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THE ETERNAL RETURN AND THE PARADOX OF PASSION

In a notebook of uncertain date (though no later than 1916) Dino Campana, perhaps the greatest Italian poet of our century, observes: "In the whirlwind of eternal return the image instantly dies."¹ This is without doubt a reference to Nietzsche, who was already mentioned several times in the preceding fragments. But why does the poet cast the image into the whirlwind of eternal return? Could there be in Nietzsche's conception of the eternal return something that corresponds to the image, even if it is not formally worked out? And why the instant death of the image in the eternal return?

To answer these questions I will first seek the subject itself of the eternal return — what it is that returns eternally in the eternal return: that is, the *same*. The eternal return is, in fact, in Nietzsche's words, the "*ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*," the eternal return of the same.

Let us pause a moment on the term *Gleich*. The word is formed from the prefix *ge-* (which indicates something collective, a gathering together) and *leich*, which derives from the Middle High German *lich*, the Gothic *leik*, and finally from a theme *lig*, which means appearance, figure, likeness, and, in modern German, *Leiche*, corpse, cadaver. *Gleich* thus signifies what has the same *lig*, the same figure. It is this theme *lig* that we find in the suffix *lich* with which so many adjectives in German are formed (*weiblich* originally means "having the figure

¹ Dino Campana, *Opere e contributi* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1973) 444.

of a woman") and even in the adjective *solch* (the philosophical expression, *als solch*, as such, signifies with respect to its figure, its proper form). In English there is an exact corresponding term: *like*, as in likeness, to liken, and to like, and in the suffix of a great number of adjectives. In this sense, the eternal return of the *Gleich* could be translated literally and with no violence as "the eternal return of the *like*."

There is, then, in the eternal return, something akin to image, to likeness, and in this sense Campana's statement is perfectly justified. The idea of the eternal return is primarily an idea of the like, something in the order of a total image, or, to use Benjamin's words, a dialectical image. And only in this context, perhaps, does the eternal return take on its essential significance.

Etymologists have been unable to explain how *Leich* came to have its meaning of corpse, which is the meaning the word has in present-day German (and also in the obsolete English term *lich*, as in *lichgate*, gateway of a churchyard). Actually, even here the semantic evolution is perfectly coherent. A corpse is that which has, *par excellence*, the same image, the same likeness. This is so true that the Romans identified the dead person with the image; the deceased was the *imago par excellence*, and, vice versa, the *imago* was primarily the image of the dead person (the *imagines* being the wax masks of ancestors kept by Roman patricians in the atrium of their houses). According to a system of beliefs which characterizes the funeral rites of many peoples, the first effect of death is that it transforms the dead person into a ghost (the *Larya* of the Latins, the *eidolon* or *fasma* of the Greeks), that is to say, a vague and menacing being who lingers on in the world of the living and returns to the places frequented by the deceased person. The purpose of funeral rites is precisely to transform this threatening and uncomfortable presence, which is none other than the image of the deceased, his likeness that returns obsessively, into an ancestor—still an image, but one that is benevolent and at a comfortable distance from the world of the living.

These are the images that inhabit for eternity the pagan Hades. A classical philologist, Nietzsche was familiar with this underworld of shades that Homer describes in a famous passage of the *Odyssey* and Polygnotus depicted in an equally famous Delphi fresco that has survived in Pausanias's description. It is precisely in these pagan depictions of hell that we meet for the first time something similar to the eternal return: the punishment of the Dainaiids, eternally drawing

water in a broken pitcher, or of Sisyphus, eternally rolling uphill a stone destined to roll down again, and of Ocnus, the rope-plaiter eternally busy in the futile task of twisting a rope which an ass immediately eats. (It is probably due to this last infernal figure — with whom Nietzsche was familiar from Bachofen's *Grabensymbolik*² — that we owe the presence of an ass in *Also sprach Zarathustra*).

The hell of the ancients appears in this perspective as a hell of the imagination: that images could be endless, that likeness could be indelible, was for them the very idea of hell.

