

“I owe to you the most beautiful dream of my life.”
- Nietzsche, [from a letter to Lou Salome]

I cannot help but admire Nietzsche when he writes in *Twilight of the Idols* that there is nothing beautiful but man. For Nietzsche, vanity is ‘the first truth of aesthetics.’ He even supplies a corollary: ugliness is precisely the ‘degeneration of the human.’ Here Nietzsche method allows us to see possibility for new forms of humanity, but he skirts dangerously close to anthropomorphizing the entire universe as isomorphic to our social spectacle. Is beauty a vain preoccupation — or an elevation of the human to the cosmic? What is left of beauty, human or otherwise — outside of what we *customarily* associate with it?

What else, then, *is* beauty, besides an inborn addiction to custom, which finally becomes natural grace? He is certainly right that beauty, after all, is reckoned by an imaginary yardstick! Whereas, on the contrary, ugliness accompanies — and even establishes — the moral or customary exercise of power. Nietzsche precedes Artaud here in demonstrating every action is (a) cruelty. Thus if our power cannot express itself through action, it turns inward: “All instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly turn inward... thus it was that man first developed what was later called his ‘soul’” (*Genealogy of Morals*)

Yet as we become part of the human story, we become increasingly beautiful. And only if we give ourselves up completely to custom, from our heart out and from the earliest years of our life, can we ever hope to grow beautiful — by losing our instincts for self-preservation. Our power for violent self-assertion assuredly degenerates from non-use, just as our ability to defend ourselves slackens when we commit ourselves to symbolic rituals and social custom. And it is certain that over time we tend to make ourselves into these kinds of totalized subjects given over entirely to social processes, to a given sequence of cultural practices.

Thus we grow in beauty (or equivalently: vanity) when we do *not* pass through the tiresome struggle for power and survival, processes which inevitably leave marks upon our bodies, rip our youth from us, criss-cross our human beauty with lines of resistance, deposit genealogical traces of vital affirmations. Intense engagements never fail to leave their mark; sometimes they can even become the truth of our entire existence.

So what is the beauty of a dream, of a woman? Is it truly a form of degeneration — an abstinence from the exercise of power, from the cruelty of activity? Or is it a much more cunning malice still? Supposing woman is the truth — is her beauty degenerate, or is the degeneration of (“humanity’s”) truth itself beautiful? There is a non-dialectical evolution of beauty from weakness, as of society from custom or of truth from error. The degeneration of survival instincts is at once a becoming-beautiful: “This is why the old baboon is uglier than the young one, and why the young female baboon most closely resembles man: is the most beautiful baboon, that is to say.”

The conflict between ugliness and beauty is no contradiction, but a steady evolution of characteristic forms of cultural becomings. The structure of culture works itself into the symmetry of faces; we now recognize symmetry as the fact of entropy, of decline — pure symmetry is a degeneration (of the human) into a total chaos. The pure beauty of total symmetry,

of total chaos, is opposed from the beginning of time to organization, biological and otherwise. All organs struggle to survive within and upon the bodies they parasite. The will to power is a metaphor, and it is not.