



Nietzsche's Eternal Return: Unriddling the Vision, A Psychodynamic Approach

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Abstract

This essay is an interpretation of Nietzsche's enigmatic idea of the Eternal Return of the Same in the context of his life rather than of his philosophy. Nietzsche never explained his 'abysmal thought' and referred to it directly only in a few passages of his published writings, but numerous interpretations have been made in secondary literature. None of these, however, has examined the significance of this thought for Nietzsche, the man. The idea belongs to a moment of ecstasy which Nietzsche experienced during the summer of 1881 in Sils-Maria, in the Swiss Alps. Like Dante, in 'the middle of life', he walked down the wooded Alpine slope and entered his own Inferno. On the anniversary of long-buried loss and pain, his psyche was temporarily flooded by archetypal imagery. This event is interpreted in the light of Freud's theory of repetition compulsion, the uncanny, and the oedipal confrontation with the unconscious. From the turbulent and frightful experience, a symbol of transfiguration emerged in the shape of Eternal Return. Its likeness to Mandala, a Jungian archetype of wholeness and the self, is striking. In the years that followed, Nietzsche produced his greatest works that assured him an unassailable place in Western philosophy. And yet, there was something disturbing about this dream-thought, and Nietzsche shuddered at any mention of the thought. Linking it with the head of Medusa in his unpublished notes, he hinted at its petrifying quality. The beguiling beauty of Medusa makes her an ambiguous symbol of exhilaration, as well as terror. Under her captivating gaze, a hero's journey towards selfhood becomes a journey into the night of madness.

Solve for me the riddle that I saw, interpret to me the vision of the most solitary man!

(Nietzsche, 1883-1885/1969a, p. 180. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Of the Vision and the Riddle)

It has gradually become clear to me what every great philosophy has hitherto been: a confession on the part of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir. (Nietzsche, 1886/1990, p. 37. *Beyond Good and Evil*)

Introduction

Nietzsche's philosophy cannot be separated from his life. Everything he wrote evolved from himself and returned to him, and the idea of the Eternal Return of the Same (*die ewige Wiederkunft des Gleichen*) is no exception. Its two aspects, that of terror and that of exhilaration, reflect a duality in his soul. His thought-experiment invites a question of whether it is possible to transcend the terror, overcome resentment, and say yes to life full of pain and suffering. If it is possible, did Nietzsche himself, that great alchemist of pain, succeed in this task? He referred to Eternal Return variously as the "most scientific of all possible

hypotheses” (1886-1887/2003, p. 118), as an “abysmal thought” (1883-1885/1969a, p. 178) and a “highest formula of affirmation” (1888/1986a, p. 99), but never offered any explication of the concept. The resultant hermeneutic vacuum provoked an abundance of interpretations in secondary literature. To give a few examples, Heidegger (1954/1984) read the idea as an existential choice, for Deleuze (1994) it was a “mystical game of loss and salvation” (p. 6), while in Kaufmann’s (1974) view it represented a life-redeeming experience. Bertram (1918/2009) commented that Eternal Return was “a monomaniacal and a sublimely irrational and unfruitful private delusion” (p. 306), and Cybulska (2008) interpreted it as a manifestation of Nietzsche’s manic psychosis.

The diagnosis of Nietzsche’s mental condition as tertiary syphilis has now been discredited and a bipolar disorder with periodic psychosis was proposed by Cybulska (2000), a hypothesis recently endorsed by Young (2010). Karl Jaspers (1936/1997) thought that Nietzsche’s pivotal psychic changes dated back to 1880-1881 and he put them down to a mysterious biological factor. More recent research suggests that Nietzsche’s mood oscillations can be traced back to 1871, when he was writing *The Birth of Tragedy*. Relatively short manic psychotic episodes, probably dating from August 1881, were interspersed with longer periods of depression, accompanied by multiple somatic symptoms (Cybulska, 2000).

The argument of this essay is built on the premise that Nietzsche was in the grip of psychosis when the idea of Eternal Return came to him, and it employs Freudian and Jungian concepts in its interpretation. Several commentators have looked at Eternal Return from the perspective of Jung’s depth psychology (e.g. Dixon, 1999; Huskinson, 2004), as well as Freud’s psychoanalysis (e.g. Chapelle, 1993). While being indebted to their scholarship, in this essay I focus on the significance of Eternal Return in relation to Nietzsche’s personal life. As philosophy was for him an involuntary memoir of his soul, such an approach seems justifiable. The psychodynamic interpretations put forward in this essay represent different, yet complementary, perspectives.

