ΠΑΙΣ ΠΑΙΖΩΝ. Homer, *Iliad* XV 362–364, Heraclitus, DK 22 B 52, and F. Nietzsche

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Introduction*

It is well known that Friedrich Nietzsche often used the simile, borrowed from prestigious Greek sources, of a child playing his childish games in the sand. The philosopher resorted to this image in different contexts, and not always with the same scope and meaning. From one occasion to the next, the degree of dependence and fidelity of

* The first version of this text has been read by my friend and former student, Bernardo Berruecos (UNAM, Mexico), to whom I am very grateful for his good advice; but he is in no way responsible for any remaining mistakes

Nietzsche's paraphrase on its sources (which are Heraclitus and Homer; *vide infra*, pp. 399–400) diverges considerably. Nor is there much certainty about the interpretation of the two Greek hypotexts, especially in the case of the 'obscure' Heraclitus, of course. Last but not least, the meaning that Nietzsche ascribes to his Greek sources does not necessarily coincide with the meaning that present-day scholars tend to attribute to them. All this may serve to indicate that the terrain on which the present article must move can be (hopefully) evocative and stimulating, but also slippery. Precisely for this reason I have considered this topic appropriate for expressing my respect and admiration for Professor Livio Rossetti, a scholar who has never been content with received certainties and who has always preferred to explore less trodden paths.

I will now list, by way of orientation, the main texts in which Nietzsche uses the image of the playing child. They are the following: *The Birth of Tragedy* §24, "On the Pathos of Truth,"[1] *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* §7, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers* §9, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (ii §5), *On the Genealogy of Morals* (ii §16). But I would like to make it clear at the outset that I do not intend to draw up a systematic list of *all* of Nietzsche's allusions to the child at play;[2] I am content not to forget any important passages and to briefly point out the differences between them and some of the problems these differences raise.

The passage from *The Birth of Tragedy* §24

In the penultimate chapter of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche compares the "tragic effect" and the aesthetic pleasure it provokes to certain musical (Wagnerian) dissonances. Both tragedy and dissonance reveal, according to him, an appetite for infinity, a desire "to go *beyond*" – a feeling that he describes as a "Dionysian phenomenon" and that

> again and again reveals to us the playful construction and destruction of the individual world as the overflow of a primordial delight. Thus the dark Heraclitus compares the world-building force to a playing child that places stones here and there and builds sand hills only to overthrow them again.[3]

Actually, the image of the child at play already appeared in one of the posthumous fragments (7[29], from 1870) preparatory to *The Birth of Tragedy*:

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[1] The first of the *Five Prefaces on Five Unwritten Books*.

[2] A complete list of all mentions of Heraclitus in Nietzsche can be found in Genovés Company's PhD thesis (2015). For a comprehensive interpretation of the complex and multi-layered image that Nietzsche forged, throughout his career, of Heraclitus, *vide* Rayman (2023: 40–76).

[3] Translation by Kaufmann (Gay, Kaufmann 1967: 142). The original text reads as follows: "(...) das uns immer von Neuem wieder das spielende Aufbauen und Zertrümmern der Individualwelt als den Ausfluss einer Urlust offenbart, in einer ähnlichen Weise, wie wenn von Heraklit dem Dunklen die weltbildende Kraft einem Kinde verglichen wird, das spielend Steine hin und her setzt und Sandhaufen aufbaut und wieder einwirft."

> Tragedy is beautiful insofar as the instinct that creates the terrible in life appears here as an artistic instinct, with its smile, as a child at play.[4]

There is a general consensus that Nietzsche is referring here to the Heraclitean fragment DK 22 B 52 (= 93 Marcovich = 97 Fronterotta).[5] Such a *communis opinio* can be illustrated, for example, by Gherardo Ugolini's comment (2007: 146):

> Il "gioco artistico" della volontà, dalla cui percezione scaturisce il senso di piacere proprio della tragedia musicale dionisiaca, viene meglio esplicato attraverso il richiamo a un celebre frammento di Eraclito [DK 22 B 52]: tale gioco si rivela nient'altro che un allegro diletto casuale e infantile di incessante costruzione e distruzione.

But there is an important question, and one that is worth raising from the outset. If we do not stick strictly to Nietzsche's *nominatim* mention of Heraclitus, it is clear that the image of the child has a more direct and immediate hypotext in a well-known passage from the *Iliad* (Hom. *Il.* XV 360 ff.):

> ... πρὸ δ' Ἀπόλλων
> αἰγίδ' ἔχων ἐρίτιμον· ἔρειπε δὲ τεῖχος Ἀχαιῶν
> ῥεῖα μάλ', ὡς ὅτε τις ψάμαθον πάϊς ἄγχι θαλάσσης,
> ὅς τ' ἐπεὶ οὖν ποιήσῃ ἀθύρματα νηπιέῃσιν,
> ἂψ αὖτις συνέχευε ποσὶν καὶ χερσὶν ἀθύρων.
> ὣς ῥα σύ, ἤϊε Φοῖβε, πολὺν κάματον καὶ ὀϊζὺν
> σύγχεας Ἀργείων, αὐτοῖσι δὲ φύζαν ἐνῶρσας.
>
> ... with Apollo in front of them holding
> the tremendous aegis, and wrecked the bastions of the Achaians
> easily, as when a little boy piles sand by the sea-shore
> when in his innocent play he makes sand towers to amuse him
> and then, still playing, with hands and feets ruins them and wrecks them.
> So you, lord Apollo, piled in confusion much hard work
> and painful done by the Argives and drove terror among them.[6]

The Homeric narrator compares the ease and effortlessness with which Apollo destroys a long stretch of the Achaean wall to that of a child pulling down the sand castles he himself has erected. Overrunning the Wall had cost Hector and his men the whole of

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[4] "Die Tragödie ist schön, insofern der Trieb, der das Schreckliche im Leben schafft, hier als Kunsttrieb, mit seinem Lächeln, als spielendes Kind erscheint." Cfr. Barbera (1992: 58); de Santiago Guervós (2007: 152).

