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# Nietzsche's eternal return and the Question of hope

Stine Holte

This article discusses Nietzsche's notion of *eternal return of the same* with regard to its impact on central discussions of Jewish-Christian notions of hope and redemption within modern intellectual history. It attends especially to the aesthetic dimension of Nietzsche's doctrine in *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and to the interpretations of it by Heidegger and Löwith. Whereas Heidegger discusses the doctrine in *The Gay Science* in light of an aesthetic-tragic heroism, Löwith presents it in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as a metaphysical truth aiming to surpass the time of *Dasein* and reconcile free will and fate. In both cases, the doctrine can be read as an expression of an aesthetic redemption in which the subject is no longer a creature waiting to be redeemed in the future, but a creator of an aesthetic or poetic redemption here and now. This view is problematized by thinkers in the modern Jewish Messianic tradition, such as Benjamin and Adorno. They connect the notion of *eternal return* to the realm of myth and suggest a messianic exodus from this realm. But they also point to the problems with such an exodus, something that points to a more dialectical notion of hope and redemption.

Theological language is born out of the dualism between the ideal standard and the status quo of man's situation. So long as this cleavage is not healed, there remains a legitimate task for theology.<sup>1</sup>

Jacob Taubes

*Karl Löwith and the ambiguous value of hope*

It is not an overstatement to claim that many theological insights are strongly associated with certain kinds of social experience. This is not least the case with the messianic notions of *hope* and *redemption*, which seem to depend on a social reality in which we “find a dualism between the ideal standard and the status quo,” to borrow Jacob Taubes’ words. Jan Assmann exemplified this when he claimed that apocalypticism is born out of experiences of oppression: “Apocalypticism and oppression go hand in hand. Apocalypticism is a form of religious and intellectual resistance, and martyrdom requires violent oppression and persecution in order to exist.”<sup>2</sup>

Such insights do not necessarily reduce theology to a mere reflection of social reality. The various experiences of dualism or oppression may be translated into both thought and action in various ways, giving rise to different notions of messianic hope: Hope may take an *apocalyptic* form, implying the hope in a revolutionary altering of the present state, or it may appear in a more *restorative* manner, meaning a hope that preserves a connection to memory and history.<sup>3</sup> There is also an alternative view: that the very notion of messianic hope is itself problematic, and therefore should be replaced by an alternative view of time and redemption, based on the Greek notion of *eternal return of the same*.

One of the defenders of the latter view is Karl Löwith. In his book *Meaning in History*, he questions “whether man’s living by expectation agrees with a sober view of the world and of man’s condition in it.”<sup>4</sup> The notion of hope is for him at best ambiguous. In antiquity, he claims, this ambiguity was recognized in the Pandora myth:

The Pandora myth, as told by Hesiod, suggests that hope is an evil, though of a special kind, distinguished from the other evils which the box of Pandora contained. It is an evil which seems to be good, for hope is always hoping for something better. But it seems hopeless to look forward to better times in the future, since there is hardly a future which, when it has become present, does not disappoint.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, it is recognized that man cannot live without hope, unless he is to fall into despair, into wan-hope. Hope in antiquity is therefore “an illusion which helps man to endure life, but which, in the last resort, is an *ignis fatuus*,” a delusionary light.<sup>6</sup>

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, this is radically different, according to Löwith. Hope is here not to be grasped in *mythical* terms as an evil which

helps man to endure life, but rather as a necessary moment in the *historical* meaning of reality. Reality is seen in an eschatological light, with a beginning and an end, in contrast to the cyclical worldview of the Greeks. This change from cyclical to eschatological time is, in Löwith's account, not a transition from less to more religion, but rather a change from a mythical religious worldview to a historical one.

However, in a seemingly paradoxical way, the new emphasis on eschatological hope also marks a first step in the long process of secularization. This process starts by a change in emphasis from nature to history, implying that nature is no longer regarded as sacred. A second step in the process of secularization happens when eschatology is detached from its transcendent conditions into immanent or political interpretations of redemption, as is e.g. seen with the replacement of the belief in God's transcendent providence with the notion of immanent and indefinite progress in the seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup> According to Löwith, the secularization of eschatological hope culminates in the dubious political theologies of the twentieth century, thereby actually betraying the original Christian notion of hope and expectation.<sup>8</sup>

