

Chapter 1

THE ETERNAL RETURN AND THE PLURALITY OF NIETZSCHE'S VOICES

*On my horizon, thoughts have arisen the likes of
which I have never seen before.*

—letter to Heinrich Kösterlitz,
August 14, 1881 (KSB 6, 136)

Nietzsche's eternal return is more radical than most other conceptions of cyclical history, for he often seems to argue that everything both has been and will return, eternally. But does he believe in a literal, unending preexistence and return of all things? Or is this strange doctrine simply a metaphor or an aid to help us visualize the difficulty of a Nietzschean affirmation of life? Can we desire everything both to have been and to return again endlessly? I hope to show in this first chapter why to these simple questions there are no simple answers. Karl Löwith, Joan Stambaugh, Bernd Magnus, and Günther Abel have all written outstanding books on the subject, but these studies have been hampered by a failure to appreciate fully the difficulties in giving a systematic reading to Nietzsche's thought.¹

All attempts to freeze the doctrine of the eternal return, or for that matter most of Nietzsche's other doctrines, into one interpretation will tell us more about the interpreter's intentions than about Nietzsche's.² This first chapter will discuss some of the difficulties involved in developing a systematic reading of the eternal return. As

Bernd Magnus writes, commentators on Nietzsche quarrel "not merely about the nuances of the doctrine of Eternal Recurrence, but about its gross outlines."³ Unlike Magnus, I believe that these difficulties arise in large part because Nietzsche never arrives at a final interpretation of the doctrine. His presentations of it in *The Gay Science*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the late writings, the *Nachlass*, and his letters are not consistent.⁴ He gives it varying interpretations depending upon the context and he underlines the variety of these interpretations by the multiplicity of voices with which he announces the doctrine. After following the eternal return through Nietzsche's published and unpublished works, we will be left, at the end of the chapter, with the question that the rest of this book will attempt to answer: How to make philosophic sense out of a thinker who often seems unsystematic and professes to be untruthful?

I will examine Nietzsche's accounts of the eternal return using as guides the first volume of Heidegger's massive Nietzsche lectures and Magnus's two insightful books on the subject.⁵ Heidegger maintains that Nietzsche remains trapped within the web of metaphysical thought. He argues that, while seeking to overcome the metaphysical tradition, Nietzsche unconsciously shares its most basic concern—namely, a preoccupation with the nature of being, which leads to the exclusion of the questioning of Being itself. In particular, Nietzsche's unconscious metaphysical presuppositions are revealed in the doctrine of the eternal return, according to Heidegger.

Using Heidegger's *Nietzsche* we will explore the published references to this doctrine plotting the changes it undergoes. Heidegger is, in some ways, a strange choice for a guide, particularly for the published works, since he claims that the unpublished writings provide the key to understanding the eternal return. But in practice it is in his analysis of the published writings that Heidegger develops his interpretation of the doctrine.⁶ In fact, there are two other factors that are more important for judging Heidegger's interpretation of the eternal return. First, the lectures that compose the Nietzsche book were given in the 1930s and 1940s, but first published in 1961. Heidegger wrote in the preface (the preface was written in 1961) to the lectures that he published them to give his readers an insight into "the path his thought had taken from 1930 to the 'Letter on Humanism'" (1947) (1:10). In the "Letter on Humanism" Heidegger counters Sartre's contention that he is a humanist, insisting that his thought had always sought to uncover Being. Heidegger views his

study of Nietzsche as something other than *blosse Auslegung* (simple exegesis) and explicitly warns against taking it as this. He does not clearly delineate between exegesis and the presentation of his own ideas. This is particularly true, as we will see, in his interpretation of "time" and of the "moment" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In the guise of interpretation, it is often Heidegger's own views that are being presented in his interpretation of Nietzsche.⁷

I will skirt the second significant problem with Heidegger's interpretation of the eternal return by not saying much about the second volume of Heidegger's Nietzsche study. There is (although Heidegger never admits to this) an important change in his interpretation of the eternal return near the end of the first volume. This change does not originate in any new reading of Nietzsche's text, but rather arises out of an evolution in Heidegger's own thought. Heidegger claims, for most of the first volume, that at least some people are capable of determining what will or will not return. Then, near the end of the first volume and continuing into the second, he argues that the eternal return teaches that we can never decide what returns, but rather "What becomes is the same itself" (2:11). As long as Heidegger believes it is a matter of choice as to what returns (that is, through most of the first volume), he calls Nietzsche a metaphysician based on the general notion that Nietzsche's doctrine is concerned with the Being of being. But when he changes his position and claims that the doctrine means we have no choice as to what returns, this allows Heidegger to specify his reasons for labeling Nietzsche's thought metaphysical.