The Birth of Eternal Return from the Spectre of Hades

We have to give birth to our thoughts out of our pain... (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 35. *The Gay Science*)

In the middle of the journey of our life, I woke to find myself, in a dark wood, for I had wandered off from the straight path. (Dante, 1330/1971, *Inferno*, Canto I, Lines 2-3)

It was in early August of 1881 in Sils-Maria in the Swiss Alps when the thought of Eternal Return suddenly invaded Nietzsche’s mind and became pivotal to his philosophy. The hauntingly beautiful scenery of the place has an air of Hades about it, not least because of a large, pyramidal boulder at the edge of Lake Silvaplana. It looks as though it has just been dropped from the skies by Sisyphus, that infernal hero of the absurd. His eternal struggle with this weighty stone can be seen as a metaphor for humanity’s struggle with the pain of existence.



It was by that Sisyphian boulder that Eternal Return was born:

The Greatest Weight — What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: ‘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 be 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!’

—Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a horrific moment (*ungeheure Augenblick*)¹

¹ I have translated *ungeheure* as ‘horrific’ to convey the onomatopoeic and physiological effect of the word; the literal meaning is ‘monstrous’. The first time Nietzsche used this word was probably when recounting the death of his father (see below). Later, it recurred as a leitmotif in

when you would have answered him: ‘You are a god, and never had I heard anything more divine!’ If this thought were to gain possession of you, it would change you as you are, or perhaps crush you. The question in each and everything, ‘Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?’ would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed you would have to become to yourself and to life to *crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal conformation and seal? (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 273, emphasis in original)

The cosmogonist idea of Eternal Return was not new to the history of human thought and Nietzsche, steeped in classical culture and pre-Socratic philosophy, would have been well acquainted with the concept. Yet there must have been something strange, compelling, and even frightening in this noontime (*Mittags*) experience. It is puzzling why Nietzsche refers directly to his most profound idea merely in one passage of *The Gay Science* (1882/1974, see above), in two passages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885/1969a, *Of the Vision and the Riddle* and *The Convalescent*), once in *Ecce Homo* (1888/1986a), and once in *The Will to Power* (1883-1888/1969b). He does, however, make several oblique references to it as though he did not dare to look the idea in the face.

The scenery of Sils-Maria is one of high mountains reflected in the deep murky waters of a lake. It creates the impression of an intersection between light and darkness, the conscious and the unconscious, the past and the future. Nietzsche (1888/1986b) later called this spot *jenseitsig* (the beyond) and recorded his experience thus: ‘It was ‘6, 000 feet beyond man and time’. I was that day walking through the woods beside the lake of Silvaplana; I stopped beside a mighty pyramidal block of stone which reared itself up not far from Surlej. Then the idea came to me” (p. 99). An earlier letter to his friend Peter Gast reveals: ‘I am at the end of the thirty-fifth year of my life, in the ‘the middle of life’, as it has been called for a millennium and a half. Dante had his vision at this age and speaks of it in the first lines of his poem. Now I am in the middle of life, so ‘surrounded by death’ that it can get hold of me at any hour.” (Nietzsche, 1875-1879/1986b, p. 441). The previous winter had been the most awful in his life; plagued by ill health and deep melancholy, he even forgot his own birthday. Nietzsche had now reached the age of

many emotionally charged passages such as ‘God is dead’ in *The Gay Science* (1882/1974); also ‘Star friendship’ (see below), and in his description of ecstasy/inspiration in *Ecce Homo* (1888/1986a, see below).

was 36, the age his father had died, and the age at which he often feared he would die too. His father’s burial was in early August of 1849, when Nietzsche was less than five years old:

On the second of August, the earthly remains of my father were consigned to the womb of the earth ... At one o’clock in the afternoon (*Mittag*²) the ceremonies began, with the bells pealing their loud knell. Oh, I shall never forget their hollow clangour in my ears ... Our pain was horrific (*ungeheure*). (Nietzsche, 1854-1861/1994a, pp. 5-6)

There was also another loss, possibly even more painful, closer in time to the ‘epiphany of Sils-Maria’. It gradually dawned on Nietzsche that his notion of Richard Wagner as the new Aeschylus about to revive the ancient culture in his music-dramas was an illusion. He also realised that the composer treated him more like a precious piece of furniture to show off to his admirers than a beloved son-friend. During the Bayreuth Festival in early August 1876, Nietzsche observed Wagner courting the rich and famous in the hope that they would finance and promote his grand opera house project. Nietzsche walked out of their eight-year intense friendship feeling betrayed and wounded. To his sister he confessed, ‘My Wagner mania certainly cost me dear. Has not this nerve-shattering music ruined my health? And the disillusionment and leaving Wagner — was that not putting my very life in danger?’ (Middleton, 1996, p. 180). His later philosophy can be seen as an attempt to transfigure the pain of this great disillusionment and loss:

There is probably a horrific (*ungeheure*) but invisible stellar orbit in which our very different ways and goals may be *included* as smaller parts of this path... Let us *believe* in our stellar friendship even if we should be compelled to be earth enemies. (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 226, emphasis in original)

Nietzsche eradicated Wagner from his life, but not from his heart and mind. Two out of the six books which he wrote in his last creative year, 1888, bear the composer’s name in the title, *The Wagner Case*, *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, and *Twilight of the Idols* sounds like a mocking echo of the final part of *Der Ring*. By his own admission, Wagner was the only man he had truly loved; the affection was unfortunately unrequited.