[5] Some scholars also adduce, in a complementary way, frs. DK 22 B 70 (παίδων ἀθύρματα τὰ ἀνθρώπινα δοξάσματα) and also DK 22 B 124 (ὥσπερ †σὰρξ† εἰκῆ κεχυμένων ὁ κάλλιστος κόσμος.)

[6] I am using the classic translation by Richmond Lattimore (1951).

book XII of the *Iliad*; but the product of such long and arduous human labour is destroyed by the god with the greatest of ease, with a couple of kicks.[7] According to the poet of the *Iliad*, the stark contrast between divine power and human weakness gives Apollo the capacity to behave with a supernatural and, at the same time, almost childish irresponsibility.

What has happened in the passage from *The Birth of Tragedy*, is that Nietzsche has merged the two texts, the Homeric and the Heraclitean, without taking the trouble to make it explicit. The thing is, in itself, well known,[8] although many Nietzsche scholars – perhaps unconsciously following the master's example – do not bother to point it out.[9]

Nietzsche, however, had good reasons for expressly mentioning the Heraclitean fragment instead of *Il.* XV 360 ff. For one thing, there is the German philosopher's devotion to the Ephesian (a devotion never revoked throughout his intellectual career);[10] and, above all, the substantial impact of Heraclitus on a number of important developments in *The Birth of Tragedy*.[11] All this was more than enough to counterbalance the 'philological' advantages that *Il.* XV 362 ff. could have offered over the Heraclitean fragment, namely:

– A more close resemblance to the image of the playing child used by Nietzsche.
– The *Iliad* was a text more familiar to many of Nietzsche's potential readers.
– Unlike fr. DK 22 B 52, it did not raise complex problems of interpretation.

On the other hand, whatever inaccuracy there might be in quoting only Heraclitus,and omitting the Iliadic passage altogether, it must not have troubled Nietzsche at all. *The Birth of Tragedy* denotes, generally speaking, a deliberate indifference (not to say contempt) to details of this kind; an indifference that managed to infuriate Nietzsche's more punctilious academic colleagues.

The Passage from *On the Pathos of Truth*

The image of the divine child at play is found again in a passage from "Über das Pathos der Wahrheit," the first of the *Five Prefaces on Five Unwritten Books*.[12] In this text, Nietzsche

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[7] Cfr. especially XV 365: πολὺν κάματον καὶ ὀϊζύν. Griffin (1980: 130) speaks of "...the poet's sense of the pathos of vain human effort, and also the divine scale, on which nothing achieved or endured by men can be really serious." In the same sense, see Otto (1954 [1929]: 241–42), Pòrtulas (*forthcoming*), etc.

[8] Cfr. *e.g.* Barbera (1992: 59–60), Genovés Company (2015: 154–155, 162, 167, 230, 231, n.739, *etc.*), Halliwell (2018: 109–110), *etc.*

[9] Halliwell (*cit.* n. 75) gives exhaustive lists of scholars who indicate the fusion and of those who ignore it (but do not deny it). The number of the latter is by far predominant.

[10] I will limit myself to two examples, both belonging to Nietzsche's last period: section §2 of "'Reason' in Philosophy" (in: *Twilight of the Idols*) and the chapter of *Ecce homo* devoted to *The Birth of Tragedy*.

[11] An argument developed by Halliwell (2018: 109–110); see also Silk, Stern (1981: 209–210, 291, 377, *etc.*).

[12] Nietzsche did not write (nor did he intend to) any of the five essays that this title seems to promise. He simply put together the five prologues and presented the booklet to Cosima Wagner as a Christmas gift for the year 1872.

reflects on the figure of the model philosopher: his pride, his isolation, the complex relationship he maintains with the dissemination of his own thought and, above all, the risks that "the pathos of truth" entails for him. He finds the model *par excellence* for all this in old Heraclitus:

> It is important to learn from such people that they once lived. One would never be able to imagine, as an idle possibility, the pride of the wise Heraclitus, who may be our example [...] Heraclitus was incredible among people, as a person; and if he was seen paying attention to the game of noisy children, then in any case he considered what a mortal never considered on such an occasion – the game of the great world child Zeus and the eternal joke of a world shattering and a world coming into being...[13]

Nietzsche here identifies "the playing child" with "das große Weltkind Zeus": while remaining a metaphor for the eternal movement of the universe, the same image which, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, symbolised the basic dissonance of the Dionysian spirit, at the same time creator and destroyer, has here been placed at the service of the construction of an ideal figure of the philosopher. Moreover, the sentences we have just quoted are indebted – not only for their content, but also for their descriptive and communicative power – to an anecdote (most probably apocryphal, but very famous) handed down by Diogenes Laertius (IX 3):

> ἀξιούμενος δὲ καὶ νόμους θεῖναι πρὸς αὐτῶν ὑπερεῖδε διὰ τὸ ἤδη κεκρατῆσθαι τῇ πονηρᾷ πολιτείᾳ τὴν πόλιν. ἀναχωρήσας δ' εἰς τὸ ἱερὸν τῆς Ἀρτέμιδος μετὰ τῶν παίδων ἠστραγάλιζε· περιστάντων δ' αὐτὸν τῶν Ἐφεσίων, "τί, ὦ κάκιστοι, θαυμάζετε;", εἶπεν· "ἢ οὐ κρεῖττον τοῦτο ποιεῖν ἢ μεθ' ὑμῶν πολιτεύεσθαι;"

> And when he was requested by them [*scil.* the Ephesians] to make laws, he scorned the request because the state was already in the grip of a bad constitution. He would retire to the temple of Artemis and play at knuckle-bones with the boys; and when the Ephesians stood round him and looked on, "Why, you rascals, he said, are you astonished? Is it not better to do this than to take part on your civil life?"[14]

The historical existence of Heraclitus serves Nietzsche as a reassurance that, despite its rarity and improbability, the figure of the philosopher is '*possible*', and not only in the

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[13] Translation by Ferrer (2020). German original text: "Es ist wichtig von solchen Menschen zu erfahren, daß sie einmal gelebt haben. Nie würde man sich, als müßige Möglichkeit, den Stolz des weisen Heraklit, der unser Beispiel sein mag, imaginiren können (...) Unter Menschen war Heraklit, als Mensch, unglaublich; und wenn er wohl gesehen wurde, wie er auf das Spiel lärmender Kinder Acht gab, so hat er dabei jedenfalls bedacht, was nie ein Sterblicherbei solcher Gelegenheit bedacht hat – das Spiel des großen Weltenkindes Zeus und den ewigen Scherz einer Weltzertrümmerung und einer Weltentstehung."