Given this change in his interpretation of the eternal return, he can argue that Nietzsche thinks of time as the eternal return of discrete moments.⁸ Particularly at the beginning of the second volume, Heidegger maintains that the eternal return leads to a *Beständigkeit des Werdens* (reification of becoming), no longer arguing that in the moment we determine the future, the eternal return is now held to arrest becoming. Heidegger writes here that although Nietzsche wants to embrace becoming, the eternal return metamorphizes becoming into *das Bleibende* (that which remains).⁹

If, in spite of these difficulties, I still use Heidegger as a guide to the published writings, it is because Heidegger and Nietzsche both saw themselves as rebels within the philosophic tradition. Reading Heidegger and Nietzsche, we have a chance to compare two insurrections. Integral to Heidegger's rebellion is his method of reading his

predecessors. Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche is based not only on what Nietzsche says; he also claims to bring out the "unsaid" (*das Ungesagte*) in Nietzsche's writings. As O. Pöggeler writes, rather than explaining Nietzsche's writings, Heidegger seeks to find Nietzsche's place in the history of Western thought.¹⁰ He strives, through a continual *Hinausdenken* (further thinking) in wider nexuses, to uncover the basic characteristics of Nietzsche's thought in order to recognize Nietzsche's metaphysical *Grundstellung* (basic position).¹¹ The central question of this chapter is whether or not Nietzsche has a "basic position" on the eternal return. Although Heidegger analyzes several of the most important passages about the eternal return in depth, his concern for integrating Nietzsche into the metaphysical tradition causes him to overlook the differences in Nietzsche's eternal return.¹²

Magnus is more sensitive to the twists and turns that this doctrine takes, but he too arrives at a "final" interpretation. He labels it an "existential imperative." Magnus claims that Nietzsche's primary concern was not to describe the nature of beings, but to affirm this life, rather than some otherworldly salvation. We should want everything to return again, exactly as it was. Although in Magnus's more recent writings he has altered some aspects of his interpretations, he continues to seek a unified interpretation of the eternal return and thereby continues to oversystematize it.¹³ At the end of this chapter we shall be left with more questions than answers. I shall draw some conclusions concerning the changes that Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal return undergoes. Here the focus is on the limitations of Heidegger's and Magnus's interpretations in order to show that they do not seriously consider the possibility that Nietzsche's doctrine may not be entirely consistent and therefore do not understand what is, in my opinion, the most revolutionary aspect of Nietzsche's thought. My reconstruction of Nietzsche's thought, emphasizing the role that pragmatic and aesthetic criteria play in his choice of interpretations, will follow in chapters 5 and 6.

ETERNAL RETURN IN *THE GAY SCIENCE* AND *THUS SPOKE ZARATHUSTRA*

Heidegger begins his analysis of the eternal return, which lies at the heart of the first volume of his Nietzsche lectures, with a rather

extravagant claim. The will to power, Heidegger writes, is a concept that Nietzsche can formulate only after he has conceived of the eternal return (1:338-39).¹⁴ Nor does the will to power, once introduced, replace or dominate the eternal return. To describe the relationship of the two, Heidegger uses the metaphor of a source and a current. The will to power arises out of the eternal return and remains dependent upon it as a current always relies upon its source (1:338-39).¹⁵ In another place in the first volume, Heidegger writes that the planned book, *The Will to Power*, is from its beginning to its end dominated (*durchherrscht*) by the eternal return. Nietzsche saw his *Hauptaufgabe* (principal task) as the *Auslegung* (exposition) of all occurrences (*Geschehens*) as will to power (1:164). That this effort, however, is carried out through the thought of the eternal return (*vom Gedanken der ewigen Wiederkehr getragen*) is so obvious according to Heidegger that one is almost "embarrassed" to mention the fact.¹⁶

Even a cursory glance at Nietzsche's writings gives us reason to pause at this claim. The first reference to the doctrine is in the *Nachlass* and stems from August 1881. In the published writings, the idea that all things return is introduced, but not specifically labeled the eternal return, in the second to last aphorism of the fourth book of *The Gay Science* (written in the spring of 1882).¹⁷ It receives its most extended discussion in the published works in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a book about which Nietzsche writes that its basic concept (*Grundkonzeption*) is the thought of the eternal return.¹⁸ But even here it is not mentioned until Book 3 of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* ("On the Vision and the Riddle"). It is alluded to, without specific mention, in *Beyond Good and Evil* (aphorism 56), mentioned in the last aphorism of *The Twilight of the Idols* ("Ancients," 5), and discussed very briefly twice in *Ecce Homo* (EH: "BT," 5; "Z," 1). Nietzsche never repudiated the doctrine, but it is far from apparent that it dominates his thinking.

