

ETERNAL RECURRENCE AND NATURE

A Thesis

by

KYLE EVAN MASK

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2008

Major Subject: Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Eternal Recurrence and Nature.

(August 2008)

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Nietzsche has often been interpreted as the champion of heroic, self-sufficient individuals, who manage to fashion some order out of the raw material of Nature through the exercise of free will. On the face of things, Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence creates a problem for such an interpretation. If history must eternally repeat itself, then it can take only one possible route. Individuals' future actions would then be constrained by the sole possible path of history, and free will would seem to be undermined.

In order to avoid the conclusion that eternal recurrence obviates free will, scholars have attempted to show that: (1) Nietzsche does not wish to establish a link between eternal recurrence and cosmology—that is, eternal recurrence should not be read as the cyclical repetition of history; (2) eternal recurrence can be construed so that it aggrandizes the importance of free choice. Contrary to these two trends in scholarship about eternal recurrence, I believe that Nietzsche intends to draw a connection between eternal recurrence and cosmology, and this connection undermines free will. In order to establish this, I examine the textual evidence on eternal recurrence from *The Gay*

Science and *Zarathustra* to show that Nietzsche employs eternal recurrence as a metaphor for determinism in those works. As a metaphor for a deterministic cosmos, eternal recurrence undercuts free will. Turning to Nietzsche's late works, I show that Nietzsche broadens the scope of eternal recurrence. Eternal recurrence comes to serve as a metaphor for the Dionysian character of Nature. Only by relinquishing one's desire for free will and submitting to necessity and to the trans-individual potency of Nature can the individual see herself as powerful. Hence, it is argued that Nietzsche does not believe individuals manifest strength by asserting their free wills against Nature, as commentators often maintain. Instead, Nietzsche enjoins individuals to cede their desires for free will and to participate in the trans-individual vitality of Nature.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In *On The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche concedes that Christianity has served at least one historically valuable and vital function. It saved humanity from suicidal nihilism by interpreting suffering as God’s righteous punishment for sin.¹ After raising humanity’s guilt to a previously unparalleled pitch, Christianity provided a goal, an outlet for humanity’s instinct to cruelty—namely, self-torment. As Nietzsche states, “Guilt before *God*: this thought becomes an instrument of torture to [humanity].”² But Christianity’s honesty, Nietzsche believes, will inevitably force it to confess God’s nonexistence. After Christianity’s subsequent self-annihilation, suffering will be left unexplained. Nietzsche worries that the inexplicability of suffering might prove dangerous. For “What really arouses indignation against suffering is not suffering as such but the senselessness of suffering.”³ At a loss to comprehend suffering in the wake of God’s death, humanity might be headed for the suicidal nihilism from which Christianity rescued it nearly two millennia earlier. Nietzsche’s own educator, Schopenhauer, formulated a pessimistic architectonic aimed at providing an answer to

This thesis follows the style and format of the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

¹ Suicidal nihilism can be distinguished from nihilism for Nietzsche. Christianity is certainly a form of nihilism, inasmuch as it deprecates becoming. However, it is not a form of suicidal nihilism, because it sustains humanity’s will by providing it with the goal of self-torture.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* in *On the Genealogy of Morals* and *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, Random House: 1967), 92.

³ *Ibid.*, 67.

the problem of suffering. He maintained that the preponderance of meaningless suffering in the world proves life to be a mistake. The only prescription for existence, he argued, is self-annihilation. While the young Nietzsche was seduced by his mentor's doctrine of life-denial, the older Nietzsche sees it as an expression of decadence. His mature philosophical endeavor is to illumine the path to life-affirmation. He wishes to show how the individual can avoid the morass of Schopenhauerian self-resignation, instead embracing life in a world that is not inherently amenable to humanity's desires for comprehensibility and comfort. How can the individual affirm life in the world of becoming? This is the question for which Nietzsche believed Europe would need an answer after the inexorable failure of the Christian, ascetic interpretation of life.

Nietzsche's mature thinking about life-affirmation centers on his doctrine of eternal recurrence. He believes that affirming eternal recurrence signifies the "highest formula of affirmation that is at all attainable."⁴ Commentators have traditionally attempted to show three things about eternal recurrence. The first is that it does not represent Nietzsche's cosmology. That is, Nietzsche does not believe that history cyclically recurs in precisely the same pattern. If proven that Nietzsche does not propound a recurrence cosmology, this would arrest what Maudemarie Clark notes as "the most common objection to eternal recurrence," namely, "that we have no reason to accept its truth."⁵ In an effort to save Nietzsche from this criticism, Clark attempts to

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, Random House: 1967), 295.

⁵ Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), 245.

demonstrate that none of the passages in which Nietzsche discusses eternal recurrence commits him to a recurrence cosmology. Similarly, in order to provide an account of eternal recurrence that “is totally independent of physics,” Alexander Nehamas interprets it as the following conditional: “If anything in the world recurred, including an individual life or even a single moment within it, then everything in the world would recur in exactly the same fashion.”⁶ Nehamas thereby avoids attributing to Nietzsche actual belief in the recurrence of history.

The second concern of commentators has been to show that Nietzsche has good reason for linking eternal recurrence to life-affirmation. Once the connection between eternal recurrence and physics has been severed, one might suspect that this is a difficult task to accomplish. After all, if Nietzsche thinks that eternal recurrence does not provide an accurate depiction of reality, why would affirming it constitute an affirmation of life? Nehamas provides a plausible answer. He begins by arguing that Nietzsche believes all events to be interconnected, such that no single event can be altered without the entire world changing. Nehamas then claims that to desire eternal recurrence “is [to] desire to repeat this very life, and so everything else in the world as well, [for] all eternity.”⁷ The affirmer of eternal recurrence desires that this world, precisely as it has been and now exists, be repeated into eternity. This would explain why Nietzsche sees eternal recurrence as the highest attainable affirmation of life. For despite the unsatisfiability of

⁶ Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 156.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 159.

the desire for recurrence, its existence bespeaks the individual's positive evaluative stance toward the only life, and only world, possible for her.

The third interpretive trend has been to demonstrate that eternal recurrence does not obviate the traditional conception of individual freedom and strength. Rather, it actually aggrandizes the importance of the free choices and actions of individuals. By the "traditional conception of individual freedom and strength," I intend the vision of the individual as a possessor of free will, who manifests her strength by imposing her will on reality. If one interprets eternal recurrence literally, it seems intuitively plausible to think that it might contradict the traditional notion of human freedom. For events in the future of one's present lifecycle have already been settled by the lone possible path of history. It thus seems that one has no control over one's future. Nehamas avoids this problem by refusing to interpret eternal recurrence literally.⁸ He proceeds to argue that Nietzsche intends to link eternal recurrence to a conception of the individual as the heroic, self-sufficient redeemer of history. Nehamas's interpretation of eternal recurrence relies heavily upon the section of *Zarathustra* titled "On Redemption." There Zarathustra states, "All 'it was' is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful accident—until the creative will says to it, 'But thus I willed it.' Until the creative will says to it, 'But thus I will it; thus shall I will it.'"⁹ The creative willing of the *übermenschlich* Nietzschean

⁸ Lawrence Hatab, who does interpret eternal recurrence literally, nevertheless maintains that it does not contradict human freedom. I discuss this in the third chapter. See Lawrence Hatab, *Nietzsche's Life Sentence: Coming to Terms with Eternal Recurrence* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 129.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, Penguin Books: 1966), 139.

individual redeems the senselessness of those past events which previously stood outside her will's sphere of dominance. So long as she creates, "on the basis of the past, an acceptable future, [she] justif[ies] and redeem[s] everything that made this future possible."¹⁰ According to Nehamas's interconnectivity thesis, "everything that made this future possible" is the past in its entirety, down to the minutest details. Hence, Nehamas attests that "absolutely everything in the past is redeemed" for the affirmer of eternal recurrence.¹¹ Nehamas thus sees the ideal Nietzschean life-affirmer as the individual who is capable of redeeming history through the creative activity of her own will.

My own interpretive strategy goes against the grain of the three trends discussed above. First, I maintain that Nietzsche intends to draw a connection between eternal recurrence and cosmology. While I remain agnostic concerning Nietzsche's belief in the actual recurrence of history, I think eternal recurrence, at the very least, serves as a *metaphor* for the way reality actually is. Second, affirming eternal recurrence constitutes the highest attainable affirmation of life, *because* eternal recurrence symbolizes the cosmos. Finally, Nietzsche employs eternal recurrence to undermine the traditional conception of individual freedom, instead substituting a novel conception of what it means to be a powerful individual. T.K. Seung provides a precedent for the heterodox interpretive approach to eternal recurrence that I take in this thesis. By way of

¹⁰ Nehamas, 160.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

introduction to my own approach, delineating Seung's innovative contribution to the literature on eternal recurrence will prove fruitful.

Seung's interpretation of eternal recurrence emerges through his detailed narrative of *Zarathustra*. The central motif of Nietzsche's prized work, Seung argues, is the conflict between Zarathustra's individual, or Faustian, self, and his cosmic, or Spinozan, self. The Faustian self champions "radical individualism"¹² and aspires to "complete self-sufficiency."¹³ This is the heroic sort of individual, described by Nehamas, who redeems history through the exercise of her unique creative will. The Faustian self attempts to assert its strength by posing its autonomous will against reality, or against cosmic necessity. By "autonomous will," Seung essentially intends what is usually captured by agent causal accounts of free will.¹⁴ According to such accounts, there are unseen forces that cause human actions. These forces are agents, or human wills, that are somehow exempt from the deterministic laws governing the rest of the universe. Agents have the capacity to make completely free, or undetermined, choices, and these free choices effectively cause observable actions. In recent discussions of the free will issue, agent causation has come under heavy fire. One important objection raised against it is that the agent it posits seems like a metaphysical entity, or a Cartesian

¹² T.K. Seung, *Nietzsche's Epic of the Soul: Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), 53.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

ego.¹⁵ The agent is conceived as a sort of unmoved mover, residing mysteriously behind the actions of the human body and controlling them. Opponents argue that agent causation is shoddy science.¹⁶ There is no reason to think that anything other than physical forces can cause empirically verifiable acts and events. Like Seung, I will use the word “autonomy” in this paper to denote the kind of human freedom detailed by agent causal accounts.

Nietzsche is highly critical of agent causation for the precise reason highlighted above. The very idea of causation, he attests, has been derived from the false belief that humans are “causal agents in the act of willing.”¹⁷ According to Nietzsche, there is no ego that can do the willing: “And as for the ego! It has become a fable, a fiction, a play on words...What follows from this? There are no spiritual causes at all!”¹⁸ The theme that there is no being behind doing—no metaphysical subject or ego behind action—runs throughout Nietzsche’s mature works. The notion that a metaphysical subject freely causes actions, Nietzsche maintains, was invented for the dubious purpose of “*finding* [people] *guilty*” so that they might be held morally accountable.¹⁹ In fact, the Judeo-

¹⁵ Peter van Inwagen, “Free Will Remains a Mystery” in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, Ed. Robert Kane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 158.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* in *Twilight Of The Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 60. It is not clear, however, that simply because the idea of causation was falsely derived, it is therefore false.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

Christian “moral-world-order” depends on the notion of free will in order to justify itself.²⁰ As soon as traditional morality ceases believing in the causally efficacious power of agents, there will be no ego to be blamed for “its” actions. It will then be acknowledged that a naturalistic conception of the cosmos does not permit belief in a morally responsible subject behind actions and events.

Actions and events seem bound together in such a way that, according to Nietzsche, the result is determinism. That Nietzsche wants eternal recurrence to function as a metaphor for cosmic necessity, at least in *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra*, will be argued in the third chapter. Cosmic necessity is, in turn, demanded by Nietzsche’s devotion to determinism. Since Nietzsche often champions the creative, active individual, one might be suspicious of attributing to Nietzsche a deterministic view of the cosmos. Determinism would, it seems, undermine Nietzsche’s praise of self-stylization, for instance. It may seem natural to think that there needs to be an undetermined, free “self” capable of arranging various natural drives and power centers in order for self-stylization to occur. But what could this self be besides a metaphysical subject that stands somehow mysteriously behind the natural forces and drives that it organizes? At present, I wish to provide evidence of Nietzsche’s belief in determinism in order to allay any prejudice the reader may have against thinking that Nietzsche takes determinism seriously.

²⁰ Ibid., 65.

As early as *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche writes, “everything that happens is inseparably connected with everything that is going to happen.”²¹ This statement constitutes a tacit rejection of any sort of libertarian free will. For libertarian accounts of free will, including agent causation, maintain that current events are not inextricably bound to future events. This is so because some future events will be the undetermined actions of individuals. Because these future actions are undetermined, what happens at present does not necessarily have any bearing on them. The only way that the present can be inseparably connected with everything in the future, as Nietzsche says it is, is if he holds to some version of determinism. While Lawrence Hatab acknowledges Nietzsche’s denial of an agent-causal account of free will, he argues that Nietzsche’s position is compatible with an open future.²² Because Nietzsche’s understanding of necessity does not preclude the openness of the future, Hatab argues that Nietzsche does not hold to causal determinism.

Hatab might be partially correct, insofar as Nietzsche does not adhere to causal determinism,²³ but it does not follow from Nietzsche’s denial of causal determinism that he repudiates all forms of determinism. Zarathustra teaches what appears to be Nietzsche’s brand of determinism when he proclaims, “Have you ever said Yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you have said Yes too to all woe. All things are

²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 97.

²² Hatab, 133.

²³ It is not clear to me whether Nietzsche accepts or rejects it.

entangled, ensnared, enamored; if ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said, ‘You please me, happiness! Abide, moment! Then you wanted *all* back.’²⁴ Nehamas uses these passages and others to show that Nietzsche holds to an “interconnectivity” thesis.²⁵ As mentioned above, according to this thesis, all events are inextricably linked, such that if one event changed the entire world would be different. Nehamas does not consider whether the interconnectivity thesis commits Nietzsche to determinism. However, the sort of interconnectivity hinted at in *Human, All-Too-Human* and described by Zarathustra is what is now referred to as “block-universe determinism.”²⁶ This brand of determinism “reflects the intuition that a difference anywhere in the universe requires a difference everywhere.”²⁷ Block-universe determinism posits that every action is necessitated by everything else in the universe that has existed and now exists. Thus, the future is the inevitable result of all that is past. While it is not clear that Nietzsche believes in causal determinism, he does seem to hold to block-universe determinism. This form of determinism is just as problematic for the traditional conception of human freedom as causal determinism. If my next action is entailed by everything in the past, I can do nothing at present to change my course of action. My action will be just as beyond my autonomous control as the flight of a stone is beyond the stone’s control. When I argue in the third chapter that eternal recurrence is a

²⁴ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 323.

²⁵ Nehamas, 154.

²⁶ Robert C. Bishop, “Chaos, Indeterminism, and Free Will” in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, Ed. Robert Kane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 113.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

metaphor for determinism, I am referring to block-universe determinism. The restriction on autonomous choice guaranteed by this type of determinism will prove identical to the restriction on freedom effected by eternal recurrence in *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra*.

Most commentators, including Hatab and Nehamas, read eternal recurrence as perfectly compatible with the individual's future exercise of free choice.²⁸ Seung holds a radically different thesis. He argues that Zarathustra is ultimately unable to triumph over cosmic necessity through the assertion of his autonomous will. Rather than successfully establishing his Faustian self as his true self, he must come to acknowledge that his cosmic, or Spinozan, self constitutes him. This cosmic self is coextensive with cosmic necessity, or Nature. It does not struggle to assert its autonomy against the cosmos, but rather acknowledges that it belongs to necessity. In keeping with the science of Nietzsche's time,²⁹ Seung conceives Nature on a mechanistic model. The autonomous, Faustian self must eventually confess his impotence and submit to Nature. Naturally, shaking off the Faustian interpretation of the self is difficult. Viewing ourselves as autonomous agents has allowed us to see ourselves as exceedingly important and powerful. While Nature follows laws from which it cannot stray, we

²⁸ See Nehamas, 160-161; Hatab, 129. Both Nehamas and Hatab realize that Nietzsche does not endorse agent causation. However, they maintain that Nietzsche does not think the way we talk about human freedom needs to change after rejecting agent causation. Hence, they continue to talk about individual choice and activity as if Nietzsche is not concerned to radically revise our thinking about those notions. I will argue, on the contrary, that he does propose a radical revision.

²⁹ I do not mean to imply that present day science has advanced beyond mechanistic explanations at the macro level.

think we have a power found nowhere in Nature apart from us; that is, the power to be the uncaused causes of actions and events. Thinking that we can wield this power makes us believe that we have a measure of control over the forces of Nature. But eternal recurrence, according to Seung, functions as a metaphor that forces Zarathustra to acknowledge his autonomous will's inability to assert itself against Nature. For eternal recurrence is probably "no more than a poetic parable for describing a deterministic universe."³⁰ Zarathustra's struggle with eternal recurrence is his battle with the idea that his life, like everything else in Nature, is nothing but the denouement of natural forces. Affirming eternal recurrence must involve relinquishing his claim to autonomy and embracing his status as a fully natural, fully determined being.

Seung's interpretive strategy has two advantages over any of the commentators' strategies mentioned thus far. First, Seung is able to provide a *direct* account of why Nietzsche links affirming eternal recurrence to life-affirmation. He can do so because eternal recurrence is a metaphor for the way the world actually is. The other commentators can only connect eternal recurrence to life-affirmation once they have settled upon some suitable formulation of it. Both Clark and Nehamas start with the premise that eternal recurrence cannot possibly have anything to do with cosmology. Their accounts of eternal recurrence thus begin with sustained efforts to show that Nietzsche does not endorse a recurrence cosmology. Only afterwards do they attempt to formulate eternal recurrence in such a way that it still makes sense as Nietzsche's ideal of life-affirmation. This strategy seems somewhat contrived when compared to Seung's.

³⁰ Seung, 180.

Second, Seung's strategy accounts for Nietzsche's disdain for the ego and the concept of free will. If Nietzsche truly repudiates free will, then any view of eternal recurrence that sees affirming it as the greatest manifestation of an individual's autonomous strength seems, *prima facie*, likely to be misguided.