[14] Translation by Hicks (1931).

distant times of archaic Greece but also – albeit more imperfectly and more difficultly – in the debased and degraded present:

> Therefore no one, if he is not instructed by history, will be able to believe in such a regal self-respect, in such an unfettered conviction that he is the only happy suitor of truth. Such people live in their own solar system; one must seek them out there (...) In a remote sanctuary, under images of gods, next to great cold architecture, such a being may appear more understandable.[15]

The image of a sage contemplating children at play as a characterisation of the philosopher reappears briefly in the posthumous fragment 11[141] from 1881, which contains the first intuition of the Eternal Return:

> What will this life look like in terms of its sum of well-being? A child's game, watched by the eye of the sage...[16]

The Cosmic Interpretation of the Playing Child

In two later texts, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* and the *Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, we can find a more complex and articulate use of the simile of the playing child and also, incidentally, a confirmation of the profound relationship that in Nietzsche's view there was (although he did not usually specify it) between *Il.* XV 362 ff. and DK 22 B 52.

These two works are practically contemporary, but very different from a formal point of view. The first is a carefully drafted text, but never published by its author. He had prepared the manuscript to take it to Richard Wagner's house in Bayreuth in the spring holidays of 1873, read it there and give it to the composer as a birthday present. But the text was received rather coolly, and Nietzsche, who in his correspondence had already expressed reservations about the degree of maturity it still lacked,[17] postponed its publication *sine die*.[18] In fact, he never published it, although he continued to teach university

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[15] Translation by Ferrer (2020). German text: "Deshalb wird Niemand, wenn er nicht durch die Historie belehrt ist, an eine so königliche Selbstachtung, an eine so unbegränzte Überzeugtheit, dereinzige beglückte Freier der Wahrheit zu sein, glauben mögen. Solche Menschen leben in ihremeignen Sonnensystem; darin muß man sie aufsuchen (...) In einem abgelegnen Heiligthum, unter Götterbildern, neben kalter großartiger Architektur mag so ein Wesen begreiflicher erscheinen."

[16] German text: "Wie wird dies Leben in Bezug auf seine Summe von Wohlbefinden sich ausnehmen? Ein Spiel der Kinder, auf welches das Auge des Weisen blickt."

[17] In a letter to Carl von Gersdorff dated 5 April 1873. Cfr. D'Iorio (2011: 383 & n. 1) and de Santiago Guervós (Sánchez Meca *et al.* 2016[2]: 481).

[18] Vide Colli (1973: 432 ff.); M. Cohen-Halimi (De Launay *et al.* 2000: 1016–1022); D'Iorio (2011: 383, 387, 410–11).

courses on the subject. He also tried to rescue it on a couple of occasions, supplementing it with two attempts at a preface.

The passage that interests us most directly for our present topic is the following:

> (...) And even that cardinal impulse, how the pure fire could enter into such impure forms, is overcome by him [= *Heraclitus*] by a sublime simile. In this world only the play of the artist and the child has a becoming and passing, a building and destroying without any moral imputation in eternally equal innocence. And so, as the child and the artist plays, the eternally living fire plays (...) Transforming himself into water and earth, [... *the Aiōn*][19] piles up heaps of sand on the sea like a child, piles up and smashes...[20]

As for the *Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, these are the notes that Nietzsche used to teach a three-hour-a-week course at the University of Basel – a course he taught for the first time in the summer semester of 1872 and repeated twice more (1873, 1876).[21] In keeping with their function as *aide-memoire*, these notes often look like a simple juxtaposition of ideas, quotations and references, with a loose syntactical structure. They also display other characteristics typical of university notes: analysis and discussion of sources, specialised polemics, explicit mention of the bibliography.

Here are the passages that have the most points of contact with the text of *The Philosophy...* quoted *supra*:

> In his demiurgic activity, Zeus is compared to a child who (as stated of Apollo in *Il.* XV 361) builds and destroys sand castles on the beach. Cf. *Rhein. Mus*. VII, p. 109, Bernays.
> H[*eraclitus*] had a sublime metaphor for this: only in the play of the child (or in art) does there exist a becoming and passing away without any moral attribution. As an unartistic person, he turned to the child's play.
> This playing cosmic child is continually building and destroying, but from time to time begins his game anew...[22]

It is easy to recognise that *Philosophy in the Tragic Age...* and *Pre-Platonic Philosophers* convey practically the same ideas (although not always in the same order) and that several

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[19] On this term, see *infra*, pp. 407-408.

[20] Translation by Newcomb (2024). Original text: "Und selbst jener cardinale Anstoß, wie das reine Feuer in so unreine Formeneinziehen könne, wird von ihm durch ein erhabenes Gleichnis überwunden. Ein Werden und Vergehen, ein Bauen und Zerstören, ohne jede moralische Zurechnung, in ewig gleicher Unschuld, hat in dieser Welt allein das Spiel des Künstlers und des Kindes. Und so, wie das Kind und der Künstler spielt, spielt das ewig lebendige Feuer, baut auf und zerstört, in Unschuld – und dieses Spiel spielt der Aeon mit sich. Sich verwandelnd in Wasser und Erde thürmt er, wie ein Kind Sandhaufen am Meere, thürmt auf und zertrümmert..."

[21] Full details in D'Iorio (2011: 383, 385 ff.); see also Whitlock (2006: xxxvii–xlv).