The first published reference to the doctrine, aphorism 341 of *The Gay Science*, entitled "The Greatest Weight," consists of a series of questions. When taken together, they define, without using the name eternal return, what would be for Nietzsche the most difficult thing to accept. There are two voices in the text: a narrator's and a demon's. Although Heidegger and others have identified the voice of the narrator's as Nietzsche's voice, I hesitate to do this.¹⁹ Unlike the aphorisms leading up to it in 341, Nietzsche does not identify

himself unambiguously as the author of these thoughts.²⁰ The narrator addresses the reader with the informal *du* (you). This familiarity is typical of many passages in *The Gay Science*. For example in 340, Nietzsche uses the first person plural to encompass both himself and his reader. In 338 the reader is addressed with the second person informal plural. But here the narrator speaks to the listener with the second person *singular* (*du*) and this serves to underline, I think, that this is a challenge to individuals—as the aphorism states in their “loneliest of loneliness”—and not a collective challenge. Each individual reader is asked to imagine a demon who whispers that he or she is condemned to repeat the same life over eternally. The narrator then poses a series of questions probing how one might react if the world were as the demon describes it. The narrator claims this would be the most difficult thing to accept.

Quotation marks set off the voice of the demon from the narrator. Unlike the demon from Descartes's *Meditations*, this demon casts our previous notions into doubt by revealing the “truth.”²¹ It describes a world in which everything returns, in exactly the same order; all humans can do is either affirm it (say yes to life) or try to ignore it. The narrator does not assert that every thing literally returns, but asks, “If life were so could you affirm it?” Those who could affirm it would be capable of carrying the heaviest weight:²²

How would it be if one day or night a demon were to steal up to you in your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “this life, as you now live it and have lived it, you must live it another time, even an infinite number of times. And there will be nothing new in it, rather every pain and every desire and every thought and breath and everything unspeakably small and large in your life must come to you again; everything in the same succession and sequence. (GS, 341)

There are many reasons, according to Heidegger, for calling the eternal return the heaviest thought, but he specifically mentions only two. First when we think it we think being, in its entirety: “It is the heaviest thought in many ways. First in relationship to what is thought in it, being in its entirety (*das Seiende im Ganzen*)” (1:276). Given Heidegger's broader thesis (in most of the first volume), that it is Nietzsche's concern for being (and his forgetting to ask the question concerning Being itself) that makes him a metaphysician, it is not sur-

prising that he would interpret "the heavy weight" in this manner.

In *The Gay Science* 341 there is some justification for Heidegger's claim that the eternal return is a doctrine about beings. The doctrine's heaviness results from our inability to affect what returns. We are asked if we could live with the knowledge that neither human agency, nor a wisdom in nature, select what comes back, but rather all things return exactly as they were. But Nietzsche, or rather the narrator, does not claim that this is the nature of the world; the narrator asks if we could affirm life if it were so. At least in *The Gay Science*, that all beings return highlights the difficulty of affirming life. We should love life so much that we would want everything to return eternally.

Secondly, Heidegger claims that with regard to thinking itself, it is the heaviest thought:

Then, however, in relationship to thinking itself: with regard to this it is the heaviest thought. For it must think through (*hindurchdenken*) the inner fullness of being, and the outer border of being in its entirety and at the same time through the loneliest loneliness of mankind. (ibid.)

With regard to thinking itself, it is the heaviest thought because it requires us to think through the loneliest loneliness. "The loneliest loneliness" is Nietzsche's phrase, but Heidegger interprets it in a way that seems to me to go beyond what Nietzsche said, or left unsaid. When and where, asks Heidegger, do we arrive at that moment of loneliest loneliness? Not when we become a hermit or concentrate exclusively on our "I," rather when a person²³ "is entirely himself; when he stands in the most essential relationships (*wesentlichsten Bezügen*) of his historical *Dasein* in the middle of being in general." (1:275)

What reasons does the narrator of *The Gay Science* 341 give for calling the eternal return the heaviest thought? The demon compares humans to minute flecks of dust (*Stäubchen vom Staube*) in an hourglass, which is eternally turned over, and asks, Do we love life so much that even if it were so, we could still say yes to it—that is, affirm it and want it to return endlessly?

The eternal hourglass of *Dasein* will be turned over eternally and you with it, you minute fleck of dust. Would you not throw

yourself down, gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke like this? Or have you once experienced a moment (*Augenblick*) where you would answer him: "you are a god and never have I heard anything more godly." (GS, 341)

It becomes even more evident as he begins to interpret *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that most of the first volume of Heidegger's interpretation is marked by his questioning of the nature of *Dasein*. As I have already said, it is possible to trace Heidegger's declining interest in *Dasein* over the course of the lectures. In his interpretation of *The Gay Science* this has not yet occurred. Here Heidegger is still asking questions about the relationship of human existence and being in general. This Heideggerian agenda imposes itself in his interpretation of *The Gay Science* 341.

In particular Heidegger's second reason for calling the eternal return the heaviest weight bears little resemblance to the narrator's reasons. The narrator calls it the heaviest weight because it underscores the insignificance of human existence—that we are nothing more than minute flecks of dust, able, at most, to affirm (but never to alter) the return of all things. Standing in "the most essential relationships" of one's historical *Dasein* is a Heideggerian concern.