But even in Christian theology one finds a connection between the theme of eternal life and the image. The Fathers of the Church, who were the first to reflect on the question of the resurrection, soon came up against the problem of the risen body's substance and form. Was the body to rise again as it had been at the moment of death or as it had been during youth? If the dead person had lost a limb five years before death, was he to rise again whole or maimed? If he had died bald, was he necessarily to rise hairless? Or supposing the departed had been a cannibal, feeding on human flesh which had become, as it were, the flesh of his flesh: to whom exactly did the devoured flesh belong? Was the risen body to contain all the flesh which had belonged to the living body or only that part of it which had constituted the corpse? However absurd the ramifications, the basic question — that of the identity between the body deceased and the body resurrected — was extremely serious, for on it depended the very possibility of salvation. Thus the problem of resurrection implied a problem of epistemology — how to recognize the individuality and identity of the person resurrected. (In this sense, the eternal return of the like poses an analogous problem, and this explains, among other things, Zarathustra's disgust at the eternal return when he realizes that this also means the eternal return of the "little man" and of everything nauseating on earth; a disgust which also recalls that of the young Socrates in Plato's *Parmenides* when faced with the eternity of the ideas of hair, dirt, and mud.)

We owe to Origen, the greatest Christian philosopher of the third century, a solution to this problem, in which the theme of salvation is linked to that of the image, and both are linked to the theme of eternal return. Faced with the implicit paradoxes of a strictly material

² For the myth of Ocnus see "Myth, Religion and Mother Right," in J. J. Bachofen, *Selected Writings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) 51-65.

conception of the resurrection (the resurrection of the corpse or, at least, of a certain quantity of matter), Origen affirms that what resurrects is not the matter of the body but its *eidos*, its image, which remains unchanged throughout all its material transformations. On the other hand, precisely because Origen still considered the *eidos* a material principle, albeit a spiritual and, literally, subtle matter, it was possible for the resurrected to fall again and to occupy a coarser body until the moment of *apocatastasis*, or final resurrection, in which the subtle matter of the *eidos* would be totally consumed. Yet even at this point the process could start over, in which case the image was virtually ineradicable. Whatever Origen was postulating—the eternal image or its ultimate consumption in the *apocatastasis*—it is clear that any conception of the redemption of what has been must necessarily come to grips with the gnoseological problem of the image.

Whenever we are dealing with the past and its redemption, we are also dealing with an image, since only *eidos* allows for the knowledge and identification of what has been. Thus the problem of redemption always implies an economy of images, a *ta fainomena sozein*, a saving of appearances, to use the Platonic definition of science.

In his 1939 course on Nietzsche, "The Will to Power as Knowledge,"³ Heidegger brings to light the meaning of the will to power from an epistemological point of view. As is well known, Nietzsche departs from a critique of Kant's theory of knowledge, particularly from the distinction between appearance and thing-in-itself. In a fragment from 1888, the apparent world is presented as an inevitable effect of that perspectivism inseparable from life and beyond which no real world is conceivable:

Perspective vision establishes the nature of appearance. As if any world would be left over once perspective is abstracted from it. That would suppress all relativity. Whatever else it may involve, every vital center has its own perspective—its specific evaluation, its means of acting and resisting. The apparent world is thus reduced to a specific mode of acting on the world, working outwards from a center. But there is no other mode of action, and the world is no more than a word for the complex interplay of these actions. Here we have no right to speak of appearance.⁴

³ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1951) 1: 473-658.

⁴ The fragment is 567 of *Wille zur Macht* (Leipzig, 1911). It corresponds to 14 (p. 184) of the new critical edition by Colli and Montinari, *Werke, kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 8: 3 (Berlin, New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1972).

Precisely because perspective coincides with the will to power itself, Kant's attempt to eliminate perspectivism is doomed to fail: "Wisdom," writes Nietzsche, "as an attempt to overcome the perspective character of evaluation, that is will to power: a principle hostile to life, destructive, and symptomatic of a weakening of the capacity of appropriation."⁵ On the other hand, "a world in a state of becoming," Nietzsche writes, "cannot be known. Only insofar as the knowing intellect finds a ready-made world of pure and fixed appearance... only thus can there exist knowledge, a reciprocal calculation of previous errors."⁶

Any conception of a *Gleichheit*, of a world that is both real and recognizable, of a thing-in-itself, is thus the result of a necessary error. In one of his fragments, Nietzsche actually goes so far as to define the thing-in-itself as a *Grundphänomen*, a fundamental appearance.⁷ He is therefore able to write that "the will to likeness is the will to power,"⁸ as elsewhere he had stated that the will to power is the will to *Schein*, to appearance and becoming. Nietzsche is here clearly going beyond a contrast between phenomenon and noumenon, art and truth, and rather positing a complete interdependence of the two concepts, and their mutual destruction in the light of the fundamental perspectivism inherent in every life.