² Strictly speaking the word *Nachmittag* (afternoon) should have been used. Nietzsche wrote this fragment at the age of 14, and it is intriguing that he used exactly the same word in *Zarathustra* when referring to Eternal Return (see below).

However, as Nietzsche was descending the wooded slope towards the lake, “in the middle of life [and] so surrounded by death” (1875-1879/1986b, p. 441), the memories of happier, yet irretrievably perished times must have returned to him with the force of an avalanche. Many years earlier he had been invited by Wagner to his Tribschen villa near Lake Luzerne, where he had become a frequent houseguest. Back in early August of 1869 he had climbed Mount Pilatus which overlooked the lake, also “6,000 feet above sea level”, exulting his *Tribschen Idyll* (letter to Gustav Krug; Middleton, 1996, pp. 56-57). The similarity between this scenery and that of Sils-Maria is uncanny, certain to bring back haunting memories. And, as Dante said, “there is no greater pain than to remember, in our present grief, past happiness” (1330/1971, *Inferno*, Canto V, Lines 121-123). Whilst briefly revisiting Tribschen years later Nietzsche wept on the ruins of his hope. Paradise lost was briefly regained, only to be lost again.

Confrontation with the Unconscious and the Epiphany

The unspeakable strangeness of all my problems and illuminations ... (Nietzsche, letter to Overbeck, September 1884, cited in Jaspers, 1936/1997, p. 106)

Nietzsche was showing unmistakable signs of manic psychosis at the beginning of August 1881. He reported to Gast: “the intensity of my feelings makes me shudder and laugh [...] on my hikes I wept tears of jubilation; I sang and talked nonsense, filled with a new vision that puts me ahead of men” (Middleton, 1996, p. 178). Sometimes he felt like a zig-zag doodle drawn on paper by a superior power wanting to try a new pen. He also believed that his brain was absorbing electricity from the atmosphere and that he ought to be put on display in a Parisian electricity exhibition (Hayman, 1995 p. 235).

Nietzsche’s perception of time during that period may have been disrupted as his notes and postcards are uncharacteristically undated. It could be possible that this disturbed sense of time lay at the heart of his dream-thought. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1900/1985a) stressed a complete lack of sense of time both in dreams and in psychosis. The Eternal Return of the Same was possibly an expression of the sameness of pain and the menacing timelessness of psychosis.

In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche (1888/1986a) recalled the moment of revelation thus:

The concept of revelation, in the sense of something suddenly, with unspeakable certainty and subtlety, becomes *visible*,

audible, something that shakes and overturns one to the depths, simply describes the fact ... An ecstasy whose horrific (*ungeheure*) tension sometimes discharges itself in a flood of tears ... (pp. 102-103, emphasis in original)

Jung (1955-56/1989a) noted that upon entering the realm of the archetypal, we are convinced that “we know the ultimate truth concerning metaphysical things” (pp. 551-2) whilst in all other matters one would submit the subjective image to objective criticism.

Nietzsche’s close friend Erwin Rohde, a famous academic writer, refused to speak of the doctrine as anything other than a symptom of his morbid state: “He was surrounded by an indescribable atmosphere of *strangeness*, by something that seemed to me to be completely uncanny” (cited by Hollingdale, 1999, p. 172, emphasis in original). In September 1881 an intimate friend, Professor Overbeck, received from Nietzsche a letter “written half in German, half in less-than-perfect Latin” (Klossowski, 1997, p. 212), which he took for a call of distress. Having observed Nietzsche’s violent mood swings, and the manner in which he had tried to initiate him into his secret doctrine, Overbeck concluded that he was “no longer a master of his reason” (Klossowski, 1997, p. 212).

During Nietzsche’s descent into the inferno of psychosis, the abyss of pain intersected with the apogee of elation and this conjunction would remain fixed in his mind. Moreover, he would crave the return of that moment — the more pain, the more overcoming, the more of the victorious elation. Thus the tears of pain were transfigured into the tears of jubilation. Melanie Klein (1981) asserted that in mania there is “the *utilization of the sense of omnipotence* for the purpose of *controlling and mastering* objects” (p. 277, emphasis in original), and that it is based on the mechanism of denial. This defence mechanism is particularly applicable to ‘lost objects’ and mania is often a reaction to painful loss and abandonment. Essentially, mania is a mask that hides despair. The tension between the opposites of pain and exhilaration, defeat and victory, became the driving force of Nietzsche’s philosophy of overcoming and the will to power.