Because Seung's work is a comprehensive narrative of *Zarathustra*, he deals only with passages from that work. In this thesis, I will examine all the textual evidence on eternal recurrence in an effort to construct a comprehensive interpretation of eternal recurrence very much like Seung's reading. Nietzsche, so I will argue, sees affirming eternal recurrence as the highest possible affirmation of life, because eternal recurrence serves as a metaphor for Nature. Furthermore, affirming eternal recurrence does not require a seemingly superhuman act of individual strength. Instead, Nietzsche intends for the initial effect of eternal recurrence to bring the individual low. In *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra*, this effect is achieved because eternal recurrence functions as a metaphor for determinism. It thereby forces the individual to realize that she has no free will by which to assert herself against the forces of Nature or the accidents of history engendered by the interplay of those forces. In Nietzsche's late works, the metaphorical significance of eternal recurrence is extended beyond determinism to the Dionysian character of Nature. What I mean by "Dionysian character of Nature" will become clearer in the fourth chapter. At present, I will note a few aspects of Dionysian Nature that will receive textual explication later in the thesis. First, Nature is ateleological. That is, Nature's cyclical activity of bringing creatures into existence and stamping them out lacks any intrinsic directionality. Second, Nature is not inherently rational or moral.

Third, like Heraclitus's conception of the cosmos, Nature is essentially agonistic, that is, defined by strife and conflict. Fourth, each element within the total economy of Nature is necessary. Thus, life cannot exist apart from the elements of Nature that have traditionally been eliminated from heavenly realms by religious interpretations of life—elements such as death, suffering, and decay. Finally, Nature is a trans-individual force (or collection of forces). Affirming eternal recurrence requires that the individual submit to Nature. Through confessing one's autonomous impotence and acknowledging Nature's virility, the individual is resurrected and enabled to participate in the Dionysian power of Nature. As Nietzsche puts it, the individual experiences in herself the "eternal joy of becoming."³¹ The ideal Nietzschean life-affirmer thus eschews the notion that her capacity to impose her individual will upon Nature showcases her strength. Instead, she sees her power as a product of her immersion in Nature.

The outline of the remainder of the thesis is as follows. In the second chapter, I will turn to *The Birth of Tragedy* to examine how Nietzsche attempts to justify life in his first work. I try to show some important similarities and dissimilarities between his early attempt at life-justification and his late attempt at life-affirmation. In the third chapter, I survey the textual evidence concerning eternal recurrence in *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra*. My aim is to demonstrate that eternal recurrence functions as a metaphor for determinism in those works. Several of my interpretations of passages from *Zarathustra* owe heavily to Seung, while others are original. I have tried to give Seung credit where deserved. The analysis provided in the third chapter shows that

³¹ Nietzsche, *Twilight*, 121.

Nietzsche thinks the deterministic consequences of eternal recurrence are incredibly tough to stomach. For determinism enervates the individual's drive to self-sufficiency by obviating her capacity to triumphantly rectify the accidents entailed by cosmic necessity. In the fourth chapter, I show that Nietzsche broadens the scope of eternal recurrence in his late works. Eternal recurrence comes to function as a metaphor for the Dionysian character of Nature. Nietzsche hopes that, by affirming eternal recurrence, the individual can experience in herself Dionysian Nature's vitality. In the fifth and final chapter, I will attempt to show what Nehamas's interpretation of eternal recurrence, which stresses autonomous creativity, may have overlooked.

CHAPTER II

LIFE-JUSTIFICATION IN *THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY*

In his 1886 “Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” Nietzsche announces that in his first work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, he had already considerably distanced himself from Schopenhauer’s “resignationism.”³² For Schopenhauer, tragedy’s lucid portrayal of the insuperability of the suffering and conflict entailed by individuated existence reinforces his doctrine of self-denial. Tragedy, writes Schopenhauer,

is the description of the terrible side of life. The unspeakable pain, the wretchedness and misery of mankind, the triumph of wickedness, the scornful mastery of chance, and the irretrievable fall of the just and the innocent are all here presented to us; and here is to be found a significant hint as to the nature of the world and of existence.³³

The hint provided by tragedy is that the splintering of the will, the thing in itself, into a multiplicity of phenomenal individuals is an error for which only self-resignation, and ultimately death, can atone. For Schopenhauer, then, tragedy is most immediately a descriptive art displaying the dissonance of existence. But its highest function consists in its capacity to engender the spectator’s recognition of the proper prescription for existence, the annihilation of self. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche seems to accept the Schopenhauerian description of reality disclosed by tragedy. He attests that tragedy

³² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy in The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), 24.

³³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), 1: 252-3.

offers a profoundly “pessimistic view of the world”³⁴ and that “the state of individuation is the origin and primal cause of all suffering.”³⁵ However, Nietzsche does not wish to grant tragedy the prescriptive function afforded it by Schopenhauer. Instead, his thematic purposes are to show how tragedy justifies life, as well as to inspire the rebirth of a tragic culture. The justification of life elicited by tragedy, so Nietzsche hopes, will counteract Schopenhauer’s destructive philosophy of life-denial.

Nietzsche later came to acknowledge the complicity of his early thinking about life-justification in certain cultural infirmities he had aimed to cure. Most prominently, he criticizes his first work’s dependence upon dialectic. In his mature works, Nietzsche prefers to focus on themes such as the necessity of strife and conflict. Hence, he eschews theoretical attempts to resolve the multitude of tensions endemic to an essentially agonistic world. Naturally, he takes aim at Hegel. It is largely because *The Birth of Tragedy* smells “offensively Hegelian” that Nietzsche condemns it.³⁶ Unlike Hegel, Nietzsche had hoped to justify existence in a world in which dialectic and reason cannot triumph over the irreducible tensions portrayed by tragedy. However, as Nietzsche later realized, it is unclear how the synthesis he attempts to invoke between Dionysus and Apollo contributes to the aesthetic justification of life, or to the formation of a tragic culture, that he wishes to envision. My objective in this chapter is to explicate

³⁴ Nietzsche, *Tragedy*, 74.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* in *On The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 270.

what Nietzsche may have had in mind. Three themes that emerge from Nietzsche's early thinking about life-justification will prove important, either as points of comparison or contrast, for understanding his later thinking about life-affirmation. First, Dionysus's function as a symbol for the essentially conflicted nature of reality is important, for Dionysus in Nietzsche's late works is largely similar to Dionysus in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The only substantial difference is that Dionysus is closely tied to Schopenhauer's metaphysical conception of the will as thing-in-itself in Nietzsche's first work. In his late works, Dionysus becomes naturalized. Second, it is vital to see that Nietzsche's depiction of tragedy, and by extension his justification of life, relies heavily on the catharsis evoked by the Apollonian principle. Both Nussbaum and Schacht stress what they see as the continuity between the justification of life that Nietzsche offers in *The Birth of Tragedy* and his late thinking about life-affirmation.³⁷ I, on the contrary, will maintain that Nietzsche's need for Apollo in his early life-justificatory formula marks an important difference from his later attempt at a purely Dionysian affirmation of life. Finally, I will briefly discuss how Nietzsche might have intended for his life-justification to operate. I will discuss the difference between "life-justification" and "life-affirmation" in order further to underscore the disparity between his early and late thinking about these issues.³⁸

³⁷ Martha Nussbaum, "The Transfigurations of Intoxication" in *Nietzsche, Philosophy, and the Arts*, Ed. Kemal, Gaskell, Conway (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 36-65. Richard Schacht, *Making Sense of Nietzsche* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 148-149.

³⁸ Nussbaum always uses the term "affirmation" when talking about Nietzsche's project in *The Birth of Tragedy*. However, Nietzsche actually employs the term

Idealism and the Death of Tragedy

Nietzsche, from the commencement of his philosophical career until its desuetude, expresses concern about his culture's propensity to view reality as perfectly amenable to rational interpretation. This concern is central to his thinking about life-affirmation at every stage of his life. In his mature thought, Nietzsche associates faith in a rational order with the standpoint he calls "idealism." Idealism appears in variegated guises—as Platonism, Christianity, Hegelianism, will to truth, or scientific rationalism, among others. Despite their more or less subtle differences, forms of idealism share a fundamental proclivity for positing an ideal, intelligible realm as true reality. Idealists endow their fabricated realms with the traits of being over against those of becoming, tending to make them intrinsically rational and moral.³⁹ Nietzsche sees idealism as a symptom of sickness, resentment, or decadence. He asserts that idealists invent their ideal "realities" in order to revenge themselves upon the one true world, that of becoming. Thus, he writes:

To talk about "another" world than this is quite pointless, provided that an instinct for slandering, disparaging, and accusing life is not strong within us: in the latter case we *revenge* ourselves on life by means of the phantasmagoria of "another", a "better" life.⁴⁰

Lacking the constitution to affirm becoming, idealists express their displeasure by creating realms defined by stasis, mind, and blissfulness. Conspicuously absent are

"justification" in his first work, not employing "affirmation" until his mature works.

³⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* in *Twilight Of The Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 47.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

such integral elements to the realm of becoming as process, the body, and suffering.

When viewed against the backdrop of a concocted ideal world, this world—the world of unintelligible conflict and suffering—seems inadequate, even repulsive.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche's later critique of idealism finds its seminal form in his critique of Socrates and Euripides. Tragedy, argues Nietzsche, died at the hands of this idealistic duo. Because of his commitment to an excessively rationalistic and moralistic outlook, Euripides was unable to comprehend the old Aeschylean tragedy:

He observed something incommensurable in every line, a certain deceptive distinctness and at the same time an enigmatic depth, indeed an infinitude, in the background....A similar twilight shrouded the structure of the drama, especially the significance of the chorus. And how dubious the solution of the ethical problem remained to him!...How unequal the distribution of good and bad fortune!⁴¹

Aeschylean tragedy displays a world that defies the idealist's longing for intelligibility.

Pain and suffering are distributed haphazardly. The noble are rent asunder by undeserved tribulations while the evil are often left unscathed. Hence, Euripides's moralistic demand for justice could not be satiated by the tragedies that Nietzsche preferred. The world portrayed by these tragedies is, according to Nietzsche, a mirror of the world of becoming. It is defined by conflict, injustice, and senseless suffering.

Rather than accept that tragedy accurately depicts the nature of reality, Euripides constrained tragedy to present the spectator with an intelligible reality. He went to great pains to explain to the spectator *why* the drama unfolded as it did, wishing to leave none of the characters' actions rationally incomprehensible. Furthermore, he sought to

⁴¹ Nietzsche, *Tragedy*, 80.

moralize tragedy,⁴² which consequently came to function as a prescription for the way the world ought to look rather than a depiction of the way it is. He thereby tacitly slandered the world of becoming, the world of Aeschylean tragedy, with the creation of the ideal world which he, the impostor tragedian, presented on stage.

Socrates, the other culprit in tragedy's death, provided the theoretical framework that guided Euripides's production of tragedy. Nietzsche does not limit his purview of Socrates' detrimental influence to his historical impact upon Euripidean tragedy. Rather, as he so often does with the historical figures he examines, Nietzsche employs Socrates as a lens through which the afflictions of modernity may be brought to light.

Accordingly, Nietzsche does not only accuse Socrates of conspiracy in the slaughter of Attic tragedy; he also points out how Socrates' embodiment in the rationalistic/moralistic outlook of modern culture acts as a barrier to the rebirth of a tragic culture. Nietzsche finds historical precedent for his own modern, Socratic culture in Alexandrian culture. He thus uses Alexandrian culture to highlight the poverty of his own culture, which he believes to be thoroughly inculcated in the Socratic faith in reason. Understanding his critique of Socrates and Alexandrian culture, and how this critique functions as a critique of his own cultural landscape, will thus further illuminate his hopes for an alternative, tragic culture.

Nietzsche claims that there are three stages of illusion "designed for the more nobly formed natures, who actually feel profoundly the weight and burden of

⁴² Ibid., 81.

existence.”⁴³ The first of these he describes as “the Socratic love of knowledge and the delusion of being able thereby to heal the eternal wound of existence.”⁴⁴ Love of knowledge, the Socratic form of illusion, is foundational to Alexandrian culture. Nietzsche acknowledges that Alexandrian faith in knowledge is the response of a “nobly formed nature” to suffering from a world rife with pain and conflict. Alexandrians are noble, one must assume, because they initially recognize that the world contains an abundance of suffering. The problem Nietzsche spies with this culture is its response to this recognition—that is, optimism in the “limitless power” of theoretical knowledge.⁴⁵ Having acknowledged the pain and suffering of existence, Alexandrian culture displays “the unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting* it.”⁴⁶ Alexandrian culture hubristically believes itself capable of ameliorating and ultimately explaining those aspects of the world that tragedy demonstrates to be unyielding to conceptual mastery. Alexandrian culture thereby exhibits symptoms that Nietzsche later associates with idealism. It displays faith that the ultimate nature of reality will be shown to be rational. Moreover, its yearning to heal “the eternal wounds of existence” bespeaks its rejection of a world in which senseless

⁴³ Ibid., 108.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 109.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 111.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 95.

pain and suffering cannot be eliminated. Alexandrian culture seems able to affirm life only insofar as reality can approximate to an ideal, rational order.

The German Idealist movement that dominated the philosophical landscape of Nietzsche's time had, through the effort of Hegel, bought wholesale into the Alexandrian enterprise. The philosophical project undertaken by Kant was essentially an effort to demonstrate the sufficiency of reason for the governance of all human activity. But while Kant paid heed to the limits of theoretical reason, its role finds the broadest possible extension in his successor, Hegel. For Hegel, the sovereignty of theoretical reason, attained in Absolute Knowing, marks the pinnacle of the activity of Spirit. Hegel weds this final triumph of reason, as Dennis Schmidt observes, with the "soteriological conviction" that suffering and conflict will come to an end.⁴⁷ Just as the Alexandrians believed themselves capable of healing the wounds of existence, so too Hegel claims that "the wounds of Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind."⁴⁸ Hegel's insistence that reason will resolve the dissonance intrinsic to life thus allows Nietzsche to see the philosophical landscape he inherits—a landscape largely dominated by Hegel—as predominantly Alexandrian. This environment is undoubtedly not amenable to the exuberantly life-affirmative attitude of the Greeks. Tragedy, Nietzsche would later claim, was for the Greeks a celebration of the world of becoming, even its harshest

⁴⁷ Dennis Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 215.

⁴⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 407.

elements.⁴⁹ Alexandrian faith in reason, with its implicit condemnation of the astringent elements of reality disclosed by Aeschylean tragedy, is incapable of affirming becoming. To justify life in an irreparably conflicted world, Nietzsche requires an antithesis to his own culture's Socratic/Hegelian faith in reason.

Apollo and Dionysus

Nietzsche thinks he discovers this antithesis in tragedy's mysterious interweaving of Apollonian and Dionysian symbolism. Therefore, it is necessary to understand what these symbols represent in order to grasp the profound significance of tragedy for Nietzsche. Nietzsche's metaphysics in *The Birth of Tragedy* provide perhaps the clearest point of departure. Nietzsche writes that "we might call Apollo himself the glorious divine image of the *principium individuationis*,"⁵⁰ whereas Dionysian art "gives expression to the will in its omnipotence, as it were, behind the *principium individuationis*, the eternal life beyond all phenomena and despite all annihilation."⁵¹ Nietzsche here, as elsewhere, expresses the difference between Apollo and Dionysus with Schopenhauerian metaphysical formulas. Schopenhauer, like Kant, distinguishes between phenomenal and noumenal reality. The phenomenal realm for Schopenhauer is the realm of individuation, while the noumenal realm is the undifferentiated, indivisible will. The will as thing in itself is the wellspring of all phenomenal, individual life. The

⁴⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols in Twilight Of The Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 120-21.

⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *Tragedy*, 36.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

will's objectification, the phenomenal realm, is merely illusory appearance; in fact, Schopenhauer often likens it to a dream. Following suit, Nietzsche associates Apollo with appearance, dreaming, and surfaces.⁵² Accordingly, Apollo governs any art form that deals with appearances or images. Painting, sculpture, even lyric poetry, which achieves its aim by engendering vivid images in the reader's mind, are among the purely Apollonian arts.

In keeping with Schopenhauer's stance that the noumenal will constitutes the true reality behind the veil of phenomenal becoming, Nietzsche describes Dionysus as the primal ground of being, or the primordial unity.⁵³ Further evincing his debt to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche cites music as the distinctively Dionysian form of art. Schopenhauer maintains that, whereas all non-musical arts simply copy phenomena, music is a perfect copy of the will itself. Thus, music has the capacity to convey something of the depth of the enigmatic ground of being. For Nietzsche, too, Dionysian music communicates truth about the intellectually unfathomable *Ur-eine*. Whereas Apollonian art deals with appearances and images, Dionysian art may be said to capture something that is imagistically and conceptually incommunicable about the nature of life itself. That depth which only music is capable of conveying will be explained in some detail later.

The preliminary sketch of Apollo and Dionysus provided thus far allows one to discern two denotations for each symbol. Both symbols have a metaphysical denotation,

⁵² Ibid., 66.

⁵³ Ibid., 45.

with Apollo signifying the phenomenal realm of individuation and Dionysus representing the *Ur-eine*. The two symbols also have an aesthetic meaning, with Apollo representing the imagistic arts and Dionysus representing music. A more detailed understanding of these symbols can be gained through examining how each provides a means to coping with the ravages of existence. Just as Socrates' illusory faith in reason arose as a response to suffering, so Apollo and Dionysus elicit distinctive illusions to combat the pain of existence. The Apollonian illusion, Nietzsche claims, consists in "art's seductive veil of beauty," whereas the Dionysian illusion is "the metaphysical comfort that beneath the whirl of phenomena eternal life flows on indestructibly."⁵⁴ Paralleling his account of the link between Socrates and Alexandrian culture, Nietzsche provides an illuminating discussion of the connection between Apollo and Homeric Greek culture. This discussion allows one to see the principle of Apollo in action, inspiring the generation of culture in his own peculiar way. Nietzsche offers no similar discussion of the relationship he cites between Dionysus and Buddhist culture. But since Homeric culture, upon Nietzsche's account, arose as a response to Dionysian undercurrents, examining his account of its nascence will prove valuable for understanding Dionysus as well.

The Apollonian culture of the Homeric Greeks, Nietzsche claims, arose as a response to the Greek folk wisdom of Silenus, which he quotes from Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*:

⁵⁴ Ibid., 109-110.

Oh, wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it is best for you not to hear? What is best is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is—to die soon.⁵⁵

Having faced the “terror and horror of existence”, the Homeric Greeks “interposed between [themselves] and life the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians.”⁵⁶ As a means of coping with the deformed aspects of reality, they translated a perfected image of themselves into the heavenly realm. They subsequently focused their attention on this realm, contemplating their own glory as reflected by their gods. Nietzsche first credits the Homeric Greeks with *overcoming* the horrors of existence through the creation of their Olympian domain. However, he immediately qualifies his exaggerated tone. Rather than having triumphed over the horror of existence, the Homeric Greeks had merely “veiled or withdrawn [it] from sight.”⁵⁷ Although Nietzsche oscillates between describing the Apollonian prophyllaxis in more robust terms as an overcoming of horror, and in more modest terms as a veiling of it, the latter description seems more appropriate. For it was only through the “most powerful and pleasurable illusions” that the Homeric Greeks were able to “combat...the wisdom of suffering.”⁵⁸ Only the illusory veiling of dissonance allowed the Homeric Greeks to defend themselves from the pain and suffering of existence, thereby effecting a reversal of Silenus’s wisdom.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 43-44.