[22] Translation by Whitlock (2006), modified. German original: "Zeus wird in seiner weltenbildenden Thätigkeit mit einem Kinde verglichen das (wie *Ilias* XV 361 von Apollo gesagt wird) Sandhaufen am Strande des Meeres baut u. zerstört (...) Hierfür hatte H. ein erhabenes Gleichnis: ein Werden u. Vergehen ohne jede moralische Zurechnung giebt es nur im Spiel des Kindes (oder in der Kunst). Als unkünstlerischer Mensch

expressions, among the most important, are reiterated almost literally and give the two texts a strong resemblance.[23] In both texts the comparison with the child at play refers to a cyclical cosmic process, characterised by alternating creative and destructive phases. It is worth recalling that, in the passage from *The Birth of Tragedy* quoted at the beginning, it is a feeling of Dionysian pleasure triggered by both music and tragedy that prompts the comparison with the playing child. This does not mean that the cosmic dimension is absent from *BT*, since poetic activity reflects in individual terms the universal "weltbildende Kraft," the "world-building force." But in the Nietzschean passages just mentioned, the cosmic process occupies the foreground and dominates everything.

Let us also note that, in *Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, Nietzsche explicitly mentions *Il.* XV 361 ff.; and he also gives the bibliographical reference to an article by J. Bernays in the *Rheinisches Museum* for 1850, important for reconstructing, in terms already close to contemporary ones, what has become our fragment DK 22 B 52. Below we will briefly examine some features of this process of reconstruction, as this will be useful for a better understanding of the connection between Heraclitus and Homer.

And a final point: the comparison with the child is repeatedly described by Nietzsche as "ein erhabenes Gleichnis." When it comes to translating the word *Gleichnis*, translators hesitate. Thus, for example, Giorgio Colli (1973: 300) translates '*immagine*'; De Launay (De Launay *et al.* 2000: 360): '*analogie*'; de Santiago Guervós (Sánchez Meca *et al.* 2016²: 592): '*metáfora*'; Newcomb (2024: 31): 'simile'. Other feasible proposals could be 'parable', 'allegory', 'comparison', and so on. But it seems unquestionable that Nietzsche resorts to the term "Gleichnis" for a double reason: (a) to remind us that the image has its remote origin in a traditional "Homeric simile";[24] (b) to underline that Heraclitus does not resolve the aporia with which he is confronted (the ups and downs and multiple vicissitudes of cosmic fire) by hypotheses, reasoning or rational argumentation of any kind, but by means of a simile borrowed from a poet. The question is concluded in an intuitive and dazzling way – as the epithet *erhaben* (≈ 'sublime') underlines.

The Constitution of the Text of DK 22 B 52

Some of the questions that have arisen so far can be better understood if we bear in mind that the text of DK 22 B 52 was not quite the same in Nietzsche's time as it is today. Nineteenth-century philologists worked hard to improve it.[25] It is well known that Nietzsche

griff er nach dem Kinderspiel (...) Jenes spielende Weltenkind baut u. zertrümmert fortwährend, aber von Zeit zu Zeit fängt es das Spiel von Neuem an..."

[23] Cfr. already Barbera (1992: 61): "Si debbono considerare insieme i due testi di Nietzsche su Eraclito perché essi si illuminano, per così dire, a vicenda."

[24] It may be useful to refer here to the title of Hermann Fraenkel's (1888–1977) classic monograph: *Die homerischen Gleichnisse* 1977 [1921].

[25] See Gritti (2012: 268 ff.) for a brief but useful survey of Heraclitean studies throughout the nineteenth century.

relied on the Heraclitean edition of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1808) – canonical until Ingram Bywater's 1877 edition and Hermann Diels' first edition (1901) – and that he took the *Heraklitische Studien* of J. Bernays very much into account.[26] He also consulted the monographs of F. Lassalle (1847–1858) and P. Schuster (1873).[27]

The text of our fragment, transmitted in its entirety by the *Refutation of All Heresies*,[28] and also taken up for the most part in Lucian's *Philosophies for sale* (DK 22 C 5 = T 568, 15 Mouraviev),[29] does not raise problems today:

αἰὼν παῖς ἐστι παίζων, πεσσεύων· παιδὸς ἡ βασιληίη.

Its meaning, however, is still disputed. I reproduce, for the moment, the translation proposed by A. Laks & G. Most (2016):[30]

A lifetime is a child playing, playing checkers: the kingship belongs to a child.

However, during the first half of the 19th century, Book IX of the *Refutatio* was not yet known. The manuscript containing Books IV–X was not discovered (in a monastery on Mount Athos) until 1842; the first edition dates from 1851. Until then, in order to reconstruct the Heraclitean passage, scholars had to rely mainly on the (fortunately quite faithful) paraphrase of Lucian's *Vitarum auctio* (XIV 11–16):

Ηρακλειτος

... καί ἐστι τὠυτὸ τέρψις ἀτερψίη, γνῶσις ἀγνωσίη, μέγα μικρόν, ἄνω κάτω περιχωρέοντα καὶ ἀμειβόμενα ἐν τῇ τοῦ αἰῶνος παιδιῇ.

Αγοραστης

Τί γὰρ ὁ αἰών ἐστι;

Ηρακλειτος

Παῖς παίζων, πεσσεύων, συμφερόμενος, διαφερόμενος.[31]

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[26] Cfr. Barbera (1992: 60 & n. 30); D'Iorio & Fronterotta (1994: 153, 156, 310–312, 316, 318–319); Genovés Company (2015: 46–53, 310 ff., 321 ff., etc.); Halliwell (2018: 109 & n. 75). Nietzsche does not record this debt in *BT* or in *Philosophy in the Tragic Age...* (which are texts without notes); but he does so in *Pre-Socratic Philosophers*. On Jacob Bernays (1824–1881), see the essays collected in Glucker, Laks (1996) and Momigliano (2016).