In December 1883 Nietzsche writes a series of letters just before the Christmas holidays. Lonely and depressed, he had gone to Nice instead of spending the winter in Genoa, as he had the year before, because Nice usually had over 220 sunny days a year; in six months in Nice he would have as many clear days as Genoa had in the entire year.²⁴ Over and over again in the letters, Nietzsche writes that clear skies are essential for his health. Even though Nice produced the promised clear skies, Nietzsche writes to Overbeck on December 24 that his health is as poor as it was in Basel. In a Christmas Day letter to his mother and sister we read that his health in the last four months was worse than in his worst times (KSB 6, 478). Then there are almost three weeks of silence. The next letter, to his publisher, is dated January 18, 1884:

Good news, even more, the best possible news from my perspective: my *Zarathustra* is finished. I did not think last year that I would find this amazing thing, the conclusion to the first two parts, already this winter (to tell the truth in a few weeks). I am happy and, as often in my life, surprised by myself. (KSB 6, 479)²⁵

A week later to Overbeck he writes: "the last two weeks were the happiest of my life." It is in this third section that not Zarathustra but a dwarf and Zarathustra's animals, introduce the most terrible of thoughts—the eternal return.

Heidegger's interpretation of the eternal return in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* consists of a long exposition of two passages ("On the Vision and the Riddle" and "The Convalescent") in this third book. In the former, Zarathustra poses a series of questions to a dwarf, who answers only the first. With the help of the latter section, Heidegger believes he discovers why the dwarf remains silent after Zarathustra rebukes him. "The Convalescent," in particular the concept of the *Augenblick* (blink of an eye), holds the key, according to Heidegger, to understanding why Zarathustra claims the dwarf makes it too easy on himself.

As the third book begins, Zarathustra, a friend to all those who travel great distances and do not wish to live without danger, boards a ship that will take him from the blessed isle to a distant land. After two days of silence he speaks with the crew telling them because they are "bold searchers . . . drunk with riddles and glad of the twilight," he will relate to them a riddle, the "vision of the loneliest." "On the Vision and the Riddle" describes a doorway in the mountains over which is written the word *Augenblick*. Here Zarathustra pauses and speaks to the dwarf he has been carrying up the mountains. Zarathustra tells the dwarf that he is the stronger of the two because the dwarf does not know his precipitous thought. Furthermore the dwarf could never bear it. But neither the dwarf's inevitable lack of understanding nor his inability to live with this thought deter Zarathustra from offering him an explanation. At the door two infinite paths come together; one goes forward and the other backwards. To Zarathustra's question, whether or not these paths contradict each other, the dwarf murmurs "disrespectfully" that every straight thing lies. All truth is crooked; time is a circle. In short, the dwarf seems to sketch in his answer the eternal return. But Zarathustra angrily replies that the dwarf is making it too easy on himself and continues, posing a series of questions to him.

Zarathustra asks what the dwarf thinks of the moment, and then replies to his question with another question: "Must not this passage have already been? And are not such things tied together so that this moment pulls along all future things to itself? Even itself? Must we not have all been here and must we not all come again? . . .

must we not eternally return (*ewig wiederkommen*)?" As he speaks these words his voice becomes ever softer due to his fear before his own thought. Suddenly he is distracted by the howling of a dog. The dwarf and the doorway disappear. He wonders if he had only dreamed the dwarf and the doorway.

The dog's howl not only marks the disappearing of the dwarf and the doorway, it also ushers in a second story. Zarathustra tells of how he sees a shepherd boy who has been sleeping with his mouth open. A snake entered into his mouth, and bit and held fast to the back of his throat. Zarathustra is unable to pull the snake out, so he tells the boy to bite off the snake's head, which the boy is able to do. The boy then spits out the head and jumps up radiant and laughing. Zarathustra claims that "never yet has a human being laughed like this boy." It is a laugh that Zarathustra longs for and gnaws at him.

In at least one point—and probably in others as well—there is a similarity between the descriptions of the eternal return in *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra*. In both cases the doctrine is described through a series of questions.

The dwarf, according to Heidegger, sees only two infinite paths; he fails to see their *Zusammenstoss* (collision) in the moment. To see the moment as a collision one must be more than an observer, one must be the moment (*Augenblick*):

. . . [between past and present] there is a collision. Obviously only for he who does not remain an observer, rather *himself* is the moment (*selbst der Augenblick ist*), who acts into the future and thereby does not allow the past to fall away, but rather at the same time overtakes and affirms it. He who stands in the moment is facing two directions: for him the past and the future run against one another (*gegeneinander*). He allows that which runs against one another to collide in himself and yet not to come to a stop because he unfolds the conflict of that which is already given up (*aufgegeben*) and that which is given-with (*Mitgegeben*). . . . What does all this say about the right way of thinking the eternal return? *The essential: what becomes in the future is precisely a product of decision.* (1:311-12) [emphasis added].

This person acts in the future and affirms the past. The two infinite paths, future and past, collide, but only for those who stand in the

moment and are not passive observers. In sharp contrast to what he will write two hundred pages later, Heidegger emphasizes that the decisions an individual makes in the moment determine how everything returns.