Rather than finding the cure for life in death, the result of the “complete victory of Apollonian illusion,” or what Nietzsche alternately calls “Homeric naïveté,”⁵⁹ is a thirst for existence in the effulgence of transfigured, beautified appearance.

The Apollonian prophylaxis against suffering does not exhibit the pitfalls of the Socratic response to existence. Apollonian culture does not pretend that the reality confronting it is ultimately intelligible or that it can somehow mend the fractured character of existence. It thereby elicits an affirmation of embodied experience that acknowledges important tragic limits on human experience. Why, then, does Nietzsche not opt for a purely Apollonian response to existence in *The Birth of Tragedy*?

There are two viable, complementary answers. First, as Julian Young argues, the Homeric Greeks’ capacity to affirm life is predicated upon their ability to remain in a state of self-deception.⁶⁰ They are only capable of affirming life insofar as they can transfigure the terrifying, grotesque aspects of existence into pulchritudinous appearances. Hence, they suppress those cacophonous elements of reality that, if permitted to surface, would confront them with the contrived figure of their harmonic, Apollonian world. The affirmation of life engendered by the Apollonian response to suffering thus fails to affirm unmitigated dissonance. And, as Nietzsche later says, the most terrifying aspects of reality are “the more powerful, more fruitful, *truer* sides of

⁵⁹ Ibid., 44.

⁶⁰ Julian Young, *Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 44.

existence, in which its will finds clearer expression.”⁶¹ Since a purely Apollonian response to life does not brook unveiled dissonance, it cannot provide the tragic justification of life that Nietzsche seeks.

Nietzsche’s other motivation for refusing to adopt the Apollonian response to suffering may very well be that he thinks an Apollonian culture cannot be sustained for any considerable length of time. The Homeric Greeks’ self-deceptive practice of suppressing dissonance creates a culture that eventually *must* be forced to countenance its own falsity. Apollonian culture will then self-destruct once the tragic wisdom it veils has forced its way to the fore of the culture’s consciousness. Nietzsche’s discussion of how Apollonian culture crumbled under the pressure of Dionysian undercurrents supports this hypothesis. After aligning Apollo with “the delimiting of the boundaries of the individual,” as well as the principles of limit and moderation more generally,⁶² Nietzsche states that, despite all the beauty and moderation of the Apollonian world, the Homeric Greek was forced to recognize that “his entire existence rested on a hidden substratum of suffering and of knowledge, revealed to him by the Dionysian.”⁶³ In spite of the Apollonian Greek’s attempt to silence this Dionysian undertone and behold only a transfigured world of beautified appearances, Dionysus, the principle of excess, the destroyer of boundaries, “revealed itself as truth...And so, wherever the Dionysian

⁶¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), 537.

⁶² Nietzsche, *Tragedy*, 46.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

prevailed, the Apollonian was checked and destroyed.”⁶⁴ Thus, the Apollonian veiling of Dionysian elements is perpetually threatened by the inability to keep those elements from erupting and rending the veil asunder. A purely Apollonian culture, then, is constantly susceptible to destruction by Dionysian forces.

As mentioned above, Nietzsche offers no analysis of the interplay between Dionysus and Buddhist culture. He only cites the Dionysian prophylaxis peculiar to Buddhist culture as metaphysical comfort. This comfort he describes as the hope that “the spell of individuation may be broken in augury as a restored oneness.”⁶⁵ Nietzsche’s language of “shattering the spell of individuation” shows that he is attempting to describe the sort of escape from individuated existence promised by Schopenhauer in the fourth book of *The World as Will and Representation* and by Buddhist conceptions of Nirvana. Thus, the Dionysian prophylaxis against the pain of existence must be hope for the negation of the discord and suffering entailed by individuated existence.

Due to Nietzsche’s insistence that Dionysus represents primal unity, it is tempting to see Dionysus as disclosing the *real* possibility of escape into an undivided, harmonious realm. Nietzsche, however, claims that metaphysical comfort is merely illusory. It is no less illusory than Apollo’s veil of beauty, which sustained the Homeric Greeks. A distinction must be made between the illusory prophylaxis attributed to Dionysus and what Nietzsche believes Dionysus to truly disclose. Nietzsche says that

⁶⁴ Ibid., 46-47.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 74.

Dionysus discloses the “terror and horror of existence.” Moreover, the Dionysian vision is described as a “glance into the abyss.”⁶⁶ If Dionysus is truly the harbinger of hope for a harmonious, painless state of unity, then Nietzsche should not make a Dionysian encounter seem so terrifying. What is the truth disclosed by Dionysus from which Alexandrian, Homeric, and Buddhist cultures attempt to shield themselves?

The answer lies in that which music directly, non-conceptually conveys about the very nature of Dionysus himself. Having already claimed that Dionysus represents primordial unity, Nietzsche asserts that this unity itself is “eternally suffering and contradictory.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, the *Ur-eine* is “suffering, primal and eternal, the sole ground of the world.”⁶⁸ According to Schopenhauer, individuation is the cause of all pain and suffering; whether the will itself suffers is a question not fit for finite beings. Breaking from Schopenhauer, Nietzsche attributes to music the power to disclose the truth of reality’s essential dissonance. Hence, Nietzsche writes that “The Dionysian musician is, without any images, himself pure primordial pain and its primordial re-echoing.”⁶⁹ This primordial pain is completely inaccessible to Apollonian consciousness. Only the spirit of music makes encountering it possible. Music thus provides a means not merely to acknowledging the suffering at the heart of existence but to participating in it.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 69.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 45.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 50.

What does it mean to participate in Dionysian suffering? Nietzsche describes the state of immersion in primordial suffering as *Rausch*, usually translated as “intoxication” or “rapture.” The Bacchic reveler experiencing *Rausch*, like the Dionysian musician, is not conscious of the boundaries of individuation. Instead, the Dionysian participant identifies with the conflicted essence of reality. In this experience, the pains of individuated existence are forgone in order to participate in the suffering at the heart of life. One must imagine that suffering from knowledge of one’s death, from the rational incomprehensibility of suffering, and from the more mundane concerns of everyday existence is forgotten in *Rausch*. Everything associated with the pains of individuation ceases to be felt. Instead, one experiences oneself as belonging to universal strife. The state of *Rausch* is one of frenzied energy and heightened attunement with the harsh elements of nature. Even death and suffering, which are so harrowing from the individual perspective, are capable of being experienced as invigorating. Nietzsche goes so far as to characterize the Dionysian experience as ecstatically joyful, as the “bliss born of pain.”⁷⁰ The result of *Rausch*, then, is that one participates in Dionysus’ pleasure in incessant conflict, suffering, and destruction. But human beings, either as conscious of themselves as individuated or as immersed in the suffering of the *Ur-eine*, cannot escape suffering. The inescapability of pain thus constitutes the Dionysian truth from which even the illusory Dionysian prophylaxis of metaphysical comfort is designed to protect the individual.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 46-47.

Why Dionysus discloses a terrifying truth, and then attempts to shield individuals from it, is never explained by Nietzsche. He reserves one of his harshest vituperations in his “Attempt at a Self-Criticism” for his doctrine of metaphysical comfort. What can be said with certainty is that Nietzsche takes Dionysian experience to be real, while metaphysical comfort is illusory. If the individual believes that Dionysus promises a metaphysical state of painless bliss, it is only because the Dionysian *Ur-eine* “always finds a way to detain its creatures in life and compel them to live on, by means of an illusion spread over things.”⁷¹ The upshot of an authentic Dionysian experience is not comfort but immersion in universal suffering. Nietzsche therefore repudiates the Buddhistic and Schopenhauerian promise of a painless state of harmony. Rather, he sees no possibility of escape from suffering. There are simply two ways of experiencing suffering: from the individual perspective or from the perspective of the *Ur-eine* itself. From the former perspective, ruination and suffering are experienced as painful and degrading. From the latter perspective, one experiences them as ecstatically joyful and power-enhancing.

Since Dionysian experience is participation in the tragic essence of reality, it will prove to be a crucial ingredient in the tragic culture that Nietzsche hopes to inspire. However, a purely Dionysian culture is tough to envision, which perhaps explains why Nietzsche never offers an analysis of Buddhist culture. How could a culture be built without the Apollonian elements of boundary and moderation functioning to check Dionysian destruction and excess? Of course, the tragic culture Nietzsche wishes to

⁷¹ Ibid., 109.

inspire cannot be purely Apollonian either, if it is to have any permanence. It must acknowledge the Dionysian suffering at the heart of existence, or else Dionysus will eventually expose its falsity. Tragedy, Nietzsche believes, can interweave Apollo and Dionysus so as to produce a culture that justifies individual existence, despite Dionysus' predilection for destroying the bounds of both individuals and culture.

The Tragic Effect

When Nietzsche writes in retrospect that much of *The Birth of Tragedy* “smells offensively Hegelian,”⁷² he undoubtedly has in mind the dialectical interaction between the Apollonian and Dionysian principles. This synthesis putatively gives rise to the tragic effect. Exactly what tragedy accomplishes for Nietzsche is open to dispute. Young provides what is perhaps the bleakest view of the tragic effect, arguing that it reinforces the Schopenhauerian conclusion that individual existence is insupportable.⁷³ He argues that Nietzsche endorses a purely Dionysian response to existence, and that this response is synonymous with metaphysical comfort. Because Young dismisses the role of Apollo in Nietzsche's justification of life, he largely ignores the dialectical character of Nietzsche's project. Schacht, on the other hand, pays more attention to how the collaboration of Apollo and Dionysus might contribute to life-justification. He attempts to demonstrate how their dialectical interweaving, upon Nietzsche's account, elicits a life-affirmative response in the spectator. Schacht thus describes the aim of

⁷² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo in On The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 270.

⁷³ Young, 48.

tragedy as that of helping the spectator “to discern ways in which...[the intractable aspects of the human condition]...may be confronted and transformed into occasions for the endowment of life with grandeur and dignity.”⁷⁴ Schacht stresses what he sees as the continuity between Nietzsche’s early and late attempts to achieve an affirmation of embodied existence. While Schacht is rightfully attentive to the dialectical nature of Nietzsche’s early attempt at life-justification, I will argue that Nietzsche’s early thinking is discontinuous with his mature attempt at life-affirmation. What the attempted synthesis between Apollo and Dionysus achieves is unclear. It seems to elicit no more than a cathartic effect, whereby the terror of existence disclosed by Dionysus is mitigated by Apollo. This seemingly amounts to little more than an Apollonian veiling of Dionysian truth. Nietzsche’s attempted life-justification in *The Birth of Tragedy* will consequently prove disparate from the purely Dionysian life-affirmation of his mature works. In the latter, there is no hint that Dionysus must be transfigured in order for life to be affirmable.

The core of tragedy, Nietzsche explains, is Dionysian. This epicenter originally consisted of nothing but a chorus of satyrs, the votaries of Dionysus and conveyors of “the Dionysian wisdom of tragedy.”⁷⁵ During the enactment of the drama, the spectator, having been blinded to the everyday reality of culture, becomes the “Dionysian man” who contemplates his image in the chorus.⁷⁶ Identifying with the chorus, the Dionysian

⁷⁴ Schacht, 148-149.

⁷⁵ Nietzsche, *Tragedy*, 58-59.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

spectator now beholds a hero torn to shreds by unavoidable conflict. But this hero is none other than Dionysus himself, the eternally suffering one, who “appears in a variety of forms.”⁷⁷ Hence, the spectator does not merely behold a particular image of suffering on stage, say, that of Hamlet or Antigone. Rather, Dionysian, universal suffering—the suffering at the heart of existence itself—is portrayed by the tragic hero. Beholding this suffering brings the spectator to the brink of self-resignation through the following rather complicated process. While identifying with the Dionysian chorus, the bounds of self-consciousness are transgressed.

But as soon as... everyday reality re-enters consciousness, it is experienced as such, with nausea: an ascetic, will-negating mood is the fruit of these states.

In this sense the Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have *gained knowledge*, and knowledge inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint.⁷⁸

Thus, after glimpsing the eternally conflicted essence of reality embodied in the suffering of the tragic hero, the spectator is “in danger of longing for a Buddhistic negation of the will.”⁷⁹ It is not during the actual experience of Dionysian identification that the spectator is close to self-abnegation. Rather, upon returning to individual consciousness and the realm of culture, the spectator becomes paralyzed. She has suffered a Dionysian vision into the eternally disjointed essence of reality, and having returned to self-consciousness, she is faced with nihilism. Dionysus has laid bare the

⁷⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 59-60.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 59.

truth that there is no escape from suffering for all that exists. Now the wisdom of Silenus, one must imagine, resounds more stridently than ever.

In danger of succumbing to self-resignation, the spectator is miraculously saved:

Knowledge kills action; action requires the veils of illusion... Here, when the danger to his will is greatest, *art* approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live.⁸⁰

In order to act in the Apollonian realm of individuation after gaining Dionysian knowledge, the spectator requires the “veils of illusion.” Exactly what form of illusion Nietzsche has in mind is unclear in the passage. He proceeds to cite the satyr chorus as “the saving deed of Greek art,”⁸¹ thereby suggesting that the Dionysian elements of the drama are responsible for rescuing the spectator from her morass.⁸² However, Nietzsche soon after states, “Nature, as yet unchained by knowledge, with the bolts of culture still unbroken—that is what the Greek saw in his satyr...”⁸³ The unchaining knowledge which the satyr does *not* represent here must surely be Dionysian knowledge. Dionysian knowledge is responsible for breaking the cultural boundaries established by Apollo, and yet the bolts of culture are here unbroken. Hence, Nietzsche is now suggesting that the satyrs predominantly partake of Apollo’s nature. This marks a revision of his initial thesis that the satyrs are purely Dionysian. The saving principle of tragic art, therefore,

⁸⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Nussbaum endorses the view that Dionysian elements save the spectator from self-annihilation. See Nussbaum, 60-61.

⁸³ Nietzsche, *Tragedy*, 61.

seems to be Apollo, the establisher of cultural boundaries and bulwarks against Dionysian knowledge. This contention finds further textual support in Nietzsche's identification of the saving illusion with the activity of veiling. Veiling is always a function attributed only to Apollo.

To corroborate the thesis that Apollonian forces save the tragic spectator from self-obliteration, one can turn to Nietzsche's discussion toward the end of *The Birth of Tragedy* about the relation between pure music and drama. Having questioned how the spectator could persist in existence after a Dionysian encounter with the pure music of *Tristan und Isolde*, Nietzsche answers, "the Apollonian tears man from his orgiastic self-annihilation and blinds him to the universality of the Dionysian process, deluding him into the belief that he is seeing a single image of the world."⁸⁴ Thus, it is "merely a glorious appearance, namely...Apollonian *illusion* whose influence aims to deliver us from the Dionysian flood and excess."⁸⁵ Nietzsche suggests that Apollonian illusion shields the tragic spectator from the full thrust of Dionysian truth by transforming Dionysian suffering into particular images on stage. Rather than beholding the universality of suffering, the spectator sees only the suffering of a noble character. This suffering is beautiful, worthy of emulation, capable of justifying life. Schacht thus describes the tragic effect: "A new way of seeing...[human existence]...becomes possible, in that our relation to the reality that is at once the ground and the abyss in our

⁸⁴ Ibid., 128.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 129.

existence comes to be regarded as amenable to Apollinian transformation.”⁸⁶ The characters, the scenes on stage, the poetry—in short, the conceptual and imagistic elements of tragic drama—rescue the spectator from the terrible disclosure of Dionysus. The spectator, no longer mourning the universality of suffering, is restored to the realm of culture and now able to act in a world that is in its essence “out of joint.”

At the time of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche believed that tragedy, upon this account, provided a propitious means of justifying life, despite the senseless pain and suffering intrinsic to individuated existence. But Nietzsche later stridently voices his disapproval of the work. What could be the reasons for his displeasure? Nietzsche hoped to accomplish two things through the union of Apollo and Dionysus. He hoped to provide a justification of individual existence, as well as to inspire the rebirth of tragic culture. Considering the former intention, two criticisms deserve attention. First, the tragic effect, as Nietzsche has explained it, seems to be catharsis of the terror evoked by the unmitigated dissonance encountered in Dionysian experience. Only Apollo’s transformation of Dionysian suffering into particular images of more readily digestible suffering rescues the spectator from self-annihilation. The problem with this account, for Nietzsche’s attempted tragic justification of life, is that the transformed suffering is no longer Dionysian suffering. If one penetrates Nietzsche’s recondite, dialectical language about the “transformation” or “transfiguration” of Dionysus, one sees that the spectator acquires the capacity to persist as individual only by virtue of Apollo’s veiling of the Dionysian terror of existence. But it is not at all clear how the truly horrific nature of the

⁸⁶ Schacht, 150.

Dionysian world can survive a synthesis with Apollo. Nietzsche never shows how the noble hero's suffering can simultaneously function as a beautiful, Apollonian image of particularity and as a Dionysian disclosure of the conflicted core of life. In the end, the tragic spectator seems to be saved only by Apollo's capacity to veil unadulterated Dionysian truth. The tragic effect, therefore, seems to consist of little more than the purely Apollonian response to life exhibited by the Homeric Greeks. Just as the Homeric Greeks needed Apollo to harness Dionysus, so too does the tragic spectator require the same.

Second, what does Nietzsche mean when he says that life is justified as an aesthetic phenomenon? There are two ways that one could attempt to justify individual existence. The first is to appeal to its intrinsic value. The second is to claim that an individual who meets some criterion is justified in existing. Whether Nietzsche adheres to only one route is uncertain. His claim that life is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon could mean that all existence is intrinsically valuable, and therefore justified, insofar as it constitutes a sort of cosmic spectacle. But as Young asks, to whom is existence then justified?⁸⁷ It could only be justified to one with a cosmic perspective, or bird's eye view, and not to individual human beings. Strangely enough, Nietzsche cites this as his view of life-justification in several passages in the text. For instance:

we may assume that we are merely images and artistic projections for the true author, and that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art—for it is

⁸⁷ Young, 52.

only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally justified.⁸⁸

Nietzsche even calls the drama of human activity and history the “perpetual entertainment” of the sole author and spectator of the world.⁸⁹ One must suppose that the cosmic perspective from which the aimless spectacle of human death and suffering finds justification is that of the *Ur-eine*. Nietzsche is thus apparently claiming that individual existence is justified because the *Ur-eine* itself finds joy in the ceaseless ebb and flow of individuals. Insofar as individuals can experience *Rausch*, they too can participate in this joy. However, this does nothing to justify existence to individuals, insofar as they remain conscious of their individuality. The suffering and pain experienced by any individual in an individuated state of consciousness will likely remain unpleasant and disturbing. Hence, Nietzsche does not here show how his aesthetic justification of life can be coherent or meaningful to individual, self-conscious human beings.