There are striking similarities between Nietzsche’s and Jung’s (1963/1983) “confrontations with the unconscious” (pp. 194-225). In many respects, Wagner was to Nietzsche what Freud was to Jung. Both Masters were self-centred, autocratic figures who demanded an undivided loyalty; both had magnetic personalities that invited an almost religious worship. Nietzsche was important for Wagner, as Jung was for Freud, mainly as a proselytiser of the Master’s ideas. Freeing oneself from such relationship

turned into a battle with the unconscious and led to psychosis in both cases. In the end, Jung (1963/1983) saved his sanity by anchoring his life in family and work, whilst Nietzsche perished alone in the abyss of his madness.

Eternal Return of the Repressed

If one has a character, one also has one's typical experience which returns repeatedly. (Nietzsche, 1886/1990, p. 91)

Uncanny (*Unheimlich*) is human existence and still without meaning. (Nietzsche, 1883-1885/1969a, p. 49)

'Repetition compulsion' is Freud's cardinal psychoanalytical concept that explains an individual's unconscious tendency to repeat his or her life pattern, and in particular to repeat traumatic experiences. Inspired by Nietzsche, Freud (1920/1984a) stated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

This 'perpetual recurrence of the same thing' (*die ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*) causes us no astonishment when it relates to *active* behaviour on the part of the person concerned and when we can discern in him the essential character-trait which always remains the same and which is compelled to find expression in a repetition of the same experiences. (pp. 292-3, emphasis in original)

According to Freud, the compulsion to repeat overrides the pleasure principle that prohibits the liberation of the repressed. However, the repressed trauma may have never entered the full light of consciousness and would constitute a case of primary repression. Mollon (2002, p. 133) has emphasised the brain's inability to encode early traumatic memories in the context of time and space, due to the incomplete myelination of the limbic system. Such trauma remains locked in the unconscious as a "pre-symbolic dread". The traumatically injured individual becomes frozen in time, constantly searching for the conditions through which it can be released (Waldron, 2010).

Nietzsche's enchantment with Wagner can be interpreted as an attempt to recreate the past and undo the early loss. His most cherished childhood memory was sitting on his father's lap whilst listening to his musical improvisations on the piano. Thus music and paternal love fused into one. Wagner, who was exactly the same age as his father, was slotted into the vacant position. But such 'willing of the past' was anything but straightforward. Not long after Nietzsche met the composer in person in 1868, he heard a terrifying, inarticulate voice behind his chair (Hayman, 1995, p.

103). It was to return as a voiceless voice in *Zarathustra*, as an oblique reference to Eternal Return:

Yesterday, at the stillest hour, the ground seemed to give way: my dream began ... Then, voicelessly, something said to me: *You know, Zarathustra?* And I cried out of terror at this whisper, and the blood drained from my face: but I kept silent. (Nietzsche, 1883-1885/1969a, p. 167, emphasis in original)

Freud (1915/1984b) recognised that "the ambivalence which has enabled repression through reaction-formation to take place is also the point at which the repressed succeeds in returning" (p. 157). The untimely death of his father left Nietzsche with an all-pervasive sense of deadness and abandonment. As often in grief, this was accompanied by repressed feelings of rage and resentment, which he later projected onto Wagner and also onto God. With some dreadful inevitability, the whole cycle of love, abandonment, resentment and rage had to repeat itself; the 'return of the dead' was complete. Wishing the lost paradise to return became bound up with the fear of losing it again; moreover the paradise had to be lost. Perhaps this is the ambiguous kernel of the Eternal Return of the Same.

In his paper *The Uncanny* Freud (1919/1985b) linked the return of the repressed with Schelling's idea of *das Unheimliche* (the uncanny), and commented that "whatever reminds us of this inner compulsion to repeat is perceived as uncanny" (p. 361). The experience of the uncanny has two aspects, the familiar and the unfamiliar one. Once a familiar, yet repressed, experience erupts suddenly through the threshold of consciousness in a historically unfamiliar situation it is as though past and present become fused. As Freud aptly commented, the "uncanny is frightening precisely because it is not known and yet familiar" (1919/1985b, p. 341). He also observed that it was liable to arise when "the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced" (1919/1985b, p. 367). Sass (1994) noted that in the state of 'uncanny particularity' of *Wahnstimmung* (delusional mood), which often accompanies psychosis, unfamiliar events and objects appear as repetitions or copies of themselves. Nietzsche (1883-1885/1969a) described the experience poetically in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

For all things that *can* run *must* also run once again forward along the same lane. And this slow spider that creeps along in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself, and I and you at this gateway whispering together, whispering of eternal things—must we not all have been here before? (p. 179, emphasis in original)

In Nietzsche's memory, happy childhood moments were instilled with a sense of abandonment, and happy moments at Mount Pilatus were overshadowed by deep loss. Thus joy became wrapped up in pain.