It becomes increasingly clear as he turns to the "Convalescent" that his interpretation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, as was the case with *The Gay Science*, is simply not supported by the texts.²⁶ One of the most notable aspects of Heidegger's discussion of "The Convalescent" is what it lacks—namely, a discussion of Zarathustra's healing. Zarathustra, at the beginning of "The Convalescent," cries out with a terrible voice that drives away all the animals except the snake and the eagle. He proclaims that he is the advocate for life, suffering, and the circle. After crying I call you, my most precipitous thought, he falls down as if he were dead. He regains consciousness, but remains seven days in bed "pale and shaking," cared for by his animals.²⁷

When Zarathustra begins to speak after these seven days, he first turns to a discussion of *Schwätzten* (chatter). He compares words to rainbows and calls them *Schein-Brücken* (apparent bridges), claiming that precisely among that which is most similar, appearance betrays most beautifully (*ibid.*). With speech, people dance over everything. The animals, according to Heidegger, like the dwarf, in "On the Vision and the Riddle," describe what seems to be the thought of the eternal return. Zarathustra laughs and call his animals *Schalks-Narren* (foolish knaves) and *Drehorgeln* (barrel organs). As Heidegger notes, the animals have failed to recognize an essential part of the teaching of the eternal return, but Heidegger is, in my opinion, mistaken as to the nature of the misunderstanding. He claims that about the content of the teaching nothing is said with the exception of the morning song (1:310). He believes that Nietzsche conveys to us only indirectly, through the course of the conversation, the difference between the chatter (*Geschwätz*) of the animals and Zarathustra's teaching of the eternal return.

Zarathustra believes he comes again to the same life: everything—even the little man—comes again. What is terrible in the thought of the eternal return is not that in the moment we decide what will or will not return, but the feeling of impotence that arises when one believes that the same things recur in precisely the same order.²⁸ Zarathustra's great ennui with regards to humankind—the thought that choked him—was that nothing matters. Even the small

man (*kleiner Mensch*) returns eternally, and therefore the smallest man and the grandest man (*grösster Mensch*) lie all too close together. Even the grandest man is all too human. Only on such an interpretation does the tragedy and the difficulty of affirming the eternal return fully surface. Although it is difficult if not impossible to fathom how the same thing can recur, this is what Zarathustra seems to claim—actually he tries to assert this, but the thought is so terrible that he swoons every time he seriously considers it.

In "The Convalescent" itself there is no evidence that Zarathustra can affirm the thought of eternal recurrence, but at the end of the third book in the section entitled "The Seven Seals (or: The Yes and Amen Song)" Kaufmann characterizes Zarathustra's affirmation of the doctrine as "boundless and without reservation."²⁹ Although Zarathustra does speak of lusting "after the nuptial ring of rings, the ring of recurrence," he never confronts specifically the possibility of a return of all things—even the little man—which made him swoon in "The Convalescent."

Those who believe in a literal return can point to the fact that in "The Convalescent" it is precisely the return of everything, even the little man, that causes Zarathustra to swoon. These comments in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* are not found within the context of a philosophical treatise. And, furthermore, Zarathustra himself cannot describe the thought. Just thinking of it seems to render him unconscious. How much comfort can the literalist take from words spoken by animals and affirmed by a literary character?

This is not to claim that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is not a philosophic text, but a thinker who had said that God is dead introduces the doctrine in the *The Gay Science* as the words of a demon. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* it is first spoken by a dwarf and then sung by Zarathustra's animals. All of this might lead us to think that it is more of a poetic than a philosophical doctrine. To this I would reply the way Zarathustra did to his animals—when we try to dismiss *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* claiming that it is poetry and therefore not philosophy we are "making things too easy." The doctrine may be presented poetically in this work, but it has the specificity, complexity, and wide-ranging character that marks philosophic thought.

Zarathustra was not the only one who had difficulty with this thought. To Overbeck, Nietzsche writes on March 8, 1884, that his only source of courage during the time he wrote *Zarathustra* he found within himself. What exactly required courage he does not

explicitly say, but the eternal return is not far to seek: "Courage to carry that thought. Then I am very far from announcing it and presenting it. If it is true or even more believed to be true—then everything changes and revolves and all previous values are devalued" (KSB 6, 494).

Paying careful attention to the various voices with which Nietzsche has described the eternal return, we have noticed that in neither *The Gay Science* nor *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* have we heard unambiguously Nietzsche's own voice. And yet these passages are, arguably, the most important discussions of the eternal return in the published works.