[27] Rayman (2023: 57–61) discusses the influence on Nietzsche of historians of Greek thought such as F. Ueberweg, J. Bernays, F. Lassalle, M. Heinze, E. Dühring and E. Zeller, and how Nietzsche took up, and transformed, many of their views.

[28] *Refutatio* ix 9, 4 = T 664, 49 Mouraviev. This work is frequently attributed (but with considerable doubt) to Hippolytus of Rome.

[29] The editions by Marcovich (1967: 490–492), Mouraviev (2006: 362) and Fronterotta (2013: 373) also adduce a number of more distant reminiscences and allusions: Philo, *de aetern. mundi* 42; Clem.Al. *Paed*. I 5; Plut. *de E* 393E; D.L. IX 3 (*supra*, p. 401; *infra*, p. 408 n. 44); Procl. *in Tim.* I 334.

[30] For a very copious (29 entries!) but not exhaustive list of translations, see Bouvier, Dasen (2020: 7–8).

[31] Bernays (1850: 109 n. 2) suggested reading συνδιαφερόμενος, instead of the expression "συμφερόμενος, διαφερόμενος" (*vel simil.*) of Lucian's mss. D'Iorio, Fronterotta (1994: 316, n. 59) translate this participle by "les faisant concorder dans le désaccord."

Heraclitus

... Pleasure is one with pain, knowledge with ignorance, great with small; up and down they go, around and about, changing places, the sport of *aiōn*.

Buyer

What then is *aiōn*?

Heraclitus

A child playing, playing checkers – separating them, bringing them together.[32]

As can be seen, it is not particularly difficult to extract the Heraclitean fragment from Lucian's text, except for its enigmatic final part (παιδὸς ἡ βασιληίη), preserved only by the *Refutatio*.[33] As for the connection between Heraclitus' "παῖς παίζων" and the Iliadic simile, Bernays finds it confirmed by the following text of Plutarch:[34]

... ἢ τοῦ ποιητικοῦ παιδὸς ἔσται φαυλότερος, ἢν ἐκεῖνος ἔν τινι ψαμάθῳ συντιθεμένῃ καὶ διαχεομένῃ πάλιν ὑφ' αὑτοῦ παίζει παιδιάν, ταύτῃ περὶ τὰ ὅλα χρώμενος ἀεὶ καὶ τὸν κόσμον οὐκ ὄντα πλάττων εἶτ' ἀπολλύων γενόμενον.

... otherwise the god will be more futile than the Poet's fancied child playing a game among the sand that he heaps up and then scatters again, if the god indulges in this game with the universe constantly, shaping the world that does not exist, and destroying it again when it does exist.[35]

In this passage, the "παῖς ποιητικός" and the sand on the seashore are obviously allusions to Homer, while the etymological figure "παίζει παιδιάν" unmistakably evokes Heraclitus. Bernays, like most of his contemporaries, interpreted Heraclitus' vestiges from a Stoic point of view;[36] but a passage like the present one, despite Plutarch's censure of the ἐκπύρωσις (*i.e.*, the periodic cosmic conflagration postulated by Stoicism), suited him well to support the link between 'Homer' and Heraclitus.[37]

All this allows us to conjecture that Heraclitus himself had already alluded to the Iliadic passage in a tone of criticism or parody. After all, our sources – be they Hippolytus, Lucian or Plutarch – do not help us to contextualise the very short Heraclitean fragment; it is important to bear this in mind. Moreover, it is well known that the polemic against

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[32] English translation (modified) by Reardon (1965). See Bouvier, Dasen (2020: 12).

[33] In Bernays' *Gesammelte Abhandlungen* (edited, after his death, by Hermann Usener) there is an Appendix where the new materials are taken into consideration.

[34] Plu. *De E* 393e = T *b*[2], *apud* fr. 93 Marcovich. Cfr. Halliwell (2018: 109 n. 75).

[35] English translation by F.C. Babbitt (1936), somewhat modified.

[36] A view Bernays shared with F. Ueberweg, E. Zeller, T. Gomperz, O. Gigon, R. Mondolfo and others; cfr. Rayman (2023: 63, n. 92).

[37] This is one of the points on which Nietzsche radically disagrees with Bernays. See Rayman (2023: 54 n. 33): "One of the virtues [*of Nietzsche's*] early writings [*is*] to show that he realized that *ekpurosis* was a Stoic invention, in contrast to Hershbell and Nimis's [1979: 35] ascription to Nietzsche of the belief that *ekpurosis* was Heraclitean."

Homer (sarcastically described as τῶν Ἑλλήνων σοφώτερος πάντων ≈ "the wisest of all the Greeks") was an important component of Heraclitus' thought.[38] However, at the present state of our knowledge, such a hypothesis is impossible to prove.

Problems of Interpretation of Fr. 22 B 52: *ΑΙΩΝ*

Leaving aside the complexities surrounding the constitution of the text, let us now turn to the interpretative issues of the fragment. Despite its brevity, virtually everything in it raises difficulties: (1) the meaning to be given to the term αἰών; (2) what kind of game the child is playing; (3) the enigmatic expression παιδὸς ἡ βασιληίη.

To begin with, it is not at all clear that αἰών means, in archaic times, 'eternity', or 'cosmic time' – although, certainly, this is how the term was understood by the *Refutatio* and practically all other ancient sources, which read the fragment from a metaphysical or theological perspective. This is the case with Philo of Alexandria (*de aetern. mundi* xlii), Clement (*Paed.* I 21, 4), Plutarch (*vide supra*) and Proclus (*in Tim.* I 334, 1).[39] All of them identify the αἰών of Heraclitus with the cosmic fire, Zeus, the demiurge or the Divinity.

However, the cosmic meaning of αἰών is not securely documented until Plato's *Timaeus*. Kirk (1954: xiii) states emphatically:

> I am prepared to maintain that in early contexts and used by itself (...) the word is most likely to refer to the human lifetime, perhaps with the special connotation of the destiny which is worked out by the individual during his lifetime.