Oedipus and the Sphinx

Who of us is Oedipus here? Who the Sphinx?
It is a rendezvous, it seems, of questions and question marks. (Nietzsche, 1886/1990, p. 33)

Like Freud, Nietzsche identified with Oedipus, that archetypal hero of self-knowledge. During the meeting at the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1908, Freud commented that "the degree of introspection achieved by Nietzsche had never been achieved by anyone, nor is it likely ever to be reached again" (Nunberg & Federn, 1967, pp. 31-32). As befitted an outstanding classical scholar, Nietzsche elected the Delphic imperative of 'know thyself' to be his life-long motto. He once wrote to his sister: "If you want to achieve a peace of mind and happiness, then have faith; if you want to be a disciple of truth, then search" (Middleton, 1996, p. 7). Prompted by curiosity, Oedipus left his home in Corinth and set off to Delphi in search of his identity. The word *zêtein* (to search for, investigate) appears frequently in Sophocles' *Oidipous Tyrannos*, and even the hero's name resonates with *OIDIPOU* (I know where). By unwittingly killing his father, the autocratic King Laius, where three roads meet, and then solving the riddle of the Sphinx at the Gate of Thebes, Oedipus sealed his fate. It was a mixture of curiosity, pride, intelligence and courage that led to his downfall, not his incestuous desires. The incest, the self-blinding and the banishment from his kingdom could be interpreted as a consequence of Oedipus' uncompromising search for truth (Cybulska, 2009).

Nietzsche (1883-1885/1969a) introduced the concept of Eternal Return in a chapter entitled *Of the Vision and the Riddle*, an undeniable allusion to the myth of Oedipus. The thought comes to Zarathustra at the gateway called Moment (reminiscent of the Gate of Thebes) where two paths meet: "This long lane behind us: it goes on for an eternity. And that long lane ahead of us — that is another eternity" (p. 178). In his early book *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche (1872/1993) had already exposed the danger in pursuing truth: "What the myth [of Oedipus] seems to whisper to us is that wisdom, and a Dionysiac wisdom in particular, is an abominable crime against nature; that anyone who, through his knowledge, casts nature into the abyss of destruction, must himself experience the dissolution of nature" (p. 47). The image of a 'lame-foot' tight-rope walker falling to his death in the Prologue to *Zarathustra* is as chilling as it is prophetic (Nietzsche, 1883-1885/1969a).

Having been deprived of the possibility of resolving the oedipal rivalries with his father, Nietzsche recreated his Laius in the form of Wagner, complete with Wagner's wife Cosima in the role of Jocasta. When his reason and inhibition were eclipsed by madness, he sent her, by then a widow, a letter "Ariadne, I love you. Dionysus" (Hayman, 1995, pp. 335, 339). In addition, it was the *agon* (contest) with Wagner that lay at the heart of Nietzsche's overtures towards Cosima rather than any 'incestuous' desire. She represented to him a kind of trophy for winning an oedipal contest, the contest that he both wished, and wished not, to win. Nietzsche's life-long longing to have a loving mentor only matched his urge to be free from any influences for the sake of "independence of the soul" (1882/1974, p. 150). Eternal Return, far from being a scientific hypothesis, became for him a defensive effort to recreate his own past, to become his own father and begetter (Rudnytsky, 1987).

Equally strong was Nietzsche's affinity with the Sphinx:

The Sphinx

Here you sit, unrelenting like my curiosity,
Which forced me to you: so be it, Sphinx,
I ask questions, like you;
This abyss is common to us both—
Is it possible that we speak with the same
mouth?

(from unpublished notes, cited by Bertram, 1918/2009, p. 190)

He wrote this fragment in the fall of 1881, shortly after the revelation of Eternal Return. The riddle-posing Sphinx and riddle-solving Oedipus had thus merged into one. Ultimately, they shared the same fate of dissolution into the abyss.

Nietzsche often feared insanity, which he thought he may have inherited from his father, who died from "softening of the brain (*Gehirnerweichung*)" (1854-1861/1994a, p. 4). In 1876, he wrote to a friend, "I could no longer doubt that I am suffering from a serious brain illness, and that pains in the stomach and eyes are only symptomatic" (cited by Hayman, 1995, p. 183). Shortly after the epiphany, he wrote to another friend, "I am living an extremely dangerous life, for I am one of those machines that can explode" (cited by Middleton, 1996, p. 178). Reading about J. R. von Mayer's conservation of energy law, convinced Nietzsche (1883-1888/1969b) that it 'demanded' Eternal Return. This seemed like a plausible answer to his own riddle; it normalised his uncanny experience and calmed his inner Sphinx. Klossowski (1997) was convinced that Nietzsche had

perceived Eternal Return as his own madness, and this terrified him.

A Healing Mandala?

My endeavour [was] to oppose decay and increasing weakness of personality. I sought a new 'centre'... To the paralysing sense of general disintegration and incompleteness, I opposed the 'eternal return'. (Nietzsche, 1883-1888/1969b, p. 224)

In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche (1888/1986a) proclaimed that Eternal Return was the ultimate life-affirming formula for embracing one's fate: "My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wishes nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely to endure what happens of necessity ... —but to *love* it ..." (p. 68, emphasis in original). It seemed like a counterpoint to the Wagnerian leitmotif of redemption, and this was to be achieved not through the sacrifice of a loving woman (as in *Tristan and Isolde*), or a self-renouncing figure like Parsifal, but through an idea. However, this raises questions regarding whether an idea alone can redeem a life; whether an idea can become a healing mandala.