Although Heidegger argues against a literal return of all things here, it is, I believe, mainly for reasons that have to do with his own project. In the middle of the first volume of his Nietzsche interpretation, Nietzsche serves as the mouthpiece for Heidegger's own thought. Without any knowledge of Heidegger's discussion of time from *Being and Time*, Heidegger's summary of "The Convalescent" is, in my opinion, very unclear. Heidegger believes that we can understand Nietzsche's notion of eternity through that of the moment. He interprets the eternal in Nietzsche by contrasting it with that which remains eternally the same (*Ewig-Gleichbleibenden*) (1:315). Nietzsche's concept of the eternity of the moment can only be thought of, according to Heidegger, when the teacher of the eternal return understands himself through the teaching. That which is taught is not simply of academic interest, but rather is existentially relevant. The teacher must understand himself as a necessary sacrifice that must *untergehen* because he is a transition (*Übergang*) (1:314).

This *Untergang* of the moment has a double meaning for Nietzsche, according to Heidegger. First *Hinuntergang als Anerkennung des Abgrunds* (going down as recognition of the groundless) and second *Weggang als Übergang* (going away as transition). The moment of *Untergang* is not simply gone, it is rather the shortest moment, which is therefore the moment that is most past. At the same time, it is the moment that is most fulfilled, "in which flashes the lightest light of being in its totality" (1:314). This is the moment where the whole of the return is grasped.

Pictorially, however, this is the ring of the serpent, the living ring. And here join together for Nietzsche in the picture of the

serpent the connection (*Zusammenhang*) of eternity and the blink of an eye to a unity: the living ring of a serpent that is the eternal return and the moment. (1:314)

I agree with David Krell that when Heidegger claims that for Zarathustra in the moment all is decided as to what will or will not return, he is suggesting that Zarathustra's notion of infinity is an authentic notion of time.³⁰ At this point in the lectures, Heidegger is attributing to Zarathustra essentially his own vision of time. Time as a passage (*Übergang*), which inevitably implies a decline (*Untergang*), is akin to Heidegger's own vision of an authentic understanding of time as the inevitable march towards death, discussed in paragraph 65 of *Being and Time*.

Heidegger holds on to this interpretation of the eternal return for most of the first volume of the Nietzsche lectures. Near the end of the lectures for 1937, Heidegger reviews the concept of the moment and again emphasizes that in the moment the future is decided. Zarathustra knows (in contrast to the dwarf, who remains silent after the second question is posed) that in the moment, everything is decided as to what will and will not return. The teaching of the eternal return is the overcoming of Nihilism (*Überwindung des Nihilismus*). The thought is only thought when we put ourselves *in die Zeitlichkeit des Selbsthandelns und Entscheidens* (in the time-ness of self-motivated actions and decisions). The teaching of the eternal return is not that everything is the same, and therefore that everything is indifferent, rather everything comes again and therefore depends on every moment (1:446).

Heidegger's Nietzsche lectures do give us the promised insight into the path of his thought between 1930 and the "Letter on Humanism." They reveal the connection between his growing pessimism with regard to the overcoming of metaphysics and the declining importance of *Dasein* in his thought. Through most of the first volume Heidegger remains optimistic about the possibility of overcoming metaphysics. Central to this project of overcoming is a new understanding of time. In particular his interpretation of the moment in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (as a never-ending passage) seems to be offered as a precursor to an authentic understanding of time, which would help prepare the way for an eventual overcoming of metaphysical thought. Exactly how such a notion of time would lead to an overcoming of metaphysical thought we

never discover, for in the course of the Nietzsche lectures, Heidegger becomes less optimistic about his ability to overcome metaphysics. And this pessimism about his own project translates into an interpretation where Nietzsche is himself further from overcoming metaphysics.

At the end of the first volume and continuing into the second, Heidegger emphasizes that time for Nietzsche consists of a series of returning moments. The moment is no longer the purely transitory passage (Heidegger called it the "collision") between past and future where all is decided as to what returns. Now Nietzsche remains a metaphysician, because he believes that reality consists of static moments that return eternally. Reality so conceived precludes becoming in a truly transitory sense—as Heidegger refers to it, *das fortgesetzte Andere* (the progressive other) (2:11).

Time, for Nietzsche, in this second of Heidegger's interpretations, is a series of moments—like a string of beads. Each moment is a discrete entity, or, to develop my metaphor, a bead. The hands of time exchange one bead for another. Reality consists in a series of discrete moments turning in an endless circle. Change, in the sense of an entirely new bead (moment) from outside the circle, is excluded. Since there is no change—that is, no new bead from outside the circle—it makes no sense to speak of a *fortgesetzte Andere* (progressive other); rather, the exchange of beads brings the constant return of the same. Becoming, for Nietzsche, means exchange—that is, the exchange of one moment for the next where all moments are contained in an ever-repeating circle. Now the *Augenblick* refers only to the duration of the eternally returning moment.

Heidegger interprets Nietzsche's conception of time as a series of short static integers rather than a seamless never-ending transition from past to present, and therefore Nietzsche is now seen primarily as a metaphysician. But since in Nietzsche's thought these recurring static moments last no longer than the "blink of an eye," Nietzsche has brought metaphysical thought to a close. If he could overcome Nietzsche's arresting of time in the moment, Heidegger seems to believe he could begin to uncover what philosophy since the Greeks had obscured.³¹ What, however, marks the second volume is a pessimism about finding a new conception of time.

