of Platonism, then Nietzsche wants to write the last variation, the one that will exhaust all remaining possibilities for Platonism and bring philosophy as such to a close. (83)

This is necessary since metaphysics/philosophy is infected with passive nihilism—with Platonism as its ultimate origin. "And all reservations and qualifications aside, we know that Plato had something to do with