Schacht discusses the second possible way in which Nietzsche may be attempting to aesthetically justify life. Perhaps Nietzsche is enjoining his readers to transfigure the meaningless suffering in their own lives, in much the same way that tragedy shows Apollo transforming Dionysus. Aesthetic justification would then mean that one’s life is justified insofar as one is able to beautify and lend direction to one’s suffering. Hence, a life is justified if it meets the criterion of being the sort of aesthetic phenomenon embodied in the life of the tragic hero. But if Nietzsche indeed intends to justify life this

⁸⁸ Nietzsche, *Tragedy*, 52.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

way, then few would be justified in existing. While tragic heroes perhaps suffer beautifully, spectators of tragedy continue to confront the brunt of their own suffering as ignoble and haphazard. Tragedy's capacity to purge suffering of its ugliness is not a feat that can be faithfully and perpetually accomplished by the individual in her everyday encounter with the world. Furthermore, one might imagine that even the tragic hero is supposed to experience her suffering as hideous and frightful; it is only the spectator of tragedy who finds beauty and solace in the hero's response to the conflicts of life. Even if one were to act the part of the tragic hero in everyday life, there is no reason to think that one would find life justified.

Precisely what Nietzsche intends by an aesthetic justification of life remains murky. Whatever his intentions, one might further question, with what right can Nietzsche attempt to provide a justification of life? How can existence admit of a discursive justification? Nietzsche's very desire to provide such justification evinces the complicity of *The Birth of Tragedy* in the Socratic/Alexandrian culture of its time. For the language of "justification" implies that life requires a conceptual "proof" of its value. The desire for such a proof must be motivated by the drive to make the value of life rationally demonstrable and comprehensible. But the task of providing a justification of life, as Nietzsche later seems to recognize, is fruitless and even impossible. Thus, he writes:

Judgments, value judgments concerning life, for or against, can in the last resort never be true: they possess value only as symptoms—in themselves such judgments are stupidities...For a philosopher to see a problem in the *value* of life

thus even constitutes an objection to him, a question-mark as to his wisdom, a piece of unwisdom.⁹⁰

Nietzsche ceases to talk about justifying life in his late works, preferring instead to talk about affirming it. This move apparently signals his recognition that the intrinsic value of life cannot be proven. Instead of trying to work out a justification of life, Nietzsche sees the individual's attitude toward life as a symptom of her overall spiritual health. The very need to justify life signals sickness. The ability to embrace life, to love it despite the impossibility of its justification, is the most telling symptom of strength.

Concerning Nietzsche's other intention in *The Birth of Tragedy*, to inspire the rebirth of tragic culture, he never delineates how the union of Apollo and Dionysus contributes to the production of a tragic culture. He only goes as far as explaining how the catharsis experienced by the spectator of tragedy can attenuate the pain of existence, thereby making life bearable. However, a tragic culture cannot encourage its members to strive for a permanent condition of catharsis. Once the cathartic effect of attending a tragic performance wears off, individuals are left to confront a world in which they are not tragic heroes. Hence, they must undergo their own baleful pain and suffering without the solace attained when attending a tragedy. Only occasional catharsis putatively succeeds in seducing the members to an existence rife with meaningless pain and suffering. Catharsis cannot, then, be the cornerstone of a tragic culture. Nietzsche, however, never suggests the tenability of an existence in which Apollo is not constantly active in veiling the bitter realities of life. It therefore seems that he cannot explain how the members of a tragic culture could bear the Dionysian elements of life when not

⁹⁰ Nietzsche, *Twilight*, 40.

beholding the mystical “synthesis” of Apollo and Dionysus on stage. Accordingly, Nietzsche does not, perhaps even cannot, provide a model of the tragic culture he hopes to inspire.

Nietzsche did not remain blind to his failure to fulfill his aspirations in *The Birth of Tragedy*. He even links his failure to his complicity in dialectic. Nietzsche did not, however, envision the possibility of an affirmation of life not predicated upon the illusory veiling of the Dionysian realities of life for quite some time after his first work. As late as *The Gay Science* he claims that only the illusory function of art can make life “bearable.”⁹¹ In his late works, on the other hand, Nietzsche claims the capacity to affirm life “even in its strangest and sternest problems.”⁹² Moreover, he proclaims, “‘How much truth can a spirit *endure*, how much truth does a spirit *dare*?’—this became for me the real standard of value.”⁹³ Nietzsche seems to have in mind difficult, Dionysian truths. In his late conception of life-affirmation, rather than requiring Apollo to transfigure Dionysian, he will attempt to affirm life without recourse to palliatives. Nietzsche’s prized philosophical creation, eternal recurrence, will take center stage in his mature attempt to affirm life in spite of the hard truths suffered in a Dionysian world.

⁹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: with a prelude in rhymes and an appendix of songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 163.

⁹² Nietzsche, *Twilight*, 121.

⁹³ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 536.

CHAPTER III

ETERNAL RECURRENCE: ELIDING AUTONOMY

Nietzsche's mature thinking about life-affirmation centers on his doctrine of eternal recurrence, the "highest formula of affirmation that is at all attainable."⁹⁴ If interpreted as the literal recurrence of precisely the same historical pattern, eternal recurrence might plausibly be expected to undermine human freedom. For everything that happens in the future of the present cycle is settled. As each cycle is identical, no event in the future of the current cycle can differ from events in past cycles. Thus, no amount of human effort can influence the only possible configuration of history. Despite the intuitive plausibility of this assumption about eternal recurrence, commentators such as Hatab and Nehamas deny that Nietzsche intends for eternal recurrence to undo human freedom. In their analyses of eternal recurrence, they argue that Nietzsche means to underscore the necessity of the past, while leaving the future open to determination by free individuals.⁹⁵ Individuals may be helpless to change the past, but the future provides a platform for the exercise of human freedom.

Hence, eternal recurrence need not engender problems for Nietzsche's praise of creative, heroic individuals. In fact, Nehamas presents a reading of eternal recurrence that strongly emphasizes its connection with the gallantry of the self-sufficient

⁹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, Random House: 1967), 295.

⁹⁵ Lawrence J. Hatab, *Nietzsche's Life Sentence: Coming to Terms with Eternal Recurrence* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 129-132. Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 160-161.

individual. Fueled by Zarathustra's approbation of the heroic individual's redemptive capacity, Nehamas argues that, through affirming eternal recurrence, the individual redeems the senselessness of human history. Nehamas essentially sees eternal recurrence as an impetus to create a perfectly integrated self, whose eternal recurrence one can joyfully will. By fashioning such a self, the individual redeems everything that made that self possible, which is the entire past. Accordingly, the ideal Nietzschean life-affirmer's individual activity imbues the past with new meaning, even rectifying its previously desultory character. It seems that what is achieved by affirming eternal recurrence, upon such a reading, is complete self-sufficiency. Through a superhuman act of individual strength, the affirmer of eternal recurrence mends the entirety of history through her autonomous activity.⁹⁶

In contrast to interpretations, such as Nehamas's, that see eternal recurrence as a vehicle for the individual's redemption of reality, I will show that Nietzsche employs eternal recurrence to undermine the individual's capacity for autonomous self-assertion. Contrary to Hatab and Nehamas, I will argue that Nietzsche does not maintain a

⁹⁶ I think Henry Staten provides helpful insight into some of the pitfalls of this notion of autonomy. See Henry Staten, *Nietzsche's Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 40, 184. Staten insightfully reads the drive to self-aggrandizement that inspires the affirmation of eternal recurrence, upon an account such as Nehamas's, as an act of resentment. The individual attempts to negate the world's ability to negate her will. Affirming eternal recurrence is a way of making that which stands against the individual's will (the senselessness of the past, for instance) disappear. The individual, by asserting that she wills the entire world, thereby "come[s] into being in the void" left by the world. The result is complete self-sufficiency, or "solitude," as Staten puts it. If Nietzsche did endorse the picture of affirming eternal recurrence painted by Nehamas, I think Staten's critique would be extremely effective. However, I will ultimately argue that affirming eternal recurrence obviates the very existence of the individual's autonomous will.

dichotomy between the necessity of the past and the openness of the future. Instead, Nietzsche wants eternal recurrence to underscore the necessity of all events, past, present, and future. The future, just as much as the past, stands outside the reach of the autonomous individual's sphere of dominance. As mentioned in the first chapter, by "autonomy," I intend the sort of freedom provided by agent causal accounts of free will. Such accounts tacitly posit a metaphysical conception of the individual, whereby the self is the uncaused cause of its choices and actions. Both Hatab and Nehamas deny that Nietzsche holds to a metaphysical conception of the self. However, they seem to concur that Nietzsche does not think the absence of such a conception of agency should change the way we think about individual freedom. Hence, Hatab writes, "Nietzsche's argument seems to be that something like fate or necessity has no bearing at all on how we are to understand human action *in practice*. Even if scientific determinism were demonstrably true, the openness of the future and introspective convictions about having real choices are phenomenological facts that cannot be explained away."⁹⁷ Since Hatab and Nehamas continue to talk about individual freedom as if nothing changes after the rejection of agent causation, I will say that they support an autonomous model of individual action. Both maintain that eternal recurrence only highlights the individual's incapacity to control the past, while leaving the future open to the prerogative of the free individual.

Against their views, I think Nietzsche engages eternal recurrence to alter the way we understand the individual, and hence individual freedom. Accordingly, I attempt to

⁹⁷ Hatab, 133.

show that Nietzsche employs eternal recurrence to undermine the way we typically think about human freedom. To this end, he employs eternal recurrence as a metaphor for determinism in *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra*. Eternal recurrence thereby undercuts any bifurcation between the future free acts of the individual and the past events of history that the autonomous individual cannot control. Consequently, affirming eternal recurrence requires confessing the impotence of one's autonomous will. The individual can neither extend her free will to the whole of history nor rectify the past by her future autonomous activity. She must rather acknowledge her powerlessness to stand against the accidents entailed by a deterministic cosmos.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will rely upon textual evidence from Nietzsche's earliest works in which eternal recurrence appears, *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra*. My reason for doing so is twofold. First, passages from these texts appear to offer stiff support for interpretations of eternal recurrence that see it as accentuating the significance of autonomous activity. Indeed, Nehamas relies primarily upon these texts for his interpretation of eternal recurrence. Second, eternal recurrence in Nietzsche's late works acquires a more comprehensive meaning,⁹⁸ which complements and expands its use as a metaphor for determinism in the two works examined in this chapter. This meaning will be the subject of the fourth chapter. What will emerge from the present examination is that confronting eternal recurrence requires countenancing the impotence of one's autonomous will.

⁹⁸ Or, rather, at least the expanded meaning of eternal recurrence is more readily discernible in the post-Zarathustran works.

Like Sands Through the Hourglass, Such is Your Life

Nietzsche first introduces eternal recurrence in a section of *The Gay Science* titled “The Greatest Weight.” The reader is asked how she would react if a demon entered her “loneliest loneliness” and issued the following message:

This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence— even this spider and this moonlight between the trees and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!⁹⁹

Nietzsche then describes two potential reactions of the listener who becomes obsessed with eternal recurrence. The first is that “The question in each and every thing, ‘Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?’ would lie upon [the listener’s] actions as the greatest weight.”¹⁰⁰ The other reaction consists in the listener’s becoming so well disposed to herself and to life that she desires her life’s eternal recurrence.¹⁰¹

The above passage can be construed so that it lends itself particularly well to one strain in Nehamas’s reading of eternal recurrence. As briefly touched upon above, Nehamas argues that eternal recurrence functions as an impetus to self-mastery.¹⁰² He claims that Nietzsche propounds a literary model for the self-creator’s activity. Just as

⁹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 273.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹⁰² Nehamas, 150.

the perfect literary character contains no superfluous character traits and commits no otiose actions, the ideal Nietzschean individual meticulously chooses only actions that contribute to the creation of a perfectly unified self. Nietzsche thus uses eternal recurrence to encourage the individual to create a fully integrated self whose eternal recurrence she can unabashedly will. In keeping with Nehamas's emphasis on self-mastery, the question whether one desires the repetition of her actions innumerable times more has sometimes been interpreted as an ethical imperative, formulated similarly to Kant's categorical imperative. Deleuze, for example, claims that Nietzsche intends for eternal recurrence to elicit the following injunction: "*whatever you will, will it in such a way that you will its eternal return.*"¹⁰³ Eternal recurrence thus construed encourages the listener to fastidiously choose her actions. If each of her actions must recur eternally, then, assuming this is not a matter of indifference to her, she will likely attempt to ensure that none of her actions be accidental or nonessential. That the individual must act as if her actions have eternal consequences thus accounts for the weightiness of the demon's message.

But if the demon's message functions primarily as a decision criterion, why is it delivered by a demon? And why does the demon refer in his message to the listener as a speck of dust? One might rejoin to the first question that a demon administers the message because it could cause the listener tremendous emotional duress. Most would prefer to view their actions as having only fleeting significance, so that they are not hopelessly frustrated by their perpetual failures. Once one's actions acquire an eternal

¹⁰³ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 68.

significance, however, the pressure to attain to self-perfection becomes exorbitant; hence, the potential crushing effect of the demon's message. Assuming that this explains why the message is delivered by a demon, it does not explain why the listener is reduced to a speck of dust. If the listener is to henceforth approach each of her actions as if they have eternal significance, this must aggrandize her self-importance. Despite her inability to change the past, the demon's message must amplify the value of her future autonomous activity. A plausible explanation that can address both questions requires a different interpretive strategy.

A viable hypothesis as to why the message is delivered by a demon is that Nietzsche is thinking of Socrates' *daimon*.¹⁰⁴ Socrates interprets his *daimon* as an inner voice, a conscience, that helps him avoid making deleterious life choices. Socrates sees his *daimon* as a sort of metaphysical guide, mysteriously aiding him in navigating his way through precarious situations in life. Contrary to Socrates, Nietzsche holds that civilization has produced the human conscience, which therefore does not represent a distinctly metaphysical aspect of the self. In a parody of Socrates' metaphysical view of his *daimon*, Nietzsche may be stressing how interpreting the demon's message metaphysically inhibits one's vitality. As discussed above, if one believes oneself to be the autonomous author of one's actions, thinking that each of one's actions will be eternally repeated could prove exceedingly harrowing. One might feel infinitely responsible for each action one performs. Similar to the Christian who views committing a single sin as deserving of eternal damnation, the individual who

¹⁰⁴ Daniel Conway suggested the potential link between Nietzsche's demon and Socrates' *daimon*.

perpetrates one act, the eternal recurrence of which she cannot will, must suffer from that choice eternally. If, on the other hand, one refuses to view the demon as underscoring the importance of one's autonomous activity, Nietzsche might be claiming that one's vitality is enhanced. So long as one views the demon's message as nothing more than the news that all one's actions are entailed by necessity, one need not hold oneself metaphysically responsible for one's actions. According to this non-metaphysical interpretation of the demon's message, the healthy response to life is to desire that one *not* be an autonomous agent. Insofar as one desires autonomy, one would then experience the demon's message with "gnashing of teeth." But if one can relinquish the metaphysical view of the self, one achieves "the ultimate eternal confirmation and seal." Nietzsche would not, then, be claiming that one is to act as if each of one's future, freely chosen actions has eternal significance. Rather, one should accept one's status as a fully natural, fully determined being. In the discussion that follows, this hypothesis will receive textual corroboration.

We can first note an ambiguity in the opening line of the demon's message, "This life as you now live it and have lived it..."¹⁰⁵ "Life" here could refer to the span of time from one's birth until the present moment in which the demon delivers its message. Then "life as you now live it" would refer to the present moment, while "life as you have lived it" would refer to the past. On the other hand, "life" could designate the entire lifespan of the listener. In this case, "life as you now live it" would denote the individual's present lifecycle. "Life as you have lived it" would then appertain to the

¹⁰⁵ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 273.

previous cycles of the exact same life. The former interpretation fits well with construing eternal recurrence as an imperative. For it provides the individual with the opportunity, from the present moment forward, to perform only actions that she would freely will to eternally recur. The latter interpretation seemingly threatens the coherence of the imperative interpretation, because according to it all the details of one's life have already been fixed. Every event has already been lived through innumerable times, and nothing can be changed this time. If this turns out to be the more plausible interpretation of the demon's message, then the demon is likely not informing the listener that she should treat her future autonomous activity as eternally significant. Rather, the demon is undermining the listener's capacity to determine her own destiny through the exercise of her autonomous will.

Before showing how the text more strongly supports the second interpretation of "life" as an entire lifecycle, I want to consider an objection from Hatab. Despite holding to the second, literal interpretation of eternal recurrence, Hatab argues that the demon's message is compatible with an open future in which some sort of human freedom can be manifested.¹⁰⁶ Exactly what kind of freedom Hatab suggests is unclear.¹⁰⁷ There is one obvious way, however, in which human freedom might be compatible with Hatab's literal reading of eternal recurrence. Each action could be one that the agent has freely chosen innumerable times past and will choose innumerable times in the future. Thus, there would be only one repeating cycle of history, but it would largely be the product of

¹⁰⁶ Hatab, 127-133.

¹⁰⁷ So far as I can tell, Hatab simply means compatibilism. See Hatab, 131. Hatab, p.54, confesses that Nietzsche's account of human freedom is unclear.

free choice. The logical compatibility of eternal recurrence and autonomy is undoubtedly tenable. However, imagining history literally eternally recurring as a result of the exact same free choices of the exact same individuals seems rather farfetched. Absent of some deterministic mechanism at work in the cosmos, it appears highly improbable that individuals would make all the same choices innumerable times without the slightest variation. One must not rest content with proving the logical compatibility of eternal recurrence and free will. Rather, one must ask whether the textual evidence suggests that the demon in “The Greatest Weight” propounds eternal recurrence in order to augment the importance of the listener’s future autonomous activity? Or does the demon issue the message to underscore the inability of the listener to determine her destiny?