In the course of this book we shall see that Nietzsche believes his thought to be an overcoming of the tradition, but not through the

invention of a new way of understanding concepts such as time. It involves, rather, a repetition of the tradition and a new attitude toward truth and consistency. Nietzsche is no longer concerned with the Cartesian project of dividing the true from the false in order to build an unshakable foundation. Absolute truth has been undermined, if for no other reason that we can no longer believe in it. Instead of looking for the way to overcome the metaphysical tradition, Nietzsche offers a discourse rendered subversive by its lack of an authoritative voice. Concepts such as the eternal return remain, and at times they seem little different from the truths they replace, but they are whispered by demons, murmured by dwarfs, sung by animals, or preached by Zarathustra.

ETERNAL RETURN IN *BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL*, *TWILIGHT OF THE IDOLS*, AND *ECCE HOMO*

The last four published discussions of the eternal return in Nietzsche's works receive scant attention in Heidegger's account—indeed, in most other accounts as well. He devotes a few pages to *Beyond Good and Evil* 56, and mentions that the doctrine is discussed in *Ecce Homo*, but he gives these sections no extended treatment. This is unfortunate, in my opinion, because these latter references add not only to our understanding of the eternal return but, even more importantly, give us a crucial insight into the manner in which Nietzsche philosophizes. Far from establishing a definitive version of the eternal return, they add to the problems of those seeking simple answers. In particular, in one place in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche seems to give, within a few lines, first a nonliteral interpretation and then a literal one.

In *Beyond Good and Evil* 56, as in *The Gay Science*, the doctrine is alluded to without being specifically mentioned. Nietzsche, using the first person, writes not as if he were offering an interpretation of the world, but rather presents the notion that everything returns as his ideal. He calls it a "tragic" ideal, but cautions that his definition of "tragic" is the inverse of the Buddha's or Schopenhauer's. Unlike Buddha and Schopenhauer, Nietzsche does not associate tragedy with pessimism. Using the conditional, he writes that his ideal would serve the overcourageous, liveliest, and most world-affirming people. They would not only have learned to accept what

was and is, but insofar as something had existed or did exist they would want to have it again, throughout eternity. They would cry *da capo* (from the beginning) not only to themselves, but unlike Zarathustra, to the whole play and spectacle. Even more clearly than in *The Gay Science* 341, Nietzsche is not presenting a theory about the world, but rather asking if we could say yes to such a world. In contrast to the earlier formulation of the doctrine, here the link between the doctrine and Nietzsche's notion of tragedy is made explicit.

After *Beyond Good and Evil* the eternal return is sometimes attributed to Zarathustra and sometimes to Nietzsche. In *Twilight of the Idols*, a work about which Nietzsche wrote "this is my philosophy in nuce," the eternal return is mentioned once.³² Here tragedy is again contrasted with Schopenhauer's pessimism. Nor is tragedy, as Aristotle claimed, designed to release us from fear and sympathy, but rather it is "yes-saying to life even in its most difficult problems." This means saying yes to the sacrifice of one's highest types (*Typen*) and transforming oneself into the eternal desire of becoming (*die ewige Lust des Werdens selbst zu sein*) (TI, "Ancients," 5). Understanding tragedy as the affirmation of becoming, Nietzsche claims to come full circle and regain the place where his work began—*The Birth of Tragedy*:

And with this [his understanding of tragedy] I touch again the place from which I first went forth—*The Birth of Tragedy* was my first reevaluation of all values. With this I place myself again on the ground from which my willing and my ability (*Können*) grow. I the last boy of the philosopher Dionysus; I the teacher of the eternal return.

Here being the teacher of the eternal return coincides with the role of the last boy of Dionysus. Both roles are inspired by his understanding of tragedy as an orgasmic affirmation of life—a reveling in becoming and the destruction that inevitably accompanies it. The differences between Zarathustra's inability to name the thought in "The Convalescent" and Nietzsche's reveling here, suggest that the doctrine does not mean the same thing for these two. It is true that in the "The Seven Seals" Zarathustra can sing "For I love you, oh eternity," but he cannot or at least does not call himself the teacher of the eternal return in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

Of the last references to the eternal return, the one found in *Ecce Homo* discussion of *The Birth of Tragedy* is the most interesting and, to my mind, most problematical. Here Nietzsche quotes, even giving the page number, from his account in *Twilight of the Idols*.³³ Again tragedy is called yes-saying to life in its hardest problems. Nietzsche's philosophy is Dionysian, affirming passing away and annihilation. It says yes to opposition, war, becoming, and radically rejects the idea of being:

The affirmation of passing away and annihilation, the decisive element in a Dionysian philosophy, the Yes-saying to opposition and war, becoming with a radical rejection of even the concept of Being: on the basis of this I recognize, in all circumstances, what is the closest to me out of all that has been thought up to now. (EH, "BT," 3)

All of this suggests a nonliteral interpretation of the eternal return. But then, immediately following these lines we read: "The teaching of the eternal return: that means of the unconditioned and unending repeated circularity of all things. This teaching could have been taught by Heraclitus" (EH, "BT," 3).