In his *Zarathustra Seminars*, Jung (1934-9/1989b) discussed Eternal Return as a symbol of life that, akin to a river, seeks its own source to which it returns in a circular movement. It is related to the Christian concept of redemption as leading back to the original state of completeness and innocence. Jung (1934-9/1989b) also referred to the *apocatastasis*, which means "the return of everything that has been lost, a complete restoration of whatever has been" (p. 1341). Nietzsche (1883-5/1969a) called Eternal Return the "ring of rings", and then announced that he had "turned [his] ultimate depth into the light" (p. 233). Thus, his abysmal thought can be seen as mandala that descended upon him in that horrific moment when his entire being was threatened with disintegration. In Sanskrit *mandala* means 'circle' and, as Jung (1934-54/1990) proposed, this archetypal symbol represents "a kind of new centring" and the "the traditional antidote for chaotic states of mind" (pp. 10, 360). Mandala usually has a round or rectangular shape and expresses the movement of the self towards unity and wholeness; its appearance is accompanied by a sense of inner order, balance and peace. It represents the self-healing tendency of the mind to rescue itself from a state of overwhelming dread and disintegration. Following the emergence of Eternal Return, Nietzsche enjoyed seven years of great creativity and wrote some of his most lucid and insightful philosophical works.

However, nothing is ever straightforward with Nietzsche. If his mentor Heraclitus taught about

coincidentia oppositorum (the coincidence of opposites) then Nietzsche lived this teaching. A man of passion and an advocate of Dionysian existence, he led the life of an ascetic hermit; a man of deeply religious nature, he became known as one of God's most famous assassins. His tragic flaw (*hamartia*) was the urge to erect and consecrate altars in the deepest depth of [his] heart (1861-1864/1994b), which only equalled his fervour to smash them. Two antithetical forces of his psyche – that of separation and that of the unification of opposites – seemed to have entered a truly gladiatorial *agon*. Living by the Heraclitean motto that all things come into being by conflict of opposites, he turned his most cherished ideals (such as Christianity and Wagner) into monsters needing to be overcome. By "taking sides against himself" (quoted by Salome, 1894/2001, p. 60), he waged an almighty war with himself; his philosophy became not only an involuntary and unconscious memoir, but a war diary. He gradually turned into a tragic mythical hero, destined for his own destruction. As Jung (1951/1991) warned, "the progressive development and differentiation of consciousness leads to an ever more menacing awareness of the conflict and involves nothing less than the crucifixion of the ego, the agonising suspension between the irreconcilable opposites" (p. 44). Ominously, just before succumbing to permanent insanity, Nietzsche signed one of his last letters 'The Crucified'. The symbol of mandala may indicate an urgent need for self-integration, rather than be an antidote to inner chaos.

Medusa's Head

The great thought as Head of Medusa: all the world's features petrify; a frozen death-head. (Nietzsche, 1884-1885/1980, p. 360)

In his unpublished notes, Nietzsche (1884-5/1980, p. 360) likened Eternal Return to the Head of Medusa, a truly petrifying image. Lou Salomé (1894/2001) witnessed Nietzsche's horror when in 1882 he shared the idea with her:

Unforgettable for me are those hours in which he first confided to me his secret, whose inevitable fulfilment and validation he anticipated with shudder. Only with a quiet voice and with all signs of deepest horror did he speak about this secret. Life, in fact, produced such suffering in him that the certainty of an eternal return of life had to mean something horrifying to him. The quintessence of the teaching of Eternal Return, later constructed by Nietzsche as a shining apotheosis to life, formed such a deep contrast to his own painful feelings about life

that it gives us intimations of being an uncanny mask. (p. 130)

Another friend, Resa von Schirnhofen, observed in April of 1884:

With a petrified expression on his face, casting shy looks around him as if a horrible danger threatened should a listener hear his words, muting the sound with his hand over his mouth he announced to me in a whisper the secret ... There was something bizarre, even uncanny in what Nietzsche told me of the eternal return of the same ... (cited in Gilman, 1987, p. 157).

But what was it that terrified Nietzsche? Discussing Medusa in *Aion*, Jung (1934-54/1991) equated it with the “diabolical element whose destructiveness is an essential part of every psyche. Seen in this light, the *stella maris* stands for the fiery centre in us from which creative and destructive influences come” (p. 137). He also emphasised the danger in man’s journey towards selfhood: “on returning to his true self, he enters an abyss deeper than hell itself” (1934-54/1991, p. 135). The reason why Nietzsche – that most articulate of philosophers – never explained his abysmal thought may well have been because it petrified him. It was like staring the medusa of psychosis in the face. Even delegating the task of teaching Eternal Return to his imaginary companion, Zarathustra, produced no direct disclosure.