The fact that in Plato the term eventually acquired the approximate meaning of 'eternity' – *scil.* "duration for ever," in contrast to a "temporal duration" – is not surprising, since αἰών comes from the same root as αἰεί.[40] But, in Heraclitus' time, the meaning of the term must have been something like "vital force, vitality"; from there, it came to mean "time or duration of a human life".[41] However, the scarcity of documents serving to trace the diachronic evolution of the word in the desirable detail makes it difficult to completely dispel the uncertainties. Hence a scholar of the stature of Degani (2001²: 33), after stating that Heraclitus' αἰών refers to the "fluire del tempo (...) apparentemente

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[38] See the fragments DK 22 B 42 and B 56 (= 30 and 21 Marcovich) and, presumably, also B 105 and A 22 (= 63a and 28c Marcovich). See on this question, among an extensive bibliography, Babut (1976); Pòrtulas (1993: 159–161).

[39] Texts in Marcovich (1967: 490–491).

[40] See, in the same sense, Hülsz Piccone (2011: 190). But, as Kahn (1979: 228) states, "this later technical sense is irrelevant here."

[41] Cfr. Onians (1951: 405-06 n. 8); Marcovich (1967: 494); Fraenkel (1975: 393 n. 55); Kahn (1979: 228); Pradeau (2002: 304–305); Fronterotta (2013: 373). *Contra*, Mondolfo (1971: 222-25), West (1971: 158–159) and others. Finkelberg (2009: 335) tentatively identifies it "with 'the *Great Year*' (...), a metaphorical use for the life-period of the created world."

capriccioso ed irrazionale," and that it is not "il tempo astratto, quanto piuttosto il tempo della vita," ends by reminding us that drawing too strict a distinction between "Individuelle Lebenszeit" and 'Weltzeit' is not always feasible or convincing. Hülsz Piccone (2011: 264), for his part, underlines the exegetical advantages of not positioning oneself exclusively in favour of either of the two alternatives:

> La dualidad de posibilidades – el tiempo cósmico y el tiempo humano – no exige (ni permite) por sí misma optar por ninguno de los dos, sino que, al contrario, cada uno implica necesariamente al otro: la dimensión antropológica y la dimensión cosmológica aparecen integradas.[42]

In any case, and despite all the uncertainties, it seems clear that we are moving in a domain comparatively alien to the αἰών as eternity, cosmic force, "ewige Dauer," etc., which Nietzsche found in his sources and in the scholars of his time,[43] and which he never came to question.

The Meaning of *"ΠΑΙΖΩΝ, ΠΕΣΣΕΥΩΝ."* The *ΒΑΣΙΛΗΙΗ* of Child

As for the πεσσοί, they seem to refer to a kind of draughts game; but exactly how they worked is not known. It is not known, indeed, whether they incorporated any element of chance and (if so) to what extent. A simple dice game is virtually ruled out. Degani (2001²: 34) recalls that the exact word for dice is ἀστράγαλοι and the verb for "playing dice", ἀστραγαλίζειν. But we do not know whether these terms were always used rigorously.[44] It is possible that the πεσσοί were some kind of mixed game – indeed, most Greek games were; perhaps a combination of draughts and dice, in which the dice conditioned the moves of the pieces. According to Kahn (1979: 71), it could be a "board game, perhaps involving dice, like backgammon and modern Greek *tavli*." Degani (2001²: 33), however, insists that it must be a game "of skill and intelligence," not of chance,[45] even though many critics perceive in the fragment (especially in the etymological figure, παῖς... παίζων ≈ "a child doing childish things") hints of something random or arbitrary, typical of children's games. Marcovich thinks it is likely to be something "fortuitous or meaningless," rather than "thoughtful and skillful." Fronterotta (2013: 374), on the other hand, suggests that, even if the game had rules, the child could play it at will: just like men, who live in

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[42] Similarly, Diano-Serra (1980: 152): "Saremmo obbligati a scegliere fra tempo della vita e tempo del mondo, solo se potessimo assumere in Eraclito una concezione astratta del tempo."

[43] Bernays himself always saw in αἰών an equivalent of Zeus.

[44] In any case, Diogenes Laertius (IX 3) employs ἀστραγαλίζειν in a passage which could refer to our fr. DK 22 B 52; cfr. Marcovich (1967: 494).

[45] In the same sense, Finkelberg (2009: 333 f.): "Rule-bound tactical games quite different from games of chance..."

ignorance of the law that governs their lives, but which they are unable to recognise.[46] Pradeau's view is similar (2002: 305):

> La citation s'apparente alors à celles, nombreuses, qui condamnent le caractère puéril de l'existence humaine, comme à celles qui dénoncent l'incapacité des hommes à se gouverner, fussent-ils d'âge mûr.

The hypothesis that fr. B 52 alludes to a game with precise rules, but that the child plays it in an irregular and capricious way, is confirmed by the work of specialists in ludography such as Ulrich Schädler, who stresses (2020: 148-151) that παίζειν *per se* already means "to play children's games," while the emphatic addition of πεσσεύων specifies that the παῖς "bouge des pions dans un jeu de plateau" designed for adults. He concludes (2009: 186–187) that

> what Heraclitus' child is doing is not to play a board game, but *to play as if he was playing a board game*, since he does not know the rules or the aim of the game.

As a result, the movements of his πεσσοί lack coherence.[47]

As for the closing sentence of the fragment, παιδὸς ἡ βασιληίη (literally, "the kingship belongs to a child"), it probably also conceals an allusion to children's games. One possibility is that it evokes the formula that, at the end of each round, proclaimed the winner "king of the game".[48] On the other hand, Schädler (2020: 155) recalls the existence of a game, called βασιλίνδα,

> où un enfant est élu 'roi' par l'ensemble des joueurs, qui doivent par la suite obéir à ses ordres, tout comme les pions dans la main de l'enfant ne bougent que selon sa volonté."

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[46] Other interpreters (*e.g.* Hülsz Piccone 2011: 260, n. 47) recall that such games were, in principle, for two players; the child could hardly play it properly alone.

