

“What If . . . ?”
*Willing Suspension
of Disbelief*

Nietzsche's thought of eternal return is among the most important items of Western thought. Nietzsche himself does not tire of saying again and again, and with varying degrees of hyperbole, that his philosophy of eternal return is the greatest thing that ever happened in history. He calls it “the greatest gift” ever given to mankind, and an event that “divides history in half.” All that came before is abolished, and the future is thrown wide open. It is to be populated by a new kind of man, a type inspired by the spirit of eternal return. The magnitude of the impact of eternal return is conveyed in Nietzsche's proclamation that the God of Judeo-Christian history is dead, with all the consequences of that momentous end. For Nietzsche himself, for Herr Nietzsche, the process of thinking the thought of eternal return was more than simply a question of scholarly studiousness or philosophic labor. Instead, it became more and more an all-absorbing and all-consuming task, eventually a destiny. Nietzsche's personal destiny also contained eleven years of insanity, with hardly a sensible word spoken until his death. His madness is one of the most discussed madneses in history. In the end, however, it is a most uninteresting case. It now seems clear that his insanity was organic in origin, probably not inherited, and possibly the result of syphilis, although the latter is not certain. What is certain is that no sensible Nietzsche reader any longer dismisses his thought on the grounds of his insanity.

In paraphrase eternal return seems a simple formula: everything that has ever been and that is will return, eternally and identically. The thought first appears in Nietzsche's writings in aphorism 341 of *The Gay Science*, as cited in the Introduction. Just as important as the content of the thought, indeed inseparable from it, is Nietzsche's manner of presenting it. We must examine that manner of presentation to learn how to think about the thought.

Nietzsche asks his reader to imagine the sudden appearance of a demon who presents the thought. So we begin, not with an exercise in critical thinking, but with something we may call, using a phrase of Coleridge's, "willing suspension of disbelief." Eternal return automatically acquires certain qualities that are given to it by the demon. We will examine these qualities momentarily. First we must look at the context in Nietzsche's writings in which the demon appears.

Eternal return, in its first appearance as aphorism 341 of *The Gay Science*, lacks an introduction that prepares the reader for his encounter with it. The aphorisms that precede it have such titles as "The Dying Socrates," "Vita Femina," and "The Will to Suffer and Those Who Feel Pity." Their contents bear no immediately recognizable relation to what Nietzsche writes in aphorism 341. Thus aphorism 341 comes to the reader like the demon himself, unannounced. Both sneak up on him. The absence of preparatory statements already tells what eternal return is not. It is not a conclusion that follows upon a prior series of thoughts. It is not a product of reason that the reader must and will discover as a logical conclusion of prior reflections. He does not find this thought. Rather, the thought finds him. It is, in the first place, a vision. The two major features of this vision are unexpectedness and strangeness. We benefit from examining both features.

Nietzsche's autobiographical *Ecce Homo* stresses that eternal return is, foremost, an unexpected and completely unfamiliar thought, and that it found him:

Now I shall relate the history of *Zarathustra*. The fundamental conception of this work, the idea of the eternal recurrence . . . belongs in August 1881: it was penned down on a sheet with the notation underneath, "6000 feet beyond man and time." That day I was walking through the woods along the lake of Silvaplana; at a powerful pyramidal rock not far from Surlei I stopped. *It was then that this idea came to me.* (EH, Z.,1)

Another passage states the point even more strongly:

The following winter I stayed in that charming quiet bay of Rapallo which, not far from Genoa, is cut out between Chiavari and the

foothills of Portofino . . . Mornings I would walk in a southerly direction on the splendid road to Zoagli . . . in the afternoon . . . I walked around the whole bay from Santa Margherita all the way to Portofino . . . It was on these two walks that the whole of *Zarathustra I* occurred to me, and especially Zarathustra himself as a type: rather, he *overtook me*. (*EH, Z, 1*)

Zarathustra "overtook" (*überfiel*) Nietzsche. Nietzsche emphasizes the experience of being "overtaken" and passes it on to his readers. He does so by making them imagine the sudden appearance of the demon who speaks of eternal return. By unexpectedly coming upon aphorism 341, the reader may experience some of what Nietzsche experienced.