Medusa is a highly ambiguous symbol. In one version of the myth, she was a chthonic monster with snakes writhing around her contorted face. She could only be approached indirectly and Perseus killed the monster by using her mirror reflection on his shield. It therefore seems possible that Nietzsche’s great thought was perhaps designed to ward off the dread of madness. In Ancient Greece, the Gorgoneion (Γοργόνειον) was a special apotropaic amulet showing the Gorgon’s head, and it was used by the Olympian Gods Zeus and Athena. This function of Medusa tallies with Nietzsche’s (1872/1993) early view of the monster as a guardian against the Dionysian frenzy and intoxication: “The figure of Apollo rose up in all its pride and held the Gorgon’s head to the grotesque, barbaric Dionysiac, the most dangerous force it had to contend with” (p. 19). This quotation suggests that perhaps only terror can effectively ward off terror. Intriguingly, Lucian (c. 120-180), well known to Nietzsche, emphasised that it was the beauty of Medusa that stunned her beholders and made them speechless so that they turned to stone in wonder (Garber & Vickers, 2003). In this respect, the seductive aspect of Medusa is reminiscent of the alluring sirens in Odysseus’ journey into the Underworld (see below).

A Hero’s Quest for Wholeness

It returns, what finally comes home to me is my own Self and what of myself has long been in strange lands and scattered among all things and accidents. (Nietzsche, 1883-1885/1969a, p. 173)

Self-knowledge is an adventure that carries us unexpectedly far and deep. (Jung, 1955-56/1989a, p. 520)

A quest for wholeness is a quest for cosmic unity; it is also a quest for God. Jung (1951/1991) believed that the emergence of the archetype of the Self is a revelation of religious nature; a revelation of God and also of man. The manner in which the thought occurred to Nietzsche had a character of visitation, and he would fall silent when passing by the pyramidal stone, as if entering a holy prescient. The term *Wiederkunft* has a religious aura, as Christians spoke of *Wiederkunft Christi* — the ‘second coming’ (Young, 2010). Did Nietzsche, in that moment of ecstasy, think that he was the second coming of Christ, or rather did he see himself as the dark side of Christ – the Antichrist? He claimed that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885/1969a; an alternative Book of Revelation) would divide history into two halves. In March of 1884, he wrote to Overbeck: “I don’t exactly know how I have come to this – but it is possible that for the first time a thought has come to me that will break the history of humanity in two” (cited by Klossowski, 1997, p. 100). Did he anticipate human history to be divided into BN and AN, instead of BC and AD? Maybe even for Nietzsche the Antichrist, a quest for wholeness was in essence a quest for God.

While still under Schopenhauer’s spell, Nietzsche (1872/1993) viewed Dionysian ecstasy as a return to a mysterious “primal Oneness” (p. 25). According to Schopenhauer (1819/1969), our suffering comes from the strivings of the Will and from being tormented by memories. As a means of saving one’s life, the mind seeks refuge in madness by destroying the thread of memory and returning to the undifferentiated state of oneness. The quest to return to primary oneness may become more urgent at a time of the disintegration of the self, such as psychosis. Rather paradoxically, the search for centeredness can turn into a search for dissolution. Despite Nietzsche’s later attacks on Schopenhauer’s philosophy, he may have lived what his early mentor had taught.

Nietzsche (1879/1976b) also identified with that subterranean, wandering hero, Odysseus: “I too have been in the Underworld, like Odysseus, and I shall yet return there often” (p. 67). In his journey to Hades, Odysseus plugged his sailors’ ears with wax and tied himself to the mast of his ship in order not be lured by

the beguiling songs of the sirens. (Although he still wanted to hear their songs.) The greatest danger for a hero who ventures into the realm of the Unconscious is the temptation to remain there; the world of phantasm can become more attractive than the world of the real and the rational. Campbell (1988, p. 218) has put it thus: "The first problem of the returning hero is to accept as real, after an experience of the soul-satisfying vision of fulfilment, the passing joys and sorrows, banalities and noisy obscenities of life. Why to re-enter such a world?"

The ecstasy that permeates the uroboric state of Oneness, coupled with a sense of omnipotence, can prove impossible to resist. Nietzsche intimated this sense of elation and omnipotence shortly before his total mental collapse. He wrote to Overbeck "anything is possible in my life now" (cited in Middleton, 1996, p. 338); to his sister "I hold, quite literally, the future of mankind in the palm of my hand" (cited in Middleton, 1996, p. 339); and to Carl Fuchs he boasted "since the old God has abdicated, I shall rule the world from now on" (cited in Middleton, 1996, p. 335, emphasis in original). What a contrast to the grim reality of a homeless, unloved man and a largely unrecognised genius.