In a late fragment, entitled *Recapitulation*, both becoming and being are defined as "falsification":

Recapitulation: imposing on becoming the character of being: this is the supreme will to power [elsewhere Nietzsche speaks of an *Abbild*, an image of eternity which must be stamped on life]. A double falsification: starting from the senses and from the spirit, to maintain a world of being, of enduring, of *Gleichwertig*, of equivalence. That everything returns: this is the extreme point of contact between a world of becoming and a world of being.⁹

Let us dwell a while on this fragment. This most certainly does not mean that the world of becoming is the original datum on which the will to power stamps its character, the *Abbild*, of being. If it were so, Nietzsche would be committing precisely the mistake for which

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Umwertung aller Werte*, ed. Friedrich Würzbach (Munich: DTV, 1969) 109.

⁶ *Umwertung* 88.

⁷ *Umwertung* 110.

⁸ *Umwertung* 88.

⁹ The fragment is 617 of *Wille zur Macht*.

he reproaches Kant, namely, of believing it possible to free oneself from the perspective vision of the will to power. An interpretation of this kind – which Heidegger also seems to subscribe to at times – is precluded by even another fragment in which Nietzsche clearly affirms: "In the beginning was not Chaos, and then a stable and harmonious circular movement of all forces; rather, all is eternal and not-become (*ungewordenes*).... The circle did not come to be, it is the *Urgesetz*, the original law."¹⁰

Only in this way can the double falsification of which Nietzsche speaks take on its true meaning. We are not dealing here with a falsification that is operated on becoming, which is the original datum of the senses, whereby it is transformed into something stable. The falsification is more subtle than that, and more difficult to get the better of, in that it predates datum and is itself the *Urgesetz*, the original law. In this sense, it has nothing to falsify; there is no preexisting being whose image needs to be impressed on becoming. Rather, being is born only as a result of this impressing. But neither is there a becoming, an original datum which the impressing transforms into being, since this would transcend perspectivism.

The paradox that Nietzsche invites us to consider is that of an *Abbild*, an image which precedes both what it is the image of, and what it is impressed upon: a like, a likeness which anticipates both terms being compared, being likened. Not only, therefore, does the thought of eternal return contain a like, an image, but this like, this image, is the Original, preceding both being and becoming, both the subject and the object. But how can an image precede that of which it is an image? How can we conceive of a likeness, an *omoiosis*, which precedes that to which it bears resemblance? How can the impression be more primordial than the subject which bears it?

Let us try to define the paradox which Nietzsche is trying to develop here. The image in question is not an image of nothing. It is perfectly self-referential. The *Wille zur Macht* is a *Wille zur Gleichheit*, a will to likeness, to a pure likening involving neither subject nor object – an image of itself, the impression of itself on itself, *pure self-affection*. Thus what the vicious circle of eternal return brings back eternally is not a *vitium*, a defect or lack, but a *virtus*, a *dynamis* and infinite potency: a *potentia* which, devoid of both subject and object, works upon itself, tends toward itself, and thus unites in itself both

¹⁰ *Umwertung* 342-43.

meanings of the Aristotelian *dynamis*: *potentia passiva*, passivity, receptivity, and *potentia activa*, tension towards action, spontaneity. If it is true, however, as Heidegger suggests, that Nietzsche is the philosopher of absolute subjectivity, then the paradox of *potentia* that he puts before us here is the same as that expounded from the very beginning of Western philosophy, namely the bottomless foundation of pure subjectivity in pure self-affection.

In the *Altpreussische Monatschrift* from 1882-1884, Nietzsche would have been able to read the fragments of Kant's posthumous work, partially edited by Reicke and Arnold. He would no doubt have felt some surprise in seeing that the favorite target of much of his criticism, the thinker who rigidly separated the thing-in-itself from the phenomenon, had, in the monotonous, near-obsessive notes that make up the *Opus Postumum*, come to formulate the same paradox that had tormented him during the years in which he was working on his *Umwertung aller Werte*, and that there was thus a subterranean link connecting the two works. Kant, who in the first *Critique* had been careful to keep receptivity and spontaneity intrinsically empty, attaining to an object only through their union in experience, here proffers the idea of a "phenomenon of the phenomenon" (*Erscheinung einer Erscheinung*) as total self-affection preceding all objects and thoughts, and in which the two *Grundquellen*, the two original sources of knowledge, unite in a self-affection that predates and founds all experience.