The suggestion that eternal return is first a thought that finds the thinker, not the other way around, is also emphasized in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Although Zarathustra is the teacher of eternal return, he does not automatically or from the beginning own the thought. He initially experiences the vision of eternal return as a thought that invades his consciousness without his invitation. There is one place where the text makes the point clearly and strongly:

my angry mistress . . . she spoke to me; have I ever yet mentioned her name to you? Yesterday, toward evening, there spoke to me *my stillest hour*: that is the name of my awesome mistress. And thus it happened . . . Yesterday, in the stillest hour, the ground gave under me, the dream began . . . never had I heard such stillness around me: my heart took fright. Then it spoke to me without voice: "You know it, Zarathustra?" And I cried with fright at this whispering, and the blood left my face; but I remained silent. Then it spoke to me again without voice: "You know it, Zarathustra, but you do not say it!" And at last I answered defiantly: "Yes, I know it, but I do not want to say it!" Then it spoke to me again without voice: "You do not *want* to, Zarathustra? Is this really true? Do not hide your defiance." And I cried and trembled like a child and spoke: "Alas, I would like to, but how can I? Let me off from this! It is beyond my strength!" (*Z, 2, "The Stillest Hour"*)

The passage refers to the vision of eternal return. It comes to Zarathustra as a dream. It is not a part of him with which he is familiar.

He does not feel strong enough for it. It comes to him as a whisper, which he at first does not want to hear. He refuses to listen and respond. It is something for which he has not asked, something with which he wants to have nothing to do. Zarathustra and the thought of eternal return are strangers to each other at this point in the development of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Later, when he has undergone a process of transformation, he prepares himself to claim the thought as his own. We will return to the question of transformation.

Another passage from *Zarathustra* further underscores the strangeness associated with beginning to think eternal return:

One morning, not long after his return to the cave, Zarathustra jumped up from his resting place like a madman, roared in a terrible voice, and acted as if somebody else were still lying on his resting place who refused to get up: “. . . Up, abysmal thought, out of my depth. I am your cock and dawn, sleepy worm. Up! Up! My voice shall yet crow you awake! Unfasten the fetters of your ears: listen! For I want to hear you. Up! Up! Here is thunder enough to make even tombs learn to listen. And wipe sleep and all that is purblind and blind out of your eyes! Listen to me even with your eyes: my voice cures even those born blind. And once you are awake, you shall remain awake eternally. It is not my way to awaken great-grandmothers from their sleep to bid them sleep on! You are stirring, stretching, wheezing? Up! Up! You shall not wheeze but speak to me. Zarathustra, the godless, summons you! I, Zarathustra, the advocate of life, the advocate of suffering, the advocate of the circle; I summon you, you most abysmal thought! (Z, 3, “Convalescent,” 1)

Again the reference is to eternal return. The image of Zarathustra awakening the thought emphasizes once more that it is not automatically given as his own from the beginning. His encounter with it is initially an encounter with an autonomous and separate entity.

There is genius in introducing eternal return by means of aphorism 341. The mere fact of reading the aphorism already makes the reader an active participant in Nietzschean thought without his being aware of it. Nietzsche could have presented his thought by using a more familiar and less startling figure, such as that of a philosopher, a preacher, a teacher, or

a poet. Instead, he uses the image of a demon—frightening, appearing out of nowhere, nonhuman. We may already note a few things that become apparent from this choice of image.

First, demons have certain distinct properties. They are nonhuman, alien, startling, frightening, and most often an unwelcome presence. They are not usually associated with good tidings. On the contrary, they are more likely the harbingers of some form of evil. Often they are represented as unattractive, ugly, and sinister. At best they are only half-human, and then they often have horrifying features or deformities. If they are at all outfitted with appealing features, they are likely to highlight the danger of seduction. If the bearer of the thought of eternal return has such qualities, it is likely that the thought itself will meet with an initial response that is a least partly determined by the messenger.

Second, and this is a way of summing up all their distinct properties, demons are at the opposite extreme of what we consider divine. This attribute alone leads us to expect certain things of eternal return. We anticipate that it will confront us with something that may be opposed to all we know to be good, familiar, trusted, and desirable. We can sense that the sphinx that aphorism 341 is will present us not only with a riddle or a vision but also with a challenge. With the notion of challenge we go to the heart of Nietzsche's style of philosophizing. The more provocatively challenging he can present something, the better it seems to him and the happier he is. Whereas Socrates is the master of mild irony, Nietzsche, using different means to accomplish the same end of personal involvement in the process of philosophic thought, is the champion of the shocking challenge. This manner of engaging his reader is so fundamental to Nietzsche, so pervasive, that any exhaustive attempt to cite samples of it would be futile. Here it is enough to note that the image of a demon must be the image par excellence for a philosopher who wants to announce that God is dead. Getting well ahead of ourselves in our reading of eternal return, we may here note that the challenge that the demon introduces goes indeed to the heart of what has remained most unchallenged throughout the history of metaphysics:

The will to truth . . . we came to a long halt at the question about the cause of this will—until we finally came to a complete stop before a still

more basic question. We asked about the *value* of this will. Suppose we want truth: *why not rather* untruth? and uncertainty? even ignorance?