The demon’s language in describing the return of the minutiae of the individual’s life is the language of necessity. The listener is not told that her life simply will recur, but that she “will *have to* live [it] once more and innumerable times more.”¹⁰⁸ And every detail of her life will “have to return” in the same succession and sequence.¹⁰⁹ There would be no reason for the demon to use such language if each cycle involved a plethora of free choices. For it would not be true that each detail of the individual’s life would, of necessity, recur. Having free will means that, concerning any of an agent’s free actions, the agent has the potential to do otherwise than she actually does. It is therefore true that her actions will *possibly* be different in future lifecycles, even if they

¹⁰⁸ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 273. My emphasis.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

turn out to be the same as a matter of fact. Hence, even if all one's actions do turn out the same in every subsequent lifecycle, it is not true that each detail of one's life *necessarily* had to recur in precisely the same sequence. Instead, it is only true that one's actions did in fact recur, but not of necessity. But this is not what the demon tells the listener. The demon alerts the listener that she has no control over the succession of events in her life, and she will remain unable to alter this necessary sequence in every future cycle. If nothing can possibly change in future cycles, it can only be because the agent lacks the power to effect change. Moreover, if the agent lacks that power with regard to future lifecycles, she also lacks it with regard to the future of the present lifecycle. It thus seems implausible that the demon announces the openness of the agent's future in this passage, so long as the passage is read literally.

But does Nietzsche want the passage to be read as the literal repetition of the entire lifecycle of the individual, or only as the repetition of the stretch of time from the present back to one's birth? In the former case, Nietzsche would be saying that everything in the listener's life, even the future, is already arranged by necessity. In the latter case he would be claiming that the past is necessary, but the future might be open to determination by the autonomous individual. That the former option is Nietzsche's intention receives substantiation from the metaphor of the hourglass. The repetition of the listener's life is necessitated by the perpetual overturning of the "eternal hourglass of existence."¹¹⁰ When an hourglass is overturned, each grain must run its *entire* course from one end of the glass to the other at the behest of gravity. The demon tells the

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

listener that she is tantamount to a grain of sand in an hourglass. Just as a grain of sand is inexorably pulled by gravity from one side of an hourglass until it comes to rest at the other, so too the individual's life, from beginning to end, unfurls in a pattern over which she lacks any autonomous dominion. Nietzsche intends for the listener to imagine her entire life unfolding deterministically in a pattern beyond her control with each new overturning of the hourglass. The project of the autonomous creator, who would harness fate through the imposition of her will upon reality, is thus thwarted by the deterministic implications of eternal recurrence.

Hence, rather than announcing the eternal significance of the listener's actions, the demon reveals the impotence of her autonomous will. So long as the listener desires to be the undetermined, uninfluenced author of her actions, the demon's message must be difficult to stomach. For her actions, just like all events in nature, are governed by necessity. She lacks the capacity to extricate herself from determination by natural forces, a capacity which has traditionally been seen to bestow a measure of power upon the individual. She is thus reduced to a speck of dust by the foul messenger of what must constitute, so long as she desires her autonomous will to arbitrate her destiny, abominable news. One question, however, remains unanswered by this interpretation. That is, why should the question, "Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?,"¹¹¹ lie upon the listener's actions as the greatest weight? The weightiness of this question is usually taken to be felt by the individual who has a robust amount of control

¹¹¹ Ibid., 274.

over her future.¹¹² This autonomous control is accounted for by Nehamas's interpretation of eternal recurrence, with its promise of an open future and focus on creativity and self-mastery.

Let us assume that the question's weightiness is felt by the individual who believes her autonomous activity to be of utmost significance. There is a textual reason to question linking the experience of the question's weightiness to the healthy response Nietzsche endorses. Nietzsche initially describes two reactions to the demon's message—gnashing of teeth and joy. He then considers two consequences of the demon's thought gaining possession of the listener. The first is that "The question in each and every thing, 'Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?' would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight."¹¹³ The second: "*Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?*"¹¹⁴ Why the disjunction? If Nietzsche intends for the listener's experience of the weightiness of the demon's message (the first consequence) to be continuous with craving the confirmation and seal of eternal recurrence (the second consequence), why does he not instead present the two consequences as a conjunction? Commentators who interpret eternal recurrence as an ethical imperative assume that the strength required for affirming eternal recurrence consists in the courageous attempt to act according to the weightiness of the demon's

¹¹² For instance, see Deleuze, 68.

¹¹³ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 274.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* First emphasis is mine.

message.¹¹⁵ But Nietzsche's use of the disjunction suggests that feeling the question as a burden might be the opposite of the salubrious response. The vigorous response would thus actually be encapsulated by the second disjunct—joyfully craving the fulfillment of the demon's message (and there seems to be nothing grave or weighty about such craving). Allowing the demon's message to bear upon one's actions as the greatest weight, on the other hand, is the reaction of one who gnashes her teeth upon encountering the demon's revelation. This interpretation, which is more fully elaborated below, proposes that the common account of the weightiness of the question under consideration is fatally flawed. For the weight is usually thought to be experienced by the affirmer of eternal recurrence, when in fact it is experienced by one who cannot yet affirm eternal recurrence.

If, as we assumed above, the weightiness of the question is felt by the individual who desires autonomy, then Nietzsche is saying that such an individual will feel eternal recurrence as an intransigent encumbrance. This is perfectly consistent with the interpretation of eternal recurrence provided thus far, according to which it impedes the individual's drive to autonomy. Moreover, it is difficult for interpretations that see affirming eternal recurrence as a triumphant autonomous act to explain why the demon's question should remain weighty. According to Nehamas's interpretation of eternal recurrence, for instance, the creative individual redeems the senselessness of history. But if the individual achieves such a superhuman redemption of life through willing eternal recurrence, it seems that affirming eternal recurrence should relieve an onus.

¹¹⁵ Deleuze, 68.

Therefore, it is difficult to link the pressure of the greatest weight to the *successful* exercise of autonomous might involved, upon Nehamas's interpretation, in affirming eternal recurrence. If one instead supposes that eternal recurrence obviates the ability of individuals to exercise their autonomous wills against necessity, it is evident that an individual who desires autonomy would experience the question as deadweight. The demon, in asking "Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?" about each of an individual's actions, would essentially be asking, "Can you desire not to be the ultimate author of each of your actions?" Thus, the individual who aspires to be in complete control of her destiny would be apt to see the demon's question as resting upon her actions as an immovable mass. If she was able to relinquish her desire for autonomy, on the other hand, she would cease to be overburdened by the question.

There seems to be an affinity between experiencing the demon's question as the heaviest load and the paralysis suffered by Hamlet, according to Nietzsche's description of him in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Hamlet's realization of the inefficacy of his will in the battle against his tragic fate led to his incapacitation. He realized that it was not within his power to set aright what necessity deemed to remain out of joint. The demon's message has similarly reduced the listener who desires autonomy to a weakling in the face of necessity. After being so diminished, she feels overtaxed by the ineffectualness of her autonomous will. In keeping with the hypothesis suggested earlier, that the demon in *The Gay Science* bears some relation to Socrates' *daimon*, we see that Nietzsche has effectively reversed the Socratic interpretation of the *daimon*. According to Nietzsche, the demon is not a metaphysical helper, but rather the bearer of the news

that there is nothing beyond or behind natural forces, which are governed by necessity. Insofar as individuals desire some degree of autonomous control over their actions, eternal recurrence will inevitably disappoint them. The message conveyed by Nietzsche's demon would in fact crush Socrates' interpretation of his own *daimon*. So long as Socrates wishes to view his *daimon* as a metaphysical guardian, he will not react joyfully to the tidings of Nietzsche's demon. For according to Nietzsche's demon, Socrates' *daimon* is a farce, an obstruction to Socrates' acceptance that his life is the product of forces not subject to determination by his autonomous will. The jubilant response for Nietzsche, the response that does not elicit gnashing of teeth, must instead be to view oneself as a completely natural being—that is, a being with no autonomous control over one's actions.

On Unredemption

Thus far, I have attempted to show how eternal recurrence in *The Gay Science* vitiates the capacity of individuals to impose their autonomous wills upon reality. However, passages from *Zarathustra* seem strongly to contradict my hypothesis. Especially troubling is "On Redemption," which appears to gird Nehamas's connection between eternal recurrence and the exercise of autonomous vigor. In this passage, Zarathustra is addressing a group of cripples:

I walk among men as among the fragments of the future—that future which I envisage. And this is all my creating and striving, that I create and carry together into One what is fragment and riddle and dreadful accident. And how could I bear to be a man if man were not also a creator and guesser of riddles and redeemer of accidents?¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, Penguin Books: 1966), 139.

Zarathustra here expresses the desire to incorporate all that has hitherto been accidental into a meaningful unity through his future creative activity. He proceeds to proclaim, “To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all ‘it was’ into a ‘thus I willed it’—that alone should I call redemption.”¹¹⁷ Thus, “All ‘it was’ is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful accident—until the creative will says to it, ‘But thus I willed it.’ Until the creative will says to it, ‘But thus I will it; thus shall I will it’.”¹¹⁸ The creative will thus strives to complete self-sufficiency, to the redemption of history by its own command.

Zarathustra describes the past as the object of the creative will’s discontent, because the creator cannot directly exert her will on the meaningless accidents of history. Hence, “Powerless against what has been done, [the creator] is an angry spectator of all that is past.”¹¹⁹ The creative will can, however, bring the past within its sphere of dominance by willing the past as a condition of its future creative activity. This is what Zarathustra longs to achieve by incorporating into “One what is fragment and riddle and dreadful accident.”¹²⁰ The past would then no longer be fragment, riddle, and dreadful accident, because its meaning would be supplied by the activity of the creative will. The degree of autonomous control over reality that Zarathustra desires can be brought out well by a religious metaphor. The Christian interpretation of God posited God as the redeemer of the world, whose redemption guarantees that the world has *telos*,

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 141.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 139.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

or purpose. Zarathustra's speech bespeaks his desire to replace God with the autonomous creator. After the death of God, the world lost its *telos* and thus redemption seemed impossible. But the message preached by Zarathustra to the cripples is that the strong, creative individual can imbue the world with *telos*, thereby redeeming the meaninglessness of history in the wake of God's death.

Nehamas and Clark include their respective discussions of "On Redemption" in their broader examinations of eternal recurrence.¹²¹ At first glance, however, any relation between Zarathustra's speech on redemption and eternal recurrence is difficult to discern. Not only is eternal recurrence nowhere mentioned in the passage, but the redemption preached by Zarathustra implies a teleological vision of history, according to which the past is consummated in the heroic redeemer's act of will. Eternal recurrence, on the other hand, Nietzsche elsewhere claims to represent "existence as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness."¹²² Such a proclamation insinuates that no individual, no matter how strong, is capable of imparting a *telos* to reality. What allows Nehamas to make the connection between redemption and eternal recurrence is his interpretation of eternal recurrence as an impetus to autonomous creativity. Because Nehamas sees eternal recurrence as a spur to the sort of creative activity preached by Zarathustra in "On Redemption," he can link the passage to eternal recurrence. When Zarathustra lauds the strong individual's ability to unify the

¹²¹ Nehamas, 159. Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 257.

¹²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale. Ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), 35.

fragments of history, he seems to be encouraging the individual to provide a meaning to the senseless past through a creative act of unification. And precisely this creative activity is what Nietzsche intends to inspire through the vehicle of eternal recurrence, according to Nehamas.

Despite Nehamas's and others' sophisticated attempts to link "On Redemption" to eternal recurrence, there are good non-textual and textual reasons alike to reject the former as Nietzsche's teaching. First, if we take Zarathustra to teach that the past is redeemed by its instrumental value for the creative individual, this redemption is obtained only by ignoring the future-oriented element of eternal recurrence, upon a literal interpretation of it. For, history does not cease with the attempted redemptive affirmation of the individual. Even if a mere mortal could successfully redeem the senselessness of the past, she cannot guarantee the purposefulness of the future. She, along with her creative activity, will one day be pitched to the dustbin of history. If affirming eternal recurrence actually requires one to affirm all history, then one must also affirm the future despite not knowing what riddles and accidents it will include.

Turning to the text, we can discern several reasons for questioning whether Zarathustra's teaching on redemption also constitutes Nietzsche's teaching. The most general reason is that Zarathustra propounds the teaching in Part Two of *Zarathustra*. To extract Zarathustra's teaching on redemption as Nietzsche's final teaching is thus to ignore that the denouement of *Zarathustra* might obviate his early teaching. Furthermore, in "On Redemption," Zarathustra evinces self-doubt concerning his own teaching. He abruptly brings his speech to a halt and looks shocked. After returning to

his senses, he states, “It is difficult to live with people because silence is so difficult. Especially for one who is garrulous.”¹²³ Although this proclamation is vague, it could signify Zarathustra’s recognition that his speech was nonsense, as T.K. Seung argues.¹²⁴ Zarathustra’s fear of silence forced him into a long, rambling speech that makes little sense. After providing this apparent excuse for his speech, one of the cripples to whom the speech was addressed, a hunchback, accuses Zarathustra of speaking differently to his pupils than to himself. Zarathustra offers no reply, and the hunchback gets the final word in “On Redemption.” It seems that, as Seung perspicaciously notes, Zarathustra is involved in a game of masks and concealment. While Zarathustra addresses his stridently heroic speech to the cripples, he does not adopt a heroic pose when he is alone. Hence, while he announces to others the redemptive power of the autonomous creator, he himself does not believe it.

Perhaps the strongest reason for questioning the link between redemption and eternal recurrence is that Zarathustra has not broached eternal recurrence before “On Redemption.” In fact, eternal recurrence does not make its official appearance until early in Part Three. Even then, the remainder of Part Three of *Zarathustra* chronicles Zarathustra’s struggle to come to terms with eternal recurrence. If Zarathustra views the upshot of eternal recurrence as already encapsulated in “On Redemption,” why does he continue to be tormented by the prospect of eternal recurrence, even after his speech about the redemptive power of the creative will? It appears that the thought of eternal

¹²³ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 141.

¹²⁴ T.K. Seung, *Nietzsche’s Epic of the Soul: Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), 103.

recurrence might evoke something harrowing that Zarathustra attempts to suppress in his musings on redemption.

Zarathustra the Grave

Zarathustra's first authentic attempt to face eternal recurrence does not come until Part Three in "On the Vision and the Riddle." He recounts a story about carrying a dwarf, who represents the spirit of gravity, along an ascent. The dwarf has been mocking Zarathustra, reminding him that although he aspires to great heights, "every stone that is thrown must fall."¹²⁵ The dwarf then grows silent, and Zarathustra, weary of silence (note again that perhaps his fear of silence will cause him to say something nonsensical), challenges the dwarf, exclaiming: "It is I or you! But I am the stronger of us two: you do not know my abysmal thought. *That* you could not bear!"¹²⁶ Zarathustra then announces that he has come upon two conflicting paths, one stretching backward for an eternity and another stretching forward for an eternity. When asked by Zarathustra if he believes that these paths contradict one another, the dwarf responds contemptuously, "All that is straight lies...All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle."¹²⁷ Zarathustra becomes infuriated, charging the dwarf with attempting to make things too easy for himself.

What do the two paths represent? And why does Zarathustra grow angry at the dwarf's reply to his question? Taking up the former question, Seung observes that if one

¹²⁵ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 156.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

path represents the past and the other represents the future, then there is no reason for their contradiction. Time is a continuum, and thus the past flows seamlessly into the future. Seung opts to interpret the contradiction between the two paths as the conflict between two types of wills. The backward path stands for what he dubs the “heteronomous will,” or the will that submits to cosmic necessity. In “On Redemption,” Zarathustra preached the dubious ability of the autonomous individual to redeem the accidents of the past. The heteronomous will, however, acknowledges the perpetually accidental character of reality. The forward path, according to Seung, represents the autonomous will of the creator, who wishes to overpower the heteronomous will and galvanize the accidents of the past for her future redemptive endeavors.¹²⁸ This explains the conflict between the two paths.

Let us entertain a modified version of Seung’s basic hypothesis. Accordingly, the backward path literally represents the past, but metaphorically the past represents that which does not yield to the creator’s autonomous will. This is continuous with the role of the past in “On Redemption.” The forward path literally represents the future, but metaphorically it represents an open stage for the autonomous individual’s creative/redemptive endeavors. This open stage is continuous with the sort of open future Nehamas sees necessary for the affirmer of eternal recurrence. Zarathustra then stands at the nexus of one path that leaves his autonomous self sterile and another path signifying his unflagging desire to assert his autonomous virility. His initial announcement of the two conflicting paths is usually interpreted as setting the stage for

¹²⁸ Seung, 121-130.

his subsequent speech on eternal recurrence, which occurs after his rebuke of the dwarf. But how can two straight, contradictory paths account for the circularity of the ring of eternal recurrence? Their straightness occludes their conjoining. Now we can understand the dwarf's reply that "All that is straight lies."¹²⁹ The dwarf is accusing Zarathustra of propounding lies about straight paths, thus explaining his contempt for Zarathustra's asinine question. The dwarf is informing Zarathustra of his disagreement—the two straight paths do not contradict, for two straight paths do not exist in the first place. After stating the doctrine of eternal recurrence tersely and, so argue Jung and Seung, with an ease and simple eloquence that Zarathustra will not duplicate, the dwarf is scolded by Zarathustra.¹³⁰

After scolding the dwarf, Zarathustra poses a series of questions to him. It is vital to note that Zarathustra is not self-confident enough to provide a straightforward account of eternal recurrence. He had planned to talk about two conflicting paths, but the dwarf's accusing Zarathustra of lying has apparently caused him to realize that his planned speech would have turned out to be nonsense. Now, he is timidly attempting to come to terms with the dwarf's laconic pronouncement of one circular path. Zarathustra begins this new speech by acknowledging the lane that leads eternally backward. Whatever is possible must have already been actualized on this lane. He then ponders, must not all that has passed before draw "after it *all* that is to come?"¹³¹ Like its

¹²⁹ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 158.

¹³⁰ Seung, 129.

¹³¹ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 158.

function in “The Greatest Weight,” eternal recurrence here confronts Zarathustra as a metaphor for the necessity of the future. Zarathustra is realizing that the past includes previous cycles of the exact same life that he is now leading and must continue to lead. Everything that will happen in his present lifecycle has already occurred on the backward lane. Thus, Zarathustra’s future is fixed. It must be just as inaccessible to manipulation by his autonomous will as the past. Having initially decided to talk about two conflicting lanes, Zarathustra is slowly beginning to realize that whatever occurs on the forward lane is entailed by whatever has occurred on the backward lane. Thus, one continuous circle, the movement of which is completely governed by the backward lane, is replacing the two conflicting lanes. Through his questions to the dwarf, Zarathustra is gradually recognizing that the only reality is that which constitutes the metaphorical significance of the backward lane, upon the present hypothesis. Although Zarathustra continues to speak of two lanes, the contents of the backward lane so obviously determine the contents of the forward lane that the two cease to conflict. As Zarathustra slowly begins to countenance the reality of the ring of recurrence, he must be uncovering his own secret identity with the speck of dust of “The Greatest Weight.” Just as the speck of dust’s movement is determined by gravity, so also whatever happens to Zarathustra is entailed by the unchangeable past. Thus, he becomes afraid of his thoughts and his speech feebly fades off. Similar to his paralysis at the end of his speech in “On Redemption,” Zarathustra seems to suffer a similar deflation when he attempts to advocate the dwarf’s pithy teaching. While he is beginning to realize that his

autonomous will must submit to the ring of eternal recurrence, to necessity, he cannot yet confess his impotence. For he cannot yet fully countenance eternal recurrence.