For Löwith, the solution to the problem was not to return Christianity to its pre-secular state, but rather to problematize eschatological hope and historical consciousness altogether. In his effort to sketch alternative ways of thinking, he kept returning to the Greek notion of time, especially as Nietzsche had thematized it in his doctrine of *the eternal return of the same*. According to Löwith, this doctrine is the key to Nietzsche's philosophy, and appears as "a stumbling-block and foolishness to those who still believe in the modern gospel of progress, which is a secularized form of Christian eschatology."<sup>9</sup>

The contrast between an eternal return and eschatology – or myth and history – has also been emphasized by thinkers in the modern Jewish messianic tradition, though in opposite terms. Walter Benjamin has e.g. defended a notion of history beyond myth, and in the Arcades project he posed the notion of *eternal return* as "the *fundamental* form of the *urgeschichtlichen*, mythic consciousness. (Mythic because it does not reflect.)"<sup>10</sup> Another example is found in Jacob Taubes who, despite his reliance on both Nietzsche's and Löwith's analyses and approval of their critique of the notion of progress, has defended not the "foolishness" of eternal return, but rather the Pauline "foolishness of the cross" – as opposed to Nietzsche's aristocratic redemption "for the few".<sup>11</sup>

Agata Bielik-Robson has discussed various expressions of such a messianic critique of Nietzsche's thought in her book *Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity. Philosophical Marranos*.<sup>12</sup> One of the characteristics of

modern Jewish thought is, according to her, a discussion with Greek tragedy. But this discussion does not happen in terms of the classical opposition between the *reason* of Athens and the *faith* of Jerusalem. The opposition is rather one between two different *religious* principles or sensibilities: “the tragic vision of the eternal return of the same” and “the messianic vision of the Exodus from the circle of nature, which offers the individual a chance to ‘get out’ [...] to *individuate*.”<sup>13</sup>

I will return to what this opposition means, but here we should ask in what way we may distinguish between eternal return and eschatology if both are expressions of *religious* sensibilities? I believe it is crucial to attend to the *aesthetic* dimensions of these religious sensibilities and develop the implications of different aesthetics of redemption. This questioning will form the background for my reading of Nietzsche’s notion of *the eternal return of the same*, as well as the interpretations of Heidegger and Löwith. Towards the end of the article, I will by way of suggestion point to some central examples of a messianic critique of Nietzsche from the point of view of modern Jewish thought. My aim is not to present an original contribution to Nietzsche research on the difficult topic of *eternal return*, and even less to argue for the notion’s coherence.<sup>14</sup> I will rather analyze Nietzsche’s thought with regard to its influence on central discussions within modern intellectual history in order to better understand the differences between a Nietzschean and a Jewish-Christian messianic notion of hope and redemption.<sup>15</sup>

The notion of *the eternal return of the same* appears in various forms throughout Nietzsche’s work, and as Ted Sadler points out, Nietzsche reportedly used to speak of the notion “in an uncanny whispering voice, as if in a state of sublime horror.”<sup>16</sup> In the following, I will seek to understand what is at stake for Nietzsche and his interpreters, by going into the most central passages in which the notion of *eternal return* appears, in *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

### The Gay Science: eternal return as a “heavy weight”

An early formulation of the doctrine of *eternal return* occurs in § 341 of *The Gay Science* under the title “The Greatest Weight” (Das größte Schwergewicht). The doctrine is here presented as a thought experiment:

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!”<sup>17</sup>

Nietzsche recognizes the potentially devastating character of this thought, but also its potential to bring about change, when he suggests that “if this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, ‘Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?’ would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight.”<sup>18</sup>

The characterization of this doctrine as a *heavy weight* should be contrasted to the assumed weightlessness of the nihilistic condition,<sup>19</sup> – the experience of losing a foundation after the death of God. Martin Heidegger explores the ambiguity of the image of the heavy weight (*Schwerewicht*), as something which on the one hand gives firmness and balance, but also pulls down and forces one to stay above, despite the constant threat to slip.<sup>20</sup> This ambiguity is also visible in Nietzsche’s conception of nihilism; despite his critique of the nihilist attitude, Nietzsche does not attempt to overcome the nihilism by seeking a new foundation. He rather wants to turn the passive nihilism into an active one, by embracing the new freedom of the nihilistic condition.<sup>21</sup>

Nietzsche’s emphasis on the thought of the eternal return as something to be *desired* and as a weight on one’s *actions* seems to support Löwith’s claim that the idea as it is presented in *The Gay Science* is to be considered an *ethical imperative*, “to live as if ‘the eternal hourglass of existence’ will ever be turned again, in order to impress on each of our actions the weight of an inescapable responsibility.”<sup>22</sup> But in what sense can we talk of *ethics* here? And how can such a heavy and potentially devastating demand to desire the past be something that also leads to ethical responsibility?