The problem of the value of truth came before us—or was it we who came before the problem? Who of us is Oedipus here? Who the Sphinx? It is a rendezvous, it seems, of questions and question marks. And though it scarcely seems credible, it finally almost seems to us as if the problem had never been put so far—as if we were the first to see it, fix it with our eyes, and *risk* it. For it does involve a risk, and perhaps there is none that is greater. (*BGE*, 1, 1)

Third, by saying “What if . . . ?” Nietzsche is already having us imagine something that is neither concretely manifest nor proven to be true. So when we react to the imagined demon and his thought, be it with horror or fear or whatever, we are reacting to an imagined possibility, not to a perceived,—let alone a proven,—actuality. Here we are already very Nietzschean. By responding to “What if . . . ?” we already tacitly agree that what counts is not whatever is or is not truly the case but what we can at least temporarily let ourselves believe to be a possibility. This is not simply a writer’s technical trick, accomplished in one special and free-standing aphorism, but one of the major pillars on which the rest of Nietzschean thought erects itself. We will return to this aspect of Nietzsche’s thought.

Fourth, demons have one additional property besides those already mentioned: they do not exist. Here we are utterly Nietzschean. By our capacity and willingness to experience as real what we would be the first to deny reality, we acknowledge a central Nietzschean thought—that we are capable and willing to create realities out of illusions if it suits our purpose or our pleasure. For Nietzsche there are no facts, only after the facts that we claim to be true because we desire or need them to be true. By simply reading aphorism 341, we not only subscribe to this thought but also illustrate it. For by reading the aphorism, we at least temporarily acknowledge our willingness to grant existence to something to which we otherwise and hitherto have denied existence. Nietzsche makes us make this gesture by our reading of his text. We are already on his side before we know it.

To put this another way, Nietzsche’s concern in presenting eternal return is first of all practical, not theoretical. By saying, “What if . . . ?”

Nietzsche does not ask whether the reader believes in sudden apparitions of demons who tell of the world's eternal recurrence. Instead, he asks how he would respond if he saw one. Our initial approach to eternal return is therefore similar to Hamlet's problem. Hamlet's problem is not whether or not to believe in ghosts but what to do when you see one who prescribes your actions. The problem is a strictly practical one. For Nietzsche, as we will see, there are no problems other than practical problems. For him, theoretical reason is merely practical reason in disguise, the better to serve the hidden needs and desires and beliefs that dress themselves up as theoretical reason.

Thus our entry into the thought and life of eternal return takes place via the antechamber of pretense, or willing suspension of disbelief. Zarathustra has something to say about what is required of anyone who wishes to think eternal return:

When it got abroad among the sailors that Zarathustra was on board . . . there was much curiosity and anticipation. But Zarathustra remained silent for two days and was deaf and cold from sadness and answered neither glances nor questions. But on the evening of the second day he opened his ears again . . . And behold, eventually his own tongue was loosened as he listened, and the ice of his heart broke. Then he began to speak thus:

To you, the bold searchers, researchers, and whoever embarks with cunning sails on terrible seas—to you, drunk with riddles, glad of the twilight, whose soul flutes lure astray to every whirlpool, because you do not want to grope along a thread with cowardly hand; and where you can *guess*, you hate to *deduce*—to you alone I tell the riddle that I *saw*, the vision of the loneliest. (Z, 3, "The Vision and the Riddle")

After this passage follows a description of the riddle, that is, the vision of eternal return. Then Zarathustra turns to the sailors with a request:

You bold ones who surround me! You searchers, researchers, and whoever among you has embarked with cunning sails on unexplored seas. You who are glad of riddles! Guess me this riddle that I saw then, interpret me the vision of the loneliest.

These two passages say something about who can understand eternal return and about how it must be heard to be understood. One must be willing to abandon the safety and security of familiar and firm ground underfoot. One must be willing to surrender to oceans of turmoil without having a firm hold within reach. One must be willing to rely on the uncertainty and risk of imaginative vision, to let go of the ascertainable. One must be willing to leave behind everything that is known. One must be willing to be shipwrecked or to become the plaything of strange and irresistible forces. It is to such daring, reckless, and imaginative seafarers that Zarathustra turns. Moreover, he turns to them not only as to a passive audience for his thought but also for an interpretation of it.

With these thoughts in mind we now turn toward a sampling of Nietzsche interpretations that have held up eternal return to be tested against the demands of scientific rigor.