One potential problem with the interpretation proffered thus far of “On the Vision and the Riddle” is that Zarathustra announces his intention to subject the dwarf to his abysmal thought before his initial speech on the conflicting lanes. Since the abysmal thought is often interpreted as the thought of eternal recurrence, it seems plausible that Zarathustra was prepared to announce the doctrine of eternal recurrence from the time he challenged the dwarf. His speech after rebuking the dwarf, then, should not mark a revision of his initially intended speech on the conflicting lanes. Against this line of criticism, I suggest that Zarathustra did not yet fully understand his abysmal thought when he challenged the dwarf. Moreover, he still will not admit its implications for his autonomy by the end of his revised speech, as evidenced by his speech-ending trepidation. When Zarathustra initially challenges the dwarf, he is attempting to assert his autonomous will against the spirit of gravity. Hence, his forceful claim that the dwarf is not capable of bearing his abysmal thought. What Zarathustra fails to realize, from the issuance of his challenge until the end of his revised speech on eternal recurrence, is that the dwarf knows the abysmal thought. The dwarf was able to describe eternal recurrence in such an unaffected manner because it is his thought, despite Zarathustra’s self-deceptive claim to the contrary.

Thus, in “On Involuntary Bliss,” which follows “On the Vision and the Riddle,” Zarathustra admits that he has not yet faced his abysmal thought. He laments:

Alas, abysmal thought that is *my* thought, when shall I find the strength to hear you burrowing, without trembling any more? My heart pounds to my very throat

whenever I hear you burrowing. Even your silence wants to choke me, you who are so abysmally silent. As yet I have never dared summon you; it was enough that I carried you with me... Your gravity was always terrible enough for me; but one day I shall yet find the strength and the lion's voice to summon you.¹³²

Here Zarathustra identifies his abysmal thought with the spirit of gravity that he had been carrying in "On the Vision and the Riddle." This identification supports the thesis that the dwarf is the custodian of the grave, abysmal thought. When in "On the Vision and the Riddle" Zarathustra challenged the dwarf with his abysmal thought, he was initially intending to assert the power of his autonomous will over the nausea induced by the spirit of gravity. To this end, he announced the two conflicting lanes in what perhaps would have been a speech on how the autonomous creator can reconcile the contradiction between the two lanes by willing the backward lane. The initial speech would then have paralleled Zarathustra's teaching in "On Redemption." There the past conflicted with the will of the creator, who mended the conflict by assimilating the past to her autonomous will. In other words, Zarathustra in "On Redemption" taught the creator to overpower the necessity of the past with the future activity of her autonomous will; and his initial announcement of the two conflicting lanes in "On the Vision and the Riddle" insinuates that he has a similar plan. But after the dwarf provides his forceful account of eternal recurrence, Zarathustra was compelled to reconsider his teaching. Now, in "On Involuntary Bliss," Zarathustra begins to recognize his complicity with the spirit of gravity he had been carrying. As we saw in "On the Vision and the Riddle," the dwarf tells Zarathustra that he will fall back down no matter how high he casts himself. Although Zarathustra formerly desired to contest the dwarf's gravity with his abysmal

¹³² Ibid., 162.

thought, he is beginning to recognize that his abysmal thought of eternal recurrence is synonymous with the dwarf's mocking gravity. Truly confronting eternal recurrence will thus force Zarathustra to encounter the impotence of his attempt to cast himself high, or the impotence of his autonomous will.

Zarathustra's next and final encounter with eternal recurrence spans from "The Convalescent" until (arguably) the end of Part Three. After summoning his abysmal thought, which immediately causes him to experience acute nausea, Zarathustra soon falls unconscious. Upon awakening, he lies silent for seven days. When he finally begins to speak to his animals, he explains that his disgust with man had choked him. He associates this disgust with the wisdom: "All is the same, nothing is worthwhile, knowledge chokes."¹³³ He then seemingly proceeds to lament the eternal return of only one type of man, the small man. Clark thus argues that Zarathustra's nausea stems from finally coming to terms with the necessity of the small man's recurrence.¹³⁴ Zarathustra, the teacher of the *Übermensch*, evidently could not brook the return of his enemy before his seven day ordeal. But after recovering from his paralysis, he recognizes that the small man's existence constitutes a necessary condition of his own existence. If Zarathustra is to affirm eternal recurrence, thereby achieving the highest attainable affirmation of life, he must be able to will the existence even of that which repulses him.

Nehamas, who also cites the disgust that choked Zarathustra as his abhorrence of the small man, describes the victory involved in affirming eternal recurrence as

¹³³ Ibid., 219.

¹³⁴ Clark, 261.

becoming “able to want to undergo again all that is cheap and detestable in the world for the sake of all that is not.”¹³⁵ It seems that, in order to achieve this triumph, Zarathustra must extend his autonomous will to a domain in which it was previously vacant. Essentially, he must be willing to say: “If the small man must eternally return in order for me to manifest the strength required to affirm eternal recurrence, well, then *I will* the existence of even the smallest man, too!” Thus, the line of interpretation under consideration results in Zarathustra’s overpowering nausea through assimilating the entire world, even those things in it which previously disgusted him, to his autonomous will. He no longer sees anything in the world as standing outside the sphere of his autonomous will. Affirming eternal recurrence would then mean that one achieves a sort of absolute mastery over reality.

However, this reading discounts the complicity between Zarathustra and the dwarf, as noted above. The dwarf in “On the Vision and the Riddle” did not tell Zarathustra that, no matter how high he cast himself, small men would continue to fall down around him as necessary conditions of his exercise of autonomous might. Rather, he prophesied Zarathustra’s inevitable fall. In order to account for Zarathustra’s association with the spirit of gravity, we must reject the notion that Zarathustra’s sickness was induced by his recognition that the small man’s recurrence is a prerequisite of his eventual triumph. Let us instead hypothesize with Seung that Zarathustra’s recognition of his own complicity with the small man choked him.¹³⁶ The text strongly

¹³⁵ Nehamas, 150.

¹³⁶ Seung, 168.

supports this hypothesis. Zarathustra does not initially attribute his choking to his disgust with the small man. Instead, he says his disgust with man choked him, thus making no distinction between small men and great men. He then associates his disgust with the uniformity of all that exists, thereby insinuating the small man's affinity to the great man. Thus, when Zarathustra repines, "Alas, man recurs eternally! The small recurs eternally!"¹³⁷ he does not intend to distinguish "man" from the "small man." Instead, the two are synonymous. Hence, he continues: "Naked I had once seen both, the greatest man and the smallest man: all-too-similar to each other, even the greatest all-too-human. All-too-small, the greatest!—that was my disgust with man."¹³⁸ Zarathustra is repulsed by the inability of the highest exemplars of humanity to fulfill his preaching in "On Redemption." Through the exercise of autonomous will, nobody, including Zarathustra, is capable of redeeming humanity's accidents. Eternal recurrence dictates that he will eternally return to the "selfsame life," thereby eternally encountering his failure to redeem the disjointedness of reality.

Although a detailed discussion of the remainder of Part Three of *Zarathustra* is not possible here, the role of eternal recurrence thus far elaborated receives corroboration in "The Other Dancing Song." Zarathustra embroils himself in a power struggle with Life, attempting to submit Life with his whip. But he is forced to acknowledge the inadequacy of his whip to control this unfathomable temptress. Perhaps Zarathustra's inability to harness Life symbolically speaks to the powerlessness

¹³⁷ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 219.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

of his autonomous will. His attempt to arrogate reality to his individual will, and thereby to redeem the world by his own might, has failed. Zarathustra lacks the freedom required to assert himself against necessity. So long as he desires autonomy, he must remain frustrated by his impotence. Life will perpetually engender accidents that he cannot redress with his individual will. Even the events of his own life, since determined by necessity, fall outside the terrain of his autonomous jurisdiction. Thus, Zarathustra never succeeds in Part Three, perhaps cannot succeed, in fulfilling his preaching in "On Redemption."

The preceding examination of eternal recurrence in *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra* shows that even passages often understood to support a connection between affirming eternal recurrence and autonomous self-assertion actually contradict such a link. Instead, in these earliest works in which eternal recurrence appears, it abrogates the individual's capacity to autonomously control her fate. Turning now to Nietzsche's post-Zarathustran works, we will see that Nietzsche accords eternal recurrence a broader scope than is generally accounted. It will come to serve as a metaphor for the inexhaustible dynamism of nature. The task of affirming eternal recurrence will involve affirming this Dionysian dynamism.

CHAPTER IV

ETERNAL RECURRENCE AS A METAPHOR FOR NATURE

Nietzsche explicitly links eternal recurrence to tragedy in *Ecce Homo* when he writes that eternal recurrence is the “highest formula of affirmation that is at all attainable,”¹³⁹ and that the “Yes-saying pathos” is a “tragic pathos.”¹⁴⁰ Hatab has recently focused on the tragic implications of affirming eternal recurrence. He argues that Nietzsche’s primary concern is with the questions: “*Can meaning be found in tragic finitude? If it can, what could be its measure?*”¹⁴¹ For Nietzsche, “these questions can only be answered adequately in the light of eternal recurrence, which amounts to the only *positive* expression of meaning that is not susceptible to *flinching* from finite becoming.”¹⁴² Thus, Hatab sees the affirmation of eternal recurrence not as a mere exhibition of psychological strength or as a simple expression of satisfaction with one’s life. Rather, it is a countermeasure to all forms of idealism that deprecate the world of becoming. Affirming eternal recurrence means affirming finitude. Seen in this light, eternal recurrence successfully achieves what Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* could not. It provides an avenue by which the finite individual can affirm life in a world that is not intrinsically amenable to humanity’s desires for intelligibility and happiness.

¹³⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, Random House: 1967), 295.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 296.

¹⁴¹ Lawrence J. Hatab, *Nietzsche’s Life Sentence: Coming to Terms with Eternal Recurrence* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 57.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

The interpretation of eternal recurrence offered below will show that I think Hatab's reading has merit, insofar as Nietzsche intends for affirming eternal recurrence to consummate his larger project of affirming becoming. As a metaphor for the Dionysian character of Nature, eternal recurrence is the symbol of radical becoming. However, I disagree with Hatab that Nietzsche proposes a tragic vision of individual existence. Tragedy is driven by the tension between individuals and natural forces. These forces inevitably thwart individuals' efforts to impress their wills upon reality, thereby underscoring the limited capacity of finite individuals for self-assertion. In order to maintain this tension, tragedy requires some strife between individuals and Nature. Nature, considered as a whole, is utterly indifferent to individuals' desires and aims. Tragedy portrays this indomitable, squandering totality bringing even the most heroic individuals low. If individuals are indeed to feel themselves tragically limited by the spendthrift activity of Nature, they must want to assert themselves *against* Nature. Without some measure of tension between individuals and Nature, individuals will not feel frustrated by Nature's penchant for senseless destruction and ruination. For the individual to experience finitude tragically, then, she must view Nature as something that often "blocks [her] natural interest in happiness, preservation, knowledge, and purpose."¹⁴³

I will argue that Nietzsche wants us to cease viewing Nature as antagonistic to our individual interests. In the previous chapter, we saw that Nietzsche employs eternal recurrence, in the earliest works in which it appears, to negate the individual's

¹⁴³ Ibid., 20.

autonomous will. In Nietzsche's post-Zarathustran works, he continues his project of reshaping what it means to be an individual. Nietzsche wants to dissolve all tension between individuals and Nature. He wants individuals to stop seeing themselves as powerful by virtue of their capacity to work against Nature. Instead, Nietzsche enjoins individuals to immerse themselves in Nature. Even the harsh elements of Nature—death, destruction, and decay—are to be viewed as manifestations of the individual's power, not as tragic limits on individual activity. By affirming eternal recurrence, Nietzsche hopes that individuals can bind themselves to Nature, thereby eliding the tragic tension between individuals and Nature. Eternal recurrence will thus prove to be a vehicle for achieving a post-tragic view of the individual.

Dual Perspectives: Individual Partiality and Nature's Indifference

Nietzsche seems to acknowledge the tragic antagonism between the individual and Nature in the following passage:

Imagine a being like nature, wasteful beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without purposes and consideration, without mercy and justice, fertile and desolate and uncertain at the same time; imagine indifference itself as a power—how *could* you live according to this indifference? Living—is that not precisely wanting to be other than this nature? Is not living—estimating, preferring, being unjust, being limited, wanting to be different?¹⁴⁴

Nature, here as elsewhere in Nietzsche's corpus, is portrayed as an indifferent, profligate economy.¹⁴⁵ Nothing more than will to power, Nature is a war zone of power centers, ultimately aimless and chaotic. To be human, Nietzsche's questions seem to intimate, is

¹⁴⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), 15.

¹⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols in Twilight Of The Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 120-121.

to desire to impose one's will upon this anarchy of forces. Nietzsche is often seen only as encouraging strong natures to assert their autonomous power over chaos. Thus is produced a picture of the Nietzsche who champions self-mastery, artistic creativity, and existential struggle in a world devoid of intrinsic value. The previous chapter should make us question whether such a depiction of Nietzsche accounts for his attack on autonomy, however. If eternal recurrence most immediately underscores the impotence of autonomous activity, then we must guard against advocating such a tendentious view of Nietzsche's thought. There is also the Nietzsche who admits that even the strongest individuals count for nothing in the total economy of Nature. This Nietzsche acknowledges that Nature's wastefulness results in the sacrifice of its "highest types."¹⁴⁶ Hence, even the most *übermenschlich* creators must countenance their powerlessness in the face of Nature's profligate indifference. Indeed, as we shall see, Nietzsche sometimes speaks as if Nature is the sole possessor of power.

Like Nietzsche, Schopenhauer was also troubled by the conflict between individual partiality and Nature's indifference. In a fascinating passage from *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer voices the difference between the individual and Nature as a difference between two antithetical perspectives. Nature, says Schopenhauer, speaks from both the particular and the universal perspectives. The former perspective is that of individuated consciousness, while the latter is that of Nature considered in its totality. From the particular perspective, each individual believes itself to be the purpose of the entire natural order. From this perspective, each organism

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 121.

believes thus: “I alone am all in all; in my maintenance is everything involved; the rest may perish, it is really nothing.”¹⁴⁷ From the universal perspective, however, the world is seen to teem with individuals, each of which is in itself inconsequential. Nature thus speaks from the universal perspective:

The individual is nothing and less than nothing. I destroy millions of individuals every day for sport and pastime; I abandon their fate to chance, to the most capricious and wanton of my children, who harasses them at his pleasure. Every day I produce millions of new individuals without any diminution of my productive power; just as little as the power of a mirror is exhausted by the number of the sun’s images that it casts one after another on the wall. The individual is nothing.¹⁴⁸

Nature is here presented as a monster of creative energy, bringing forth and destroying its creatures in a purposeless process. Nature itself thus represents a vicious circle of creativity and destruction in which the individual counts for nothing. For Schopenhauer, the resolution of the antithesis between particular and universal perspectives consists in acknowledging the error of the particular perspective—that of egoism—and consequently denying one’s will to live. Adopting the universal perspective is not an option for the individual *qua* individual, since the universal perspective belongs to Nature itself. Furthermore, Schopenhauer maintains that finite individuals cannot help but see Nature’s ateleological activity of bringing individuals into existence and stamping them out as a source of misery. Thus, the function of the universal perspective is only to highlight the absurdity of the particular perspective.

¹⁴⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), 2: 599.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 600.

We are about to see that the content of eternal recurrence in Nietzsche's late works bears a striking similarity to Nature, as depicted from Schopenhauer's universal perspective. Nietzsche employs eternal recurrence as a metaphor for the Dionysian character of Nature. Like Schopenhauer's depiction of Nature from the universal perspective, Dionysian Nature fecklessly creates and destroys individuals. However, rather than grant Schopenhauer that the universal perspective exposes individuated existence as an error, Nietzsche will invite the individual to participate in the universal perspective.

Da Capo Dionysus

The content of eternal recurrence is often taken to remain fixed throughout Nietzsche's corpus. In the previous chapter, I took the content of eternal recurrence in *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra* to be history, precisely as it has occurred and will occur in every detail. This is a fairly typical interpretation of eternal recurrence's content. It conveniently allows eternal recurrence to be formulated as a neat test of psychological health: if one can will the eternal recurrence of history with all its joys and sorrows, one passes the test. However, a closer inspection of eternal recurrence in Nietzsche's late works reveals that its content is not so easy to pin down. And once pinned down, the content will be seen to be much broader than history.

Although Nietzsche does not explicitly refer to eternal recurrence in the following passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*, he obviously has it in mind. He first claims to have had his eyes opened to the ideal of the most world affirming human being

through his experience with pessimism. This is an interesting claim that will be revisited later. He proceeds to describe the ideal life-affirmer:

the ideal of the most high-spirited, alive, and world-affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have *what was and is* repeated into all eternity, shouting insatiably *da capo*—not only to himself but to the whole play and spectacle, and not only to a spectacle but at bottom to him who needs precisely this spectacle—and who makes it necessary because again and again he needs himself—and makes himself necessary—What? And this wouldn't be—*circulus vitiosus deus*?¹⁴⁹

The most world-affirming human being thus desires the eternal recurrence of “the whole play and spectacle.” What is this entire play and spectacle? Is it history and only history?

To see what Nietzsche means to be affirmed, we must understand that the ideal world-affirmer shouts *da capo* in three successive moments. In the first moment, the content to be affirmed is oneself, presumably one's own life. But Nietzsche immediately extends the scope of affirmation in the second moment. One says yes “not only to [oneself]” but to the entire play and spectacle. In the third moment, not only the spectacle but also “him who needs precisely this spectacle” must be affirmed. The individual to be affirmed in the third moment cannot be the individual that was already affirmed in the first moment, as the third moment would then be entirely superfluous.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 68.