How can the eternal return teach the unconditional and unending repetition of all things and at the same time be the affirmation of passing away and annihilation? And if it involves repetition, how is it a Heraclitian doctrine?³⁴ Just at the point where it might seem reasonable to interpret the eternal return as a tragic (not pessimistic) affirmation of the transience of life, Nietzsche repeats Zarathustra's claim that all things literally return. The last published reference to the doctrine, in his description of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *Ecce Homo*, does little to help us out of the problem. Here, Nietzsche again associates the doctrine with Zarathustra. He writes that the basic concept of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is eternal return. As in *Beyond Good and Evil* the affirmation of the return of all things is called the highest form of *Bejahung* (affirmation) (EH, "Zarathustra," 1). If anything, this confuses matters more by again suggesting that this is Zarathustra's doctrine.

We are back to the problem to which interpreters of the doctrine themselves eternally return. Having sifted through the published works we still have not arrived at a single interpretation of the eternal return. Perhaps the *Nachlass* can be of help.

ETERNAL RETURN IN THE *NACHLASS*

Before asking what position Nietzsche takes on the eternal return in the *Nachlass*, I want to consider some of the problems as well as some of the possibilities that the publication of the *Nachlass* has brought with it.

The *Nachlass* is hardly monolithic. Giorgio Colli andazzino Montanari, the editors of the new edition of Nietzsche's works, have divided it into two groups, *nachgelassene Schriften* and *nachgelassene Fragmente*. Under the former they include several essays from Nietzsche's time in Basel, which were not published during his lifetime (for example, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" belongs to this period). They also consider *The Anti-Christ*, *Ecce Homo*, and *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* (KSA, volume 6) *nachgelassene Schriften*, since they were not published before Nietzsche's fall into insanity. In volumes 7-13 of the KSA the editors assembled the fragments. For the purposes of this book, *Nachlass* will mean both the *nachgelassene Schriften* from volume 1 as well as the fragments (volumes 7-13). Since the manuscripts for *The Anti-Christ*, *Ecce Homo*, and *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* (KSA 6) were ready for the press, and since it seems that Nietzsche had every intention to publish them, I will not differentiate between them and the other works Nietzsche himself published.³⁵

The *Nachlass* is a valuable resource for every Nietzsche scholar, but I separate the work that Nietzsche himself published or intended to publish and the fragments published by Nietzsche's editors.³⁶ It is incumbent on those who do not distinguish between them to explain why Nietzsche chose not to publish a remark. Nietzsche reviewed his unpublished notes extensively in the last years and prepared four books for publication in 1888. He had ample opportunity to publish the notes he considered important. If something appears only in the *Nachlass*, it is very possible Nietzsche was in some way dissatisfied with it. Certainly the notes can provide us with insight into the process that spawned Nietzsche's thought. My interpretation, concerned as it is with not only what Nietzsche said, but how he said it, will be based primarily on the published works. I think of the notes, as Kaufmann and Magnus do, as a place where Nietzsche carried out experiments with his thought, some of which he undoubtedly felt were unworthy of publication.

Those who take the eternal return literally find some support in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (and ought to quote the forementioned passage from *Ecce Homo*, but rarely do), but the *Nachlass* offers their most substantial support. The notes for the eternal return, however, bolster the argument that the *Nachlass* is a thought laboratory—a place where ideas could be experimented with.

In July 1881 Nietzsche went to Sils in search of clear skies, but for the first month the weather was uncharacteristically overcast. His health was bad. He writes Overbeck, on July 30, that he has already suffered from six attacks lasting two to three days each. Two weeks of silence separate that letter and the next, which is the one to Kösterlitz, which along with fragment 11[141] (KSA 9, 494) first announces the eternal return. In the fragments through to the end of that notebook (KSA 9, 572; 11[335])—the last few fragments from this notebook were, the editors tell us, added later—we have the most extended treatment of the eternal return found anywhere in Nietzsche's writings.

These include quite a few short fragments where it is unambiguously asserted that everything returns:

Everything has returned: the Sirius (the brightest star in the sky) and the spider and your thought in this hour and even this thought that everything comes again. (KSA 9, 524; 11[206])³⁷

Other passages suggest that nothing could ever return.

Is not the existence of any particular difference and incomplete circular form in the world which surrounds us already a sufficient refutation against a completely circular form for all that exists? (KSA 9, 561; 11[311])

There are several fragments that have come to be labeled "proofs" for the eternal return. About these there has been, in recent years, considerable discussion. Magnus has examined some of these "proofs" at great length and concluded:

Careful attention to the language of Nietzsche's alleged "proof" of recurrence seems to show that no such proof exists unambiguously. Further and more troubling the textual evidence may be taken to suggest that perhaps there can be no unam-