Discussion and Closing Remarks

He who fights the monsters should watch it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze for too long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you. (Nietzsche, 1886/1990, p. 102)

A spectre of undecidability haunts Nietzsche's writings. As a poet-writer he must have felt compelled to veil the communications of his intimate experiences, whilst as a philosopher, he aimed at presenting these experiences as universal truth. The enduring fascination he holds for poets, writers, philosophers and psychoanalysts may well rest on the open-endedness of interpretations his writings evoke. There cannot be a definitive reading of Eternal Return and the analysis presented in this essay is not exclusive but complementary to others.

The idea of Eternal Return descended upon Nietzsche at a time of a multiple anniversary: that of his father's death at the age he himself had now reached, and that of the happy beginning and the bitter end of his cherished friendship with Wagner. His repeated use of the word *ungeheure* (horrific, monstrous) can be seen as a semiotic leitmotif that suggests a link between these events. Nietzsche's longing for a loving mentor never abated, and his friendship with Wagner could be seen as an unconscious attempt to undo his early loss. By implicitly promising to fulfil this longing, and then disappointing the immense promise it had created, Wagner inflicted a deep

wound in Nietzsche's soul. That wound would never heal. This second trauma was deeper because it shattered a great, albeit unrealistic, expectation. It resulted in a psychotic eruption at the anniversary of both losses, which culminated with the epiphany of Eternal Return. Psychotic reactions have been reported to occur at the anniversary of parental death as expressions of incomplete mourning and unresolved identification (Gabriel, 1992). In circumstances uncannily reminiscent of the past, the emotions surrounding earlier traumas returned to Nietzsche with great intensity and compelling vividness; he must have felt as if life was repeating itself. In trying to universalise this experience he christened it Eternal Return.

The passages in part III of *Zarathustra* (1883-1885/1969a), where Nietzsche refers directly to Eternal Return, are imbued with the imagery from the myth of Oedipus. He wrote them in January of 1884, shortly before the first anniversary of Wagner's death. If the untimely death of his father left Nietzsche with the guilt for winning 'the oedipal duel', Wagner's death must have amplified this guilt. However, Oedipus never wished his father's death, consciously or unconsciously. That proud man wanted only to assert his right where 'the three roads meet' and his unintentional killing of King Laius was a consequence of Laius' intransigence and self-centredness. Had Oedipus been given due recognition by his father, he would have never killed him (and we would not have one of the most spellbinding legends). Unconsciously, Nietzsche may have hoped to undo the myth and win the duel without 'killing' the father figure. However, this was not to be. Self-absorbed Wagner, reminiscent of King Laius, was unable to contain his projections and facilitate their resolution. The tragic myth was thus re-enacted and the vicious circle of repetition compulsion was complete.

The vision of Eternal Return can be seen as an attempt to reconcile the inner opposites and to symbolise the redemptive, healing mandala. However, when Nietzsche wrote to a friend in relation to his August epiphany that it "filled [him] with a new vision that put [him] ahead of men" (letter to Gast, cited in Middleton, 1996, p. 178), he knew well the peril of such visions. Earlier the same year, he had declared visions as "a profound mental disturbance" and warned against the *religiosi* who "see things that others do not see" (Nietzsche, 1881/1982 p. 39). Instead of reconciling the opposites, Eternal Return turned into a menace and an indication of the much-feared madness. It became his Medusa.

Nietzsche's asceticism and solitariness, fortified by pride, rendered his yearnings for love and intimacy unfulfilled. Yet he recognised that "the perpetual lack of a really refreshing and *healing human love*, the

absurd isolation which it entails, making almost any residue of connection with people merely something that wounds one — that is all very bad indeed...” (Letter to Overbeck, cited in Middleton, 1996, p. 282, emphasis in original). He often spoke of Ariadne, that faithful companion of the great, mythical hero Theseus who slew Minotaur in the Cretan labyrinth. Unlike Theseus who held onto Ariadne’s thread, Nietzsche ventured into the labyrinth of the unconscious all by himself. However, although one can get in alone, one needs the help and guidance of another human being to get out. Even he, the advocate of hardness and self-sufficiency, needed his Ariadne with her embodied love and wisdom to lead him back to reality. An idea such as Eternal Return was no substitute for real human love.

Eternal Return also symbolised a transfiguration of loss and pain into a love of fate, accompanied by an elation

of victorious overcoming. Nietzsche was unable to resist the temptation of returning to that alchemical moment again and again. A reality full of suffering and unremitting loneliest loneliness could not compete with the beguiling pull towards the Dionysian world of dream and intoxication. Ultimately, the alluring sounds of the sirens and the bewitching gaze of the Medusa proved too powerful. In his words: “I often look back in wrath at the most beautiful things that could not hold me – because they could not hold me” (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 247). The compulsion to repeat turned into a vicious circle, a maddening tarantella dance that culminated in his total mental collapse at the age of forty-four. Thus a hero’s journey into the light of reason became a journey into the night of madness. As other great tragic heroes before him, Nietzsche perished in full consciousness of his fate. The fate, he proclaimed, one must love.

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