¹⁵⁰ At least it cannot be the same individual under the exact same description. One might object that Nietzsche could be talking about the same individual in the first and third moments, only under different descriptions. I do not think this is inconsistent with what I ultimately argue about affirming eternal recurrence. Nietzsche wants the human individual to effectively see Dionysian Nature's joy and power as coextensive with her own joy and power. This would mean that in the third moment, the individual,

Rather, the one to be affirmed in the third moment is the one who needs the entire play and spectacle. If we hypothesize that the entire play and spectacle is not just history but the cyclical movement of Nature, we can explain who is affirmed in the third moment. For who needs this spectacle? Who is the vicious circle become god? Nietzsche is probably referring to Dionysus. Dionysus is the god whose death is but a promise of new life. This explains why Nietzsche says that the object of affirmation in the third moment makes the spectacle necessary because he needs himself. If Dionysus is to affirm himself, he must affirm both creation and destruction, both life and death. Dionysus' self-affirmation thus demands that the play and spectacle of Nature's desultory, cyclical activity never cease. For Dionysus' existence depends upon those elements of life that idealists attempt to banish from their fabricated realms of being. Dionysus needs death and ruination if he is to affirm his life, for without death he could not be rejuvenated. Nietzsche is likely exhorting his readers to recognize that their existence is also predicated upon a Dionysian substratum of death and destruction. It is thus in the third and final moment of affirmation that the pinnacle of life-affirmation is attained. For as Nietzsche tells us, "in the Dionysian symbol the ultimate limit of affirmation is attained."¹⁵¹ The individual who can affirm the Dionysian character of Nature thus achieves an affirmation of becoming that excludes none of the harsh elements of life.

in affirming Dionysus, is also affirming herself.

¹⁵¹ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 271.

How exactly does the symbol of Dionysus relate to eternal recurrence? In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche declares that both Dionysus and eternal recurrence encompass the highest limit of life affirmation. Here, we touch upon the organic unity of Nietzsche's thought. He is able to interchange Dionysus and eternal recurrence so often because they possess nearly indistinguishable metaphorical significance. Dionysus is the symbol of the eternal cyclical play of Nature,¹⁵² of becoming, and now I suggest that eternal recurrence functions quite similarly. It serves as a metaphor for the necessary recurrence of all elements within the total economy of Nature.

Before proceeding to examine the evidence for this contention, I want to make it clear that I am not denying that eternal recurrence also has history for its content. There is no contradiction in holding that eternal recurrence is to be read both as the recurrence of history and as a metaphor for the Dionysian character of Nature. In fact, because of Nietzsche's repudiation of free will, it seems plausible that the currents and surges of Nature are wholly responsible for engendering particular historical events. There are no agent causes capable of interposing their wills between Nature and history. In the previous chapter, I argued that reading eternal recurrence as the literal repetition of history undermines the notion of autonomy. Because one is to imagine that every event in one's life has already been decided, one cannot exercise autonomous control over

¹⁵² The language of the play and spectacle of Nature might not suit Nietzsche's mature commitment to naturalism. Insofar as it suggests that the activity of Nature constitutes entertainment for divine spectators, it seems residually metaphysical. In the second chapter, we saw that in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche perhaps even tried to justify individual existence on the basis that the primal, Dionysian unity finds it diverting. Nietzsche no longer has the same intentions, but perhaps he should have adjusted his language accordingly.

events in the present or future. Eternal recurrence, insofar as it is a metaphor for Nature, will also initially bring the individual low. It reminds the individual of her inevitable obsolescence, of the fact that she counts for nothing in the total economy in Nature. It is only by ceding her drive to autonomy and immersing herself in Nature that the individual can find herself powerful.

Eternal Recurrence and Dionysus

In *Twilight of the Idols* and *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche provides extended discussions of the duo, eternal recurrence and Dionysus. In the latter work, he employs Dionysus as a counter-symbol to “Christianity, the philosophy of Schopenhauer, in a certain sense already the philosophy of Plato, and all of idealism as typical forms.”¹⁵³ As forms of idealism, all these targets are united by their penchant for privileging a false realm of being over the true world of becoming. Viewing the domain of temporality as insufficient and hollow, idealists have fabricated worlds defined by stasis—worlds in which decay, death, and suffering have been abolished. Hence, they have indicted becoming, substituting mendacious lies in place of the truth. The Dionysian “Yes to life,” on the other hand, is “strictly confirmed and born out by truth and science.”¹⁵⁴ It is predicated upon recognition of the necessity of *all* aspects of existence in the total economy of life. Unlike idealists, the Dionysian world affirmer says Yes even to death and decay. They are just as necessary, and therefore just as valuable, as the elements of

¹⁵³ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 272.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

existence galvanized by idealists for the creation of their ideal lies. Thus, Nietzsche writes:

The affirmation of passing away *and destroying*, which is the decisive feature of a Dionysian philosophy; saying Yes to opposition and war; *becoming*, along with a radical repudiation of the very concept of *being*—all this is clearly more closely related to me than anything else thought to date.¹⁵⁵

A Dionysian affirmation of life thus requires affirming an essentially agonistic, dissonant world. It involves realizing that “Nothing in existence may be subtracted, nothing is dispensable.”¹⁵⁶

Where does eternal recurrence fit into the mix? Immediately following his discussion of Dionysian life-affirmation, Nietzsche describes eternal recurrence as the doctrine “of the unconditional and infinitely repeated circular course of all things.”¹⁵⁷ As with “the whole play and spectacle” of *Beyond Good and Evil*, we are confronted with a vague content for eternal recurrence, namely, “all things.” Given the immediately preceding discussion of Dionysian affirmation, it seems probable that Nietzsche is not restricting the content of “all things” to all historical events. Instead, he intends all elements within the total economy of life. Eternal recurrence encompasses the infinitely repeated, ateleological course of birth and death, creation and destruction. It is the eternal recurrence of strife, war, and becoming—precisely those elements that are the hallmark of a Dionysian philosophy. Thus, Nietzsche intends for eternal recurrence to

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 273.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 272.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 273-274.

underpin the necessity of all aspects of life for Nature's eternal, indifferent movement. This would explain Nietzsche's claim that perhaps the doctrine of eternal recurrence had already been taught by Heraclitus.¹⁵⁸ Heraclitus did not teach that history would eternally repeat itself. Thus, if Nietzsche intends to limit the content of eternal recurrence to actual historical events, he has no basis for claiming that perhaps Heraclitus already taught the doctrine. Instead, Nietzsche must be proposing this broader, Dionysian content for eternal recurrence. Heraclitus was the one who originally imparted the Dionysian wisdom that all things are motivated by strife, that strife is necessary, and that strife is therefore justice. Moreover, for both Heraclitus and Nietzsche, "all things" are necessary in the grand economy of the whole. No one element of Nature can have privileged ontological or axiological status over its opposite. Nature *must* destroy in order to create. Everything that idealists find repellant *must* exist in order for life to exist. Hence, every element in the total economy of life needs its opposite, and the strife of these opposites must eternally recur if life is to continue.

A similar picture of the relation between eternal recurrence and Dionysus emerges toward the end of *Twilight of the Idols*. Nietzsche writes:

What did the Hellene guarantee himself with these [Dionysian] mysteries? *Eternal* life, the eternal recurrence of life...the triumphant Yes to life beyond death and change; *true* life as a collective continuation of life through procreation, through the mysteries of sexuality.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 274.

¹⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *Twilight*, 120.

It is not the eternal recurrence of history with which Nietzsche concerns himself here. Rather, it is the eternal recurrence of life. By “life,” Nietzsche says that he means the “collective continuation of life.” Hence, he identifies true life with a trans-individual force, which eternally persists beneath the whirl of the generation and decay of individuals. Eternal recurrence, as the eternal recurrence of life in this passage, thus signifies Nature’s perpetually incurious process of bringing individuals into existence and exterminating them. Moreover, by consecrating procreation, Nietzsche is exulting in the eternal potency of this trans-individual force, Nature. Christianity, on the contrary, “with *ressentiment against* life in its foundations...made of sexuality something impure.”¹⁶⁰ In doing so, like other forms of idealism, it slandered Nature and slandered life. Nietzsche proceeds to praise the Greeks for understanding the necessity of pain in the total economy of life: “For the eternal joy in creating to exist, for the will to life eternally to affirm itself, the ‘torment of childbirth’ *must* also exist eternally.”¹⁶¹ Once again, Nietzsche is endorsing the Heraclitean/Dionysian view of Nature. Everything within the total economy of life must exist if Nature, the truly powerful, trans-individual force, is to continue its eternal march. And again, Nietzsche’s use of the word “eternally” in the quote directly above insinuates a connection between eternal recurrence and the recurrence of each element within the totality of Nature. If Nature is to continue its activity, even the “torment of childbirth” must eternally recur.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 121.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

Something that must vex proponents of the existential version of Nietzsche has been made explicit in the above passage. Hatab and Nehamas, for example, read Nietzsche as championing the individual who manages to forge meaning or unity out of the raw, indifferent material of Nature. The existential individual bravely attempts to assert her freedom against the looming specters of global purposelessness and her own encroaching demise. But Nietzsche, at the end of *Twilight of the Idols*, does not laud the ability of courageous individuals to impose their values and wills upon Nature. Instead, he defines true life as a collective continuation of life. Nietzsche is evidently jubilating in the potency of a trans-individual force. This collective force, Nature, and not the individual, is here seen to be the one who wields all the power; and its power is expressed just as much by eradicating individuals as by creating them. Rather than celebrating the individual, Nietzsche again seems to be employing eternal recurrence in an effort to undermine the importance of the individual. In the grand economy of Nature, each individual essentially amounts to nothing. But rather than encourage finite individuals to wage war against the indifference of Nature—to contest Nature's dictum that the individual is inconsequential—Nietzsche defines true life as the trans-individual power of Nature.

Julian Young is one of the few commentators to acknowledge that Nietzsche, in his late works, often basks in the vigor of a trans-individual force. Young reads Nietzsche, at the end of *Twilight of the Idols*, as admitting his inability to affirm individuated existence. He has once again become a Schopenhauerian.¹⁶² Nietzsche has

¹⁶² Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art* (New York: Cambridge

indeed perpetrated something curious. On the one hand, his late works anticipate the lawgivers of the future, who will endow the post-death-of-God world with direction and meaning. Without some directionality provided by strong individuals, Nietzsche worries that humanity might perish of nihilism. However, eternal recurrence seems to be the recurrence of Nature's indifferent creation and destruction of individuals. To affirm it, therefore, seems to require assent that no individual's inscription of values upon reality is at all important. For Nature, being wholly indifferent to the very existence of any individual, might capriciously stamp out the highest exemplars of humanity before they can even undertake their attempts at value legislation. Nietzsche readily acknowledges the essential purposelessness of Nature, even revels in it: "Affirmation of life even in its strangest and sternest problems, the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility through the *sacrifice* of its highest types—that is what I called Dionysian, *that* is what I recognized as the bridge to the psychology of the *tragic* poet."¹⁶³ And Nietzsche is not here simply telling the reader what he recognized Dionysus to signify in his first work. Rather, he is alerting the reader that the Dionysus of *The Birth of Tragedy* is, by and large, the same Dionysus taught by the late Nietzsche, the teacher of eternal recurrence.¹⁶⁴ Thus, Nietzsche ends the passage: "And with that I again return to the

University Press, 1992), 139. I will discuss Young's contention in greater detail at the end of the chapter.

¹⁶³ Nietzsche, *Twilight*, 121.

¹⁶⁴ With the caveat that Dionysus in *The Birth of Tragedy* was still closely tied to Schopenhauer's metaphysics, while Dionysus in Nietzsche's late works has been fully naturalized.

place from which I set out—*Birth of Tragedy* was my first revaluation of all values; with that I again plant myself in the soil out of which I draw all that I will and *can*—I, the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysus—I, the teacher of eternal recurrence...’’¹⁶⁵

Once again, Nietzsche mentions Dionysus and eternal recurrence in the same breath, as if the two are inseparable. As I have been emphasizing, this is because eternal recurrence is a metaphor for the Dionysian character of Nature. Nature continues to manifest its power through the eternal recurrence of the same processes and every aspect of these processes. Through the desultory creation and destruction of individuals, Nature proves that it, and it alone, is the ultimate possessor of power. Eternal recurrence thereby reminds the individual of her inescapable dissolution, of her inconsequentiality within the total economy of Nature. With the passage above, Nietzsche’s task of undermining the traditional notion of individual freedom and strength is complete. And from the first time eternal recurrence appears until the last, it performs the destructive job. In *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra*, eternal recurrence undercut autonomy by obviating the individual’s free will. In those works, Nietzsche implores his readers to imagine their lives unfolding in patterns that have been decided without the intervention of their autonomous wills. In Nietzsche’s late works, eternal recurrence does further damage to the traditional notion of individual freedom and vitality. As a metaphor for the Dionysian character of Nature, eternal recurrence portrays the inexhaustible power of an ateleological, trans-individual force. This force manifests its strength through the aimless process of creating and destroying individuals. Collapsing the existential

¹⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *Twilight*, 121.

conception of freedom, Nietzsche chooses not to celebrate the capacity of courageous individuals to assert their wills against Nature's haphazard activity. Instead, he revels in the potency of Nature, even its predilection for the destruction of the noblest individuals. Eternal recurrence thus highlights the impotence of individual activity, insofar as it is conceived as the individual's struggle against Nature.

One can now clearly see how eternal recurrence is related to Schopenhauer's universal perspective of Nature. According to the universal perspective, Schopenhauer depicts Nature as an ineluctably powerful and indifferent force. This trans-individual force displays its vitality through the aimless creation and squandering of individuals. Eternal recurrence, too, now represents Nature's eternal dynamism. But for Schopenhauer, the universal perspective only underscores the absurdity of individuated existence. If Nature cares nothing for individuals, individuation must be a mistake. Nietzsche, however, as the prognosticator of a life-enhancing culture, cannot capitulate to Schopenhauerian life-denial. His revaluation of all values must be carried out by the strong individuals he envisions (or at least wishes to envision) as capable of affirming eternal recurrence. This strength, as we saw in the previous chapter, cannot consist in an act of autonomous assertion. One cannot succeed in extending one's autonomous will over all reality by simply saying to the world, "thus I will it." Exactly what kind of strength, then, is associated with affirming eternal recurrence?

Experiencing Nature's Inexhaustible Vitality

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, we saw that Nietzsche claimed to have had his eyes opened to the ideal world-affirming human being through his descent into pessimism.

What prompts Nietzsche to make the enigmatic claim that through grappling with pessimism he stumbled upon its opposite? Nietzsche does not provide adequate textual evidence to permit a hypothesis based on the passage in *Beyond Good and Evil* alone. Nevertheless, a coherent account of how Nietzsche might have stumbled upon his life-affirmative ideal through his struggle with pessimism is possible, provided the treatment of eternal recurrence offered thus far. If eternal recurrence, when first introduced in *The Gay Science*, was already conceived as possessing Dionysian connotations, then Nietzsche would have reason to associate it with pessimism. At the time of *The Gay Science*, he still propounded an aesthetic justification of life that relied heavily upon art to veil the harsh truths of life. But just as Dionysus threatened to annihilate Apollonian culture in *The Birth of Tragedy*, so too might the Dionysian nature of eternal recurrence imperil the illusory artistic veils that, in *The Gay Science*, make life bearable. Eternal recurrence would then force the young, art-adoring Nietzsche to recognize the absurdity of his attempt to hide the true nature of reality. Eternal recurrence might thus have had the same paralyzing effect on Nietzsche as that experienced by Hamlet when he realized that he lacked the power to rectify reality. Eternal recurrence in the late works could have a similar paralyzing effect on the individual. Since it underscores Nature's eternal dynamism, countenancing eternal recurrence forces the individual to acknowledge her own relative insignificance. For the individual is infinitesimal in the great economy of life. Nature continues its aimless activity of creation and destruction long after the demise of the individual. And the individual, while alive, is ever faced with the realization that she is nothing but fodder for Nature's pointless process of eternal

recurrence. Thus, Nietzsche had good reason to initially see eternal recurrence as the most pessimistic of all views of the universe.¹⁶⁶ Reality as it is, aimless creation and destruction, uninterrupted pain and suffering—all this is guaranteed in eternal recurrence. Individual existence might justifiably seem highly unattractive in such a world.

While encountering eternal recurrence might immediately cause the individual to bemoan her insignificance in an aimless cosmos, Nietzsche does not wish to stop there. Rather, he wishes to pass over to the opposite of pessimism, putatively achieved by affirming eternal recurrence. What does Nietzsche mean by “affirmation?” Herein resides the crux of Nietzsche’s intended “solution” to pessimism. “Affirmation” cannot amount to autonomous “willing.” I argued in the previous chapter that Nietzsche cannot envision affirming eternal recurrence as an autonomous act by which the individual annexes reality to her own will. For eternal recurrence undermines autonomous assertion. But another reason why affirming eternal recurrence cannot simply mean willing the entirety of history is that the content of eternal recurrence is not limited to

¹⁶⁶ Nietzsche brings out the relationship between eternal recurrence and nihilism quite forcefully in his notes. Since he often associates pessimism with nihilism, as both express the will to nothingness, a link between eternal recurrence and pessimism is also insinuated. See, for instance, Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), 35-36. Nietzsche calls the thought of “Duration...without end or aim...the most paralyzing idea.” As aimless duration is guaranteed by eternal recurrence, Nietzsche writes, “Let us think this thought in its most terrible form: existence as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness: ‘*the eternal recurrence.*’ This is the most extreme form of nihilism: the nothing (the ‘meaningless’), eternally.” Furthermore, in the notes, Nietzsche seems to think that eternal recurrence will weed out the weak—those who cannot affirm the ateleological course of Nature. These considerations confirm Nietzsche’s claim that he discovered eternal recurrence while battling pessimism.

history. As explained in this chapter, eternal recurrence also canvasses the Dionysian character of Nature. I do think it is plausible that Nietzsche's ideal life-affirmer exhibits the readiness, or the willingness, to have history, and so also her life, eternally repeated. But the thesis of the previous chapter rules out seeing this willingness as an act of autonomous will; that is, the individual does not extend her autonomous will to the entirety of history and the whole of Nature by affirming eternal recurrence.

To see what Nietzsche intends by "affirmation," we can turn to his discussions of *amor fati*. Nietzsche explains this idea:

My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it—all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary—but *love* it.¹⁶⁷

Amor fati expresses the desire that nothing in the world be different. What is the content of *amor fati*? What is it that one wants not to be different? While Nietzsche elsewhere intimates that the lover of fate is to embrace the specific events that comprise her own life,¹⁶⁸ the scope of what is to be loved seems quite broad in the above passage. In fact, it seems coextensive with the content of eternal recurrence. Nietzsche juxtaposes *amor fati* and idealism, just as he sets Dionysianism against idealism. By posing an antithesis between idealism and *amor fati*, Nietzsche is hinting that the lover of fate does not simply embrace history. As an antipode to the idealist, she also embraces the whole of becoming, which is symbolized by Dionysian Nature. *Amor fati* is thus love of both

¹⁶⁷ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 258.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 324.

history and Nature. One wants nothing altered—not events in the past, present, and future, or anything in the total economy of life.