[47] Schädler (2020: 154) also suggests that the expression συμφερόμενος, διαφερόμενος, which we find in the Lucianic parody of fr. B 52 (*vide supra*, p. 405-406) entailsan allusion to the incoherent and aimless movements of the πεσσοί.

[48] Cfr. *e.g.* García Calvo (1985: 256–257) and Conche (1986: 448). *Contra*, West (1971: 159) and Diano-Serra (1980: 152–153). Kurke (1999: 263–264) identified the βασιληίη with a special piece (like the queen in the game of chess); the player who got it received the title of 'βασιλεύς'. But Schädler (2020: 150–151) dismisses this hypothesis.

Heraclitus' other allusions to childhood are as follows:

DK 22 B 70 (= 92*d* Marcovich = 44c Fronterotta): men's opinions are like children's games[49]
DK 22 B 79 (= 92 Marcovich = 55 Fronterotta): the difference between a δαίμων and a man is comparable to that between an adult and a child.
DK 22 B 117 (= 69 Marcovich = 63 Fronterotta): a drunk man can be led even by a small child.
DK 22 B 121 (= 105 Marcovich = 87 Fronterotta): the political incompetence of the Ephesians is such that it would be better for them to hand over the government of their city to children.

All these mentions are – albeit to varying degrees – pejorative, and all of them imply a negative assessment of childhood,[50] although sometimes adults come off even worse than children. None of this encourages us to suppose that Heraclitus' παῖς made use of any special "skill or intelligence" in his games.

An "Artist's Cosmodicy"

So far we have discussed the problems intrinsic to DK 22 B 52 and some of the solutions they allow. But, as we pointed out at the beginning, one thing is the meaning that philologists can deduce from the usually very brief Heraclitean fragments and another (which may be quite different) is the meaning that Nietzsche himself attributed to them. In the case at hand, many of these differences derive from the fact that, unlike a good number of present-day interpreters, Nietzsche had no doubts about the '*cosmic*' meaning of the simile of the παῖς and his games.[51] In this "erhabenes Gleichnis" – as he calls the simile of fr. B 52 –[52] he found a much-desired demonstration that Heraclitus' cosmology was organised under the sign of an innocent play, which excluded any idea of morality, injustice or teleology.[53] In the action of the child there is no objective of any kind: incessant becoming exhausts itself, according to Nietzsche, in a playful form, and the cosmic game must be qualified as arbitrary. This is "the innocence of becoming." Such an interpretation of fr. B 52 can be glossed with another Heraclitean passage (DK 22 B 102 = 91 Marcovich = 57 Fronterotta), where the remoteness of the divinity from any moral judge-

[49] Many interpreters regard this fragment as a variant or reminiscence of B 79. Pradeau (2002: 305) sees it as an explanatory paraphrase of B 52.

[50] Fronterotta (2013: 374) stresses that immature age is equivalent for Heraclitus to "superficialità e leggerezza." Cfr. also Babut (1976: 472), Pradeau (2002: 304), *etc*.

[51] Contemporary scholars who reject – not always for the same reasons – the cosmic interpretation of fragment B 52 include Kirk (1954: xiii), Marcovich (1967: 493–495), Conche (1986: 446 ff.), Pradeau (2002: 305) and Fronterotta (2013: 373 ff.). The list is by no means exhaustive.

[52] *Vide supra*, pp. 403-404.

[53] Cfr. Rayman (2023: 53–54).

ment is also underlined: τῷ μὲν θεῷ καλὰ πάντα καὶ ἀγαθὰ καὶ δίκαια, ἄνθρωποι δὲ ἃ μὲν ἄδικα ὑπειλήφασιν ἃ δὲ δίκαια.[54]

The vindication of the cosmos on purely aesthetic grounds (as opposed to any theological, moral or teleological argumentation) is, as is well known, a concept stemming from Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy that also became a key notion in Nietzsche's thought.[55] One could speak of a kind of "artist's metaphysics." In fact, Erwin Rohde already used the formula "artistic cosmodicy" to refer to *BT*, in a letter to Nietzsche dated 6 February 1872, when this work had just appeared.[56] Nietzsche found the expression to his taste and resorted to it on more than one occasion.[57]

Two Mentions of the Child at Play *in Zarathustra*

At this point, we must refer to the (few) important mentions to the παῖς that remain to be discussed, namely in *Zarathustra* (1883–1885) and *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887). I think we can do this more briefly because the powerful image of the child, with all its implications and resonances, had already been integrated into Nietzsche's thought and his characteristic ways of expressing himself. In parallel, the intertextual relationship with the Greek hypotexts has become less relevant.

D'Iorio and Fronterotta (1994: 316 n. 60) point out the two references to the child in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

> La même image revient ensuite, avec un sens plus moral que métaphysique, dans le *Zarathustra*; voir la parabole "Les trois métamorphoses" et, surtout, "Des vertueux."

As for the first passage, Zarathustra, after relating the metamorphoses of the spirit (first, camel; then, lion; finally, child), evokes the child in these terms [i §1]:

> But say, my brothers, what can the child do that even the lion could not do? Why must the preying lion still become a child? The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred 'Yes'.[58]

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[54] Cfr. Colli (1973: 434); D'Iorio, Fronterotta (1994: 158; 317–318 nn. 80, 81); Cohen-Halimi (De Launay *et al.* 2000: 1030).

[55] Halliwell (2018). See also Hershbell, Nimis (1979: 28, 32); Barbera (1992: 59 f., 65). As Halliwell (2018: 93) points out, this idea is emphasised by Nietzsche himself, in his "Attempt at Self-Criticism," written for the 2nd edition of *BT*. Cfr. also the posthumous fr. 26[193] (from 1884): "In the idea that the world is a divine game and beyond good and evil – I have as predecessors the Vedanta philosophy and Heraclitus."

[56] D'Iorio & Fronterotta (1994: 318, n. 82); Ugolini (2007: 146–147); Halliwell (2018: 101, n. 40).

[57] Cfr. *e.g.* the posthumous fragment 21[15] (from 1872) and *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* §7. See also Genovés Company (2015: 584–585).