Nietzsche could have read in the *Opus Postumum* a perfectly Nietzschean definition of the thing-in-itself:

The thing-in-itself is not another object, but another relation of the representation to the same object, by which this latter may be conceived not analytically but synthetically, as the sum of intuitive representations considered as phenomena, that is, the sum of those representations containing a merely subjective foundation of the representation in the unity of intuition. The *ens rationis* = X is the position of self, according to the identity principle, in which the subject is conceived as affecting itself and thus, as far as form goes, simply as a phenomenon.¹¹

Here, as in the *Abbild* of Nietzsche's will to power, the subject is affected not by an object, but by itself. This subject thinks of nothing other than its own pure receptivity as original self-affection and, in

¹¹ E. Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Akademieausgabe, 1936-38) 22: 26-27.

this way, *gives itself to itself, suffers itself*, undergoes *passion*, and thus, and only thus, opens out to the world.

This paradox of potency—or, as we are now able to call it, of self-passion—is in truth even older than this and is inscribed at the very origin of Western metaphysics. It is in precisely this way that Aristotle understands the dimension of pure subjectivity in his *De Anima*: “The so-called *nous* of the soul,” he writes,

does not identify in actuality with any of the entities before thinking ... and even when it has become in actuality each of the entities ... even then it remains to some extent *in potentia* ... and can thus conceive of itself, think itself.... But how can it think, if to think is to undergo a certain passion? Since thought is potentially each one of the *intelligibilia*, but in actuality is none of them before the act of thinking? It must therefore be something like a writing tablet, on which nothing is actually written.¹²

This wax surface on which nothing is written, this inextinguishable potency which unites in itself passivity and spontaneity, *potentia* and *act*, *dynamis* and *energeia*, is by no means obvious. Some lines earlier, Aristotle defines the crux of this self-passion in the following way:

Suffering is in no way simple; it is, on the one hand, a certain destruction by its contrary and, on the other, a salvation (*soletia*) of what is in *potentia* by that which is in act and which bears its resemblance, as potency in relation to act.... And this is not a becoming other than itself, but a giving to self and to act.¹³

Have we gone beyond this paradox of passion, this giving of self to self, this *epidosis eis auto* which marks the dawning of all consciousness and all subjectivity? Contemporary thought, in attempting to break the circle of subjectivity and to loosen the knot tying *potentia passiva* and *potentia activa* together, has privileged and pushed to an extreme the pole of *potentia passiva*, of passivity. I am thinking here, to speak only of French philosophy, of Bataille and his concept of ecstasy; of Levinas and his idea of passivity; of Derrida, who, through his concept of *gramma*, has given new rigor to Aristotle's paradox of the writing-tablet; and of Nancy's fascinating research into the trembling of subjectivity. But I am also thinking of Heidegger, of his concept of being-unto-death and of authentic resolution in *Being and Time*,

¹² *De Anima* 429a-30a.

¹³ *De Anima* 417b.

which led him to postulate a "passionate" dimension which precedes all possibility and in which nothing has yet been given to *Dasein*. In this way, contemporary philosophy has conceived the most extreme form of subjectivity: pure under-going, absolute *pathos*, the tablet on which nothing is written. But are we sure that it is not this very tablet that Nietzsche was driving at in the eternal return of the *Gleich* and in the will to power? Are we certain that we have got beyond a philosophy of potency?

We are used to understanding the will to power only as *potentia activa*. But power, *potentia*, is first and foremost *potentia passiva*, passivity and passion. What Nietzsche tried to do in the concept of eternal return is precisely to conceive the final identity of the two *potentiae*, the will to power as a pure passion affecting itself.

Fifty years earlier, in an attempt to think through the same paradox, Schelling ran up against the idea of an Immemorable: *Unvordenkliches*. If we wish to conceive the potency of being, he writes, we are forced to think of it as pure *potentia*, as a pure potency without being. But this we can do only if the *potentia* is already, in itself and prior to itself, a pure existent. "Insofar as it is mere potency of being, it would pass over into being before all thought, or, as the German language puts it so admirably, *unvordenklich*, that is to say, immemorably and unthinkably."¹⁴ Pure passion, as the final coincidence of *potentia passiva* and *potentia activa*, is in itself immemorable. The *like*, the image perpetually returning, cannot be retained in the memory. Its eternal return is its passion, in which, between the writing and its erasing, there is, as Nietzsche says, *keine Zeit*, no time. In this sense, Campana was right when he wrote that "within the whirlwind of eternal return the image instantly dies." As an image of nothing, the *like* disappears in its own enduring, and is destroyed through its own salvation. But, to take up another expression of Campana, "that remembrance which remembers nothing is the strongest of all remembrances."

¹⁴ Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, in *Schellings Werke*, ed. K.F.K. Schelling (Stuttgart, 1856-61) 13: Lesson 10, *passim*.