Nietzsche also asserts that one is not merely to *bear* what is necessary. He means that *amor fati* is not mere acceptance of reality. One could accept that the world must be as it is, consent to bear it, but hate it to the core. Less radically, one could acquiesce to bear reality as it is, but nevertheless either feel indifferently toward it or prefer that some things be different.¹⁶⁹ But this is not what Nietzsche intends, as evidenced by his disavowal of merely bearing reality. Rather, Nietzsche endorses a model of life-affirmation that centers on *eros*. He proposes an erotic bond between the individual and the world. I think what is at stake in this bond is that the individual is no longer to view herself in opposition to necessity or to Nature. At the outset of the chapter, I discussed how Hatab's tragic conception of eternal recurrence requires some antagonism between the individual and Nature. Without this tension, the individual will not see Nature as constraining, as placing tragic limits upon, her efforts and desires. But Nietzsche wants to dissolve any such tension. The bond of love between the individual and Nature is intended to close the space between the two. No longer craving to assert her will against necessity or against Nature, the lover of fate sees herself united with the world.

¹⁶⁹ Clark thinks this latter option is perfectly compatible with affirming eternal recurrence. See Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), 282. Moreover, she thinks it helps avoid the charge against eternal recurrence that one must consent to will morally repulsive acts. For one can be willing to undergo again, say, the time surrounding the murder of one's spouse, but still prefer that one's spouse had not been murdered. I do not think this is what Nietzsche intends. Rather, he enjoins his readers to love necessity, and therefore to love the events to which necessity gives rise.

Two passages from Nietzsche's late works corroborate the above contention. The first is from the last section of *Twilight of the Idols*, which I have considered at length already in this chapter. After reveling in the inexhaustible, profligate power of Nature, Nietzsche writes:

*that [collective continuation of life] is what I recognized as the bridge to the psychology of the tragic poet. Not so as to get rid of pity and terror, not so as to purify oneself of a dangerous emotion through its vehement discharge—it was thus Aristotle understood it—: but, beyond pity and terror, to realize in oneself the eternal joy of becoming—that joy which also encompasses joy in destruction....*¹⁷⁰

Shortly after the end of this passage, Nietzsche cites himself as the votary of Dionysus and the teacher of eternal recurrence. He therefore intimates that whatever he teaches in this passage is also what he means to teach by eternal recurrence. As we have seen, Nietzsche is discussing how the collective continuation of life, or the Dionysian potency of Nature, inspires the creation of tragedy. Tragedy's portrayal of the perpetual Dionysian suffering and destruction of individuals, so Nietzsche believed in *The Birth of Tragedy*, elicits terror in the spectator. But like Aristotle, whom he criticizes here, the young Nietzsche maintained that tragedy achieves its aim by catharsis. Only the Apollonian veil of beauty provides the spectator with the strength not to succumb to self-annihilation at the terror invoked by Dionysus. However, the mature Nietzsche, now repudiating catharsis, teaches that the individual is not to purge herself of Dionysian terror. Rather, one is "to realize in oneself the eternal joy of becoming." In other words, one is to realize in oneself the joy of Dionysian Nature, "that joy which also encompasses joy in destruction." As in the passage above concerning *amor fati*,

¹⁷⁰ Nietzsche, *Twilight*, 121.

Nietzsche here attempts to completely close the gap between the individual and Nature. By affirming eternal recurrence, one erotically binds oneself to that which must eternally recur—Dionysian Nature. One ceases to view the aimless ring of human suffering and death as a horrifying spectacle, *against* which one must attempt to forge some meaning or unity. Instead, one completely immerses oneself in Nature, experiencing Nature's aimless squandering of individuals as cause for one's own joy.

In a similar vein in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche praises “Whoever does not merely comprehend the word ‘Dionysian’ but comprehends *himself* in the word ‘Dionysian’.”¹⁷¹ Nietzsche is saying that the ideal life-affirmer does not view herself as disconnected from Nature. Instead, she cannot think the word “Dionysus” without comprehending herself. There is no space between the two. Immediately after this passage in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche proceeds to cite the lines from *Twilight of the Idols*, quoted above, in which he admonishes the individual to experience in herself the eternal joy of becoming. Again, the Nietzschean life-affirmer is not to experience terror at Nature's incessant creation and destruction of individuals. Rather, affirming eternal recurrence places the individual “*beyond* pity and terror.” Through experiencing the power of a trans-individual force, Nature, in oneself, one is placed beyond the pale of the terror of suffering and destruction. One even finds these formerly horrific aspects of life to be sources of joy.

One might question how the individual *qua* individual can experience Dionysian Nature's aimless circle of death and ruination as a source of joy. Surely, it may seem,

¹⁷¹ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 272-273.

the joy must belong all to Nature and not to the individual, for the individual is snuffed out by the eternal process of becoming. Moreover, unlike Dionysus, the finite individual's death is not a promise of her own rebirth. How, then, can the individual see herself as Dionysian? Nietzsche's answer, I suggest, is that the individual, through affirming eternal recurrence, can experience the world from Schopenhauer's universal perspective of Nature. We have seen how Schopenhauer personifies Nature as a monster of creative and destructive force, whose power is manifested by perpetually and capriciously bringing individuals into existence only to obliterate them. From the universal perspective, all suffering, destruction, and passing away exhibit Nature's power. For Schopenhauer, the individual cannot partake of Nature's joy in senseless destruction. Being individuated means that one will find death and suffering repulsive, as warranting life's condemnation. Nietzsche, on the other hand, wants to maintain that one can remain individuated and yet participate in Nature's inextinguishable pleasure in the ebb and flow of individuals. Through binding oneself to Nature, one sees one's own power and joy as coextensive with Nature's. One sees the world through the totalizing lens of Nature. From Nature's perspective, no amount or distribution of suffering can indict life. As Nietzsche says in a note, "being [or Nature] is counted *holy enough* to justify even a monstrous amount of suffering."¹⁷² This further explains why Nietzsche, in *Twilight of the Idols*, describes the individual as incapable of being afflicted by Nature's squandering proclivity. Nature itself needs senseless suffering and destruction to advance its eternal procession. Insofar as the individual can see life through the

¹⁷² Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 543.

perspective of Nature, there is no need to feel terror, frustration, or anxiety due to the preponderance of senseless suffering and decay in the world. Rather, the individual can see all suffering as an enticement to life, even as an extension of her own (non-autonomous) power. Just as the Bacchic reveler in *The Birth of Tragedy* experienced Dionysian pain as bliss, the individual is now exhorted to experience even the harsh elements of Nature as cause for ecstatic exuberance. Through participation, or immersion, in Nature's perspective, the affirmer of eternal recurrence experiences complete reconciliation with Nature.

At this juncture, it seems natural to wonder what sort of model of individuation Nietzsche is espousing. It seems reasonable to suspect that the individual has been completely elided by her immersion in Nature. I mentioned earlier that Young even questions whether Nietzsche has returned to his Schopenhauerian roots. Drawing upon the last section of *Twilight of the Idols*, in which Nietzsche revels in the potency of a trans-individual force, Young argues that Nietzsche is confessing his inability to justify individuated existence. I think Young's interpretation is deficient in one sense and meritorious in another. Beginning with the deficiency, it is not clear that Nietzsche cannot maintain *some model* of individuation, despite the individual's immersion in Nature. For instance, Nietzsche could hold that the individual is nothing more than a collection of natural forces that meets some criterion of coherency. This bundle of forces need not view itself as an ego, and it need not view itself as in any way opposed to Nature. Whatever happens to it, happens as a result of the forces at work in, through, and around it. This type of individual can have particular aims and desires; but these

aims and desires will be recognized as nothing more than the epiphenomena of the natural forces that comprise the individual. Consider the following passage:

Has anyone at the end of the nineteenth century a clear idea of what poets of strong ages have called *inspiration*?...one is merely incarnation, merely mouthpiece, merely a medium of overpowering forces. The concept of revelation—in the sense that suddenly, with indescribable certainty and subtlety, something becomes *visible*, audible, something that shakes one to the last depths and throws one down—that merely describes the facts. One hears, one does not seek; one accepts, one does not ask who gives; like lightning, a thought flashes up, with necessity, without hesitation regarding its form—I never had any choice.¹⁷³

Nietzsche clearly rejects here, as elsewhere, the notion that a substantial subject controls the thoughts and ideas of the self. He describes inspiration as the feeling that one is only a medium of overpowering forces, not consciously guided by the individual. Perhaps Nietzsche can hold some loose view of the individual as comprised by, and as a medium of, natural forces. As this individual views suffering and destruction from the perspective of Nature, she will not wish to exact vengeance when harmed by outside forces. For she will not suffer from what must occur as a result of the interplay of natural forces. Nietzsche seems to exemplify this resignation to Nature's necessity when he says of his obscurity among German readers: "I myself have never suffered from all this: what is *necessary* does not hurt me; *amor fati* is my inmost nature."¹⁷⁴

Nietzsche epitomizes this love of necessity when reflecting on his own life in *Ecce Homo*.

¹⁷³ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 300.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 324.

I never even suspected what was [unconsciously] growing in me—and one day all my capacities, suddenly ripe, *leaped forth* in their ultimate perfection. I cannot remember that I ever tried hard—no trace of *struggle* can be demonstrated in my life; I am the opposite of a heroic nature. ‘Willing’ something, ‘striving’ for something, envisaging a ‘purpose,’ a ‘wish’—I know none of this from experience. At this very moment I still look upon my future—an *ample* future!—as upon calm seas: there is no ripple of desire. I do not want in the least that anything should become different than it is; I myself do not want to become different.¹⁷⁵

What leaps forth from this passage is the lack of autonomous constraint required for Nietzsche to fulfill his life’s task. He attempts to convince his readers that his entire life has organically unfolded with very little conscious control on his part. He appears to have experienced his life as a fate, a destiny, guided by the trans-individual powers working through him. Nietzsche’s assertion that he is the opposite of a heroic nature is also interesting in this regard. Walter Kaufmann inserts a footnote after this claim, pointing out how Nietzsche might be setting himself up as an antipode to Faust.¹⁷⁶ Since Faust finds redemption through his heroic striving, Nietzsche may be claiming that he has discovered a sort of redemption through passivity, through submission to the trans-individual forces that govern his life. Only by letting these forces do their work—by ceasing to struggle against Nature—has Nietzsche succeeded in becoming who he is.

Yet, I have obviously encountered great difficulty in trying to explicate the model of individuation that Nietzsche might hold. For whatever model of individuation

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 255.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 255n. The hypothesis of Seung’s work on *Zarathustra* is, in fact, that Zarathustra must come to realize that he cannot find redemption through autonomous assertion. He must admit that his Faustian drive is powerless. Thus, this passage, indeed Nietzsche’s doctrine of *amor fati* generally, fits well with Seung’s analysis of *Zarathustra*.

Nietzsche is proposing, humanity has not yet reached it. It is therefore exceedingly difficult even to envision it. The merit of Young's argument is, I think, that Nietzsche *perhaps* thinks the more traditional, tragic model of individuation, which pits the individual against Nature, cannot be maintained. As Schopenhauer holds the more traditional model of the individual, Nietzsche may agree with Schopenhauer that individuation is, upon such a standard, too painful to bear. Schopenhauer, like Hatab, maintains the tragic tension between individuals and Nature. Accordingly, individuals cannot help but see themselves as habitually frustrated and tormented by the purposeless sufferings and pains entailed by Nature's volatility.¹⁷⁷ The individual will is, on Schopenhauer's account, perpetually thwarted by the world. Young *may* be correct to think that Nietzsche never sees individuated existence as tenable in a world where the tension between individuals and Nature persists unresolved. After all, what other reason might Nietzsche have for proposing an erotic union between the individual and Nature?

Of course, this question cannot admit of a conclusive rejoinder. As it stands, affirming eternal recurrence does seem to result in an odd sort of insulation from pain, suffering, and death. To feel even the harshest elements of existence as enticements to life must involve a diminishing of what one might call "second-order suffering." This is the sort of suffering that engenders existential reflection and perhaps inflicts the greater degree of psychological strain upon the individual. For instance, worrying about one's death, suffering over the incomprehensibility of suffering, feeling frustrated by one's

¹⁷⁷ Of course, Hatab, unlike Schopenhauer, does not see this as a reason why the individual should not fight the good fight and attempt to forge a niche for herself in the world.

limitedness, by one's finitude—all this is encapsulated by second-order suffering. But as Nietzsche states in a passage above on *amor fati*, he never suffered from what is necessary. As Nietzsche recognizes death and senseless suffering to be necessary elements within the total economy of Nature, we must suppose that he is claiming never to have suffered from them. The amount of first-order pain and suffering that was necessary for his life did not cause him grief; he did not suffer from his suffering. He recognized the pointlessness of resisting his lot, of contesting the life provided him by Nature. Whether this constitutes a tacit admission that individuated existence is unbearable, absent the bond between the individual and Nature, is both interesting and uncertain. But certainly Nietzsche has attempted to outline an innovative conception, however difficult to discern it may be, of what it means to be individuated. And it is my contention that the vehicle through which Nietzsche hopes this novel conception will find its fulfillment is eternal recurrence.

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

I have argued that affirming eternal recurrence involves surrendering the autonomous view of the self. The individual must confess her lack of autonomous control over reality and begin to see herself as powerful *because* she belongs to Nature. Hence, her power does not stem from her capacity to assert herself against Nature. I have also argued that perhaps Nietzsche can maintain some model of individuation, according to which individuals maintain particular aims and interests, so long as the individual is seen as nothing more than a medium of the trans-individual forces working through her. Of course, interesting work remains to be done on squaring the autonomous passivity involved in affirming eternal recurrence with Nietzsche's praise of active, creative individuals.

Contrary to the conclusion of this thesis, it is often maintained that eternal recurrence cannot undermine the traditional conception of the autonomous individual. Nehamas advocates perhaps the strongest alliance between affirming eternal recurrence and the traditional conception of the individual. As we have seen, he holds that eternal recurrence is an impetus to fashion a perfectly integrated self whose eternal recurrence one can affirm. Eternal recurrence therefore encourages the individual to create a unified self, over against the indifference of Nature, through the exercise of her autonomous will.

I think there are a couple of problems with Nehamas's interpretation that my reading of eternal recurrence avoids. First, Nehamas admits that a plurality of human

types could construct the sort of unified life to which Nietzsche calls his readers. Nehamas sees this as an unavoidable result of Nietzsche's perspectivism. Numerous types of individuals with differing values, aims, and desires can aspire to become affirmers of eternal recurrence. I do not disagree that eternal recurrence can shelter a plurality of types of individuals with unique values and virtues. But I think Nehamas is wrong to argue that any unified individual, who wants nothing in the past to be different, fits Nietzsche's description of the ideal life-affirmer. Take, for instance, someone who fashions herself into the ideal Christian ascetic. She exhibits the sort of perfectly unified personality portrayed by the characters of the world's preeminent novels. She despises her natural instincts, choosing to practice all manner of self-castigation for her perceived sins. She places all hope in a heavenly realm, in which no vestige of suffering or decay will remain. And yet, she is willing to affirm eternal recurrence. For she believes, quite comically, that God is telling her to do so. Would Nietzsche allow this individual to pass for one of his ideal life-affirmers?

I think the obvious answer is 'no'. The reason why Nehamas's interpretation is susceptible to such obvious counterexamples is because he fails to recognize the connection between affirming eternal recurrence and affirming the Dionysian character of Nature. Affirming eternal recurrence is only possible for those who can find all aspects of becoming joyful. A plurality of human types might fit the bill, but many, if not most, types would also be excluded.

Second, eternal recurrence can only function as a regulative ideal for Nehamas, who even seems to admit as much.¹⁷⁸ If one had to create a perfectly unified self before affirming eternal recurrence, no one would be able to affirm it. At best, individuals can only aspire to become worthy of affirming eternal recurrence upon Nehamas's model. But while Nietzsche might pose eternal recurrence as an ideal, it is certainly not an unattainable regulative ideal, intended to govern autonomous human activity. In the third chapter, I argued that eternal recurrence involves recognizing that one's autonomous control extends just as little to the future as it does to the past. Thus, eternal recurrence cannot guide future autonomous creativity. Instead, Nietzsche poses eternal recurrence as an ideal of life-affirmation that can be achieved by complete submission to necessity and to Nature. It is not merely to be aspired to, but rather to be fulfilled by the individual's immersion in Nature. Nietzsche himself does not act as if he poses eternal recurrence merely as a regulative ideal. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche laments his inability to achieve *amor fati*. He longs to one day become "only a Yes-sayer."¹⁷⁹ However, by the time of *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche announces *amor fati* as his "inmost nature."¹⁸⁰ Thus, Nietzsche does not seem to think that his ideal of life-affirmation is unreachable.

¹⁷⁸ Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 163.

¹⁷⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 223.

¹⁸⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, Random House: 1967), 324.

We have seen that *amor fati* captures what Nietzsche intends by the “affirmation” of eternal recurrence. *Amor fati* seems to involve total acquiescence, not just to the uncontrollability of the past, but to the future as well, no matter what necessity may determine the latter to hold. Affirming eternal recurrence, then, seems to involve autonomous passivity in regard to the future. Neither Nehamas nor Clark adequately explains the purely passive stance of the lover of fate. Despite Nietzsche’s claim that *amor fati* means wanting nothing in the future to be different—indeed, wanting nothing in all eternity to be different—Clark asserts that Nietzsche can intend only the past for its content. Otherwise, *amor fati* would be “completely incompatible with Nietzsche’s emphasis on change and creation.”¹⁸¹ There is, however, no textual evidence supporting Clark’s claim about *amor fati*. If my thesis is tenable, there is no reason to think that passages in which Nietzsche emphasizes creativity should be given the privileged interpretive status Clark attributes to them. Rather, creativity should be explained within the confines of the individual’s immersion in Nature. Such an explanation will undoubtedly prove difficult, since Nietzsche has attempted to steer us toward a new model of individuation. We might not easily envisage this model due to myriad factors, among which are: the lack of clarity with which Nietzsche presents it; its radical character; even its potential inconceivability; or perhaps simply the fact that most of us still view individuation on a more traditional model, one that preserves some tension between individuals and Nature. Whatever the reason or reasons, I think the textual

¹⁸¹ Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 282.

evidence on eternal recurrence points toward a view of the individual as more passive, or submissive, than Nehamas and Clark are willing to grant.

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