[58] Translation by Kaufmann (1954: 139). Original German text: "Aber sagt, meine Brüder, was vermag noch das Kind, das auch der Löwe nicht vermochte? Was muss der raubende Löwe auch noch zum Kinde werden?

Although the Heraclitean reminiscence is unmistakable (cfr. "a game" ~ "παῖς παίζων"), what gives the passage its full meaning is, at least in my opinion, the image of the child *as Nietzsche himself has been constructing it throughout his previous work*. Let us note, moreover, that the '*cosmic*' dimension that we have seen Nietzsche recognised in fr. B 52 – possibly erroneously, but that is another matter – is here displaced in favour of the psychic (or moral, to use the term employed by D'Iorio and Fronterotta) dimension.

The other text of *Zarathustra* (the last paragraph of II §5, "On the virtuous") is more complicated:

> (...) Now you are angry with me, as children are angry. They played by the sea, and a wave came and carried off their toys to the depths: now they are crying. But the same wave shall bring them new toys and shower new colorful shells before them. Thus they will be conforted...[59]

Zarathustra declares here that the sea has taken away from the 'virtuous' the names and conventional notions of virtues – toys with which they had been playing irresponsibly, like children. But the same wave will bring them new toys. The connotations of innocence and irresponsibility have not changed, but the image as a whole seems to take on a different meaning. It no longer expresses the amoral 'innocence' of the cosmic process, but the naivety, the childish foolishness of those who believe themselves to be 'virtuous': a usage more in keeping with the usually negative connotations that the ancient Greeks used to associate with childhood.[60]

"The Most Unexpected and Exciting Lucky Throw"

The last text we are going to consider is part of section §16 of the second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Nietzsche analyses in depth the origin of the "bad conscience," which arises from the aggression that 'civilised' man perpetrates against himself, mutilating and contradicting his deepest natural instincts.[61] An animal turning against itself is, according to Nietzsche, something so improbable, so sensational, that it ultimately opens up many *interesting* possibilities:

Unschuld ist das Kind und Vergessen, ein Neubeginnen, ein Spiel, ein aus sich rollendes Rad, eine erste Bewegung, ein heiliges Ja-sagen."

[59] Translation by Kaufmann (1954: 208). German text: "(...) Und nun zürnt ihr mir, wie Kinder zürnen. Sie spielten am Meere, – da kam die Welle und riss ihnen ihr Spielwerk in die Tiefe: nun weinen sie. Aber die selbe Welle soll ihnen neue Spielwerke bringen und neue bunte Muscheln vor sie hin ausschütten! So werden sie getröstet sein..."

[60] *Vide supra*, p. 410.

[61] Cfr. Moroney (1986: 42–43), Genovés Company (2015: 575–576), *etc.*

> From now on, man is *included* among the most unexpected and exciting lucky throws in the dice game of Heraclitus' "great child," be he called Zeus or chance; he gives rise to an interest, a tension, a hope, almost a certainty, as if with him something were announcing and preparing itself, as if man were not a goal but only a way, an episode, a bridge, a great promise...[62]

The cosmic dimension of the image reappears here; and it does so, as on all the other occasions we have encountered it, in order to emphasise the random and non-finalistic character of a process or cycle. But, in the present case, this notion applies not to the cosmos, but explicitly to man. However, these expectations of the future are not celebrated in moral or intellectual terms, in terms that we might more or less generically describe as 'humanist'; the most that can be said of the possibilities that open up for the animal alienated from itself is that they constitute an interesting tension.

Epilogue

What conclusions can be drawn from this re-examination? The basic scope of the image of the child at play was clear from the outset: it serves Nietzsche to convey the notion of a cyclical process of creation and annihilation without responsibility or purpose of any kind. But then we have seen how the philosopher applied this basic idea to very different contexts and uses: to the creative feeling of the Dionysian artist, to the calm contemplation of the wise, to the amorality and endlessness of the cosmic process, to the transformations of the spirit advocated by Zarathustra, to the "throwing of the dice" that has given rise to the human animal... We have also noted how Nietzsche freely combined the two Greek hypotexts of the image (DK 22 B 52 and Hom. *Il.* XV 362–364), possibly already related to each other beforehand.[63] Alternately, he emphasises the concentrated and allusive diction of Heraclitus or the relaxed and detailed description of a Homeric simile, depending on the more cosmological or more ethico-psychological character of each context. All these games were favoured by the textual imprecision of the Heraclitean passage: in Nietzsche's time, DK 22 B 52 was still "under construction," so to speak. Finally, with his clearly diversified, but at the same time coherent use of the image, Nietzsche made it *his own* and turned it into another weapon in his personal dialectical panoply; into something, in short, that "helped him to think."

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[62] Translation by Kaufmann, (Gay, Kaufmann 1967: 521). Original German text: "Der Mensch zählt seitdem mit unter den unerwartetsten und aufregendsten Glückswürfen, die das „grosse Kind" des Heraklit, heisse es Zeus oder Zufall, spielt, – er erweckt für sich ein Interesse, eine Spannung eine Hoffnung, beinahe eine Gewissheit, als ob mit ihm sich Etwas ankündige, Etwas vorbereite, als ob der Mensch kein Ziel, sondern nur ein Weg, ein Zwischenfall, eine Brücke, ein grosses Versprechen sei..."

[63] *Vide supra*, p. 406.

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ΠΑΙΣ ΠΑΙΖΩΝ. Homer, *Iliad* XV 362–364, Heraclitus, DK 22 B 52, and F. Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche resorted several times to the image of a child playing with sand or pebbles. His purpose in doing so was to evoke a cyclical process of construction and destruction devoid of both responsibility and finality. This essay examines, on the one hand, the relation of the child's image to its two main hypotexts (Heraclitus DK 22 B 52 and *Iliad* XV 362-64) and, on the other, the range of Nietzsche's uses of the simile.

KEYWORDS Nietzsche, Heraclitus, construction and annihilation, children's games