The ethical demand is indeed not to be conceived in terms of conventional morality. In § 345 of *The Gay Science*, entitled “Morality as a problem”, Nietzsche claims that we need to question the value of morality and of the command “thou shalt”, because of its emphasis on conscience and selflessness.<sup>23</sup> Instead of regarding conscience as a command that bridles one’s selfishness, Nietzsche stresses the value of the self-determination of the “free spirit”,<sup>24</sup> quoting a motto from the Greek poet Pindar: “What does your conscience say? ‘You shall become

the person you are.”<sup>25</sup> This motto – to become who you are – is also the subtitle of *Ecce homo* and is, according to Löwith, polemically directed against the Christian demand of conversion and rebirth.<sup>26</sup>

The demand to become who you are or to love oneself also means that, instead of feeling guilt and regret about one’s past self, characterizing slave morality, one should embrace the past and accept and love one’s fate – *amor fati*. In § 276 of *The Gay Science*, when Nietzsche introduces the concept of *amor fati* for the first time, he states: “I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth!”<sup>27</sup> But how can such an approval of fate and necessity be an expression of a “free spirit”, and not subjection to a fatalistic determinism? As Joan Stambaugh has pointed out, Nietzsche distinguishes between what he calls “Turkish fatalism”, in which fate is “something to which man is subjugated and against which he is powerless”, and “Russian fatalism” in which man understands himself as fate. Only Russian fatalism is for Nietzsche an expression of the “highest wisdom” and means living “in a Dionysian relation to existence [which] means to affirm the elements of creation and destruction as inherent in eternal recurrence.” Nietzsche’s conception of fate, in other words, sees freedom and necessity as fully compatible, not unlike the Stoic tradition, but also, as Stambaugh shows, with strong parallels to thinkers such as Spinoza and Schelling.<sup>28</sup>

It is nevertheless not clear how it is possible to *love and affirm* the potentially devastating or destructive elements inherent in the thought of an eternal return. Martin Heidegger comments on the strange fact that the heavy demand is given in a book called *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*: “Where is here the cheerfulness [Fröhlichkeit]?” But he points out that the cheerfulness in question is not “the empty surface of momentary pleasure”, but instead a “cheerfulness of superiority”, a superiority which grows stronger through the affirmation of the necessity of the terrible.<sup>29</sup> This leads us to a discussion of the aesthetic dimension of Nietzsche’s doctrine.

### *Tragedy and sublimity*

In Heidegger’s interpretation of the doctrine of *eternal return*, he points out that the section that follows “Das größte Schwergewicht” in *The Gay Science* is called “Incipit tragoedia” – “tragedy begins”. According to Heidegger, the experience of the tragic belongs to the basis (Grundbestand) of Nietzsche’s thought, and the notion of *eternal return* marks the

beginning of "the tragic era for Europe". But Nietzsche does not think of the tragic like Aristotle, who claimed that the tragic had a cathartic function, implying that the creation of fear and compassion should cause a kind of *moral* purification. The tragic for Nietzsche does indeed not have any consideration for the moral, but rather belongs to the *aesthetic*.<sup>30</sup> This recalls Nietzsche's famous remark in §24 of *Birth of Tragedy*, in which he claimed that "only as an aesthetic phenomenon do existence and the world appear justified."<sup>31</sup>

In Heidegger's reading, the aesthetic meaning of tragedy implies an element of the terrible (*das Furchtbare*), which is seen to have a necessary affiliation with beauty. The tragic-heroic attitude is to affirm this affiliation in a willful act in which suffering is apprehended as pleasure. Heidegger makes a point of this by quoting Nietzsche's *Wille zur Macht*: "Es sind die *heroischen* Geister, welche zu sich selbst in der tragischen Grausamkeit Ja sagen: sie sind hart genug, um das Leiden als *Lust* zu empfinden.' [...] Der tragische Geist 'nimmt die Widersprüche und Fragwürdigkeiten in sich hinein'."<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche's aesthetic interpretation of tragedy, in other words, seems to imply a heroic mixture of suffering and pleasure.

This experience of pleasurable pain is remindful of the aesthetic category of the *sublime*. In Immanuel Kant's famous version, the feeling of the sublime is evoked not only in the presence of the excess of nature, but also when confronted with the moral law. The latter is out of the question for Nietzsche. Rejecting the Kantian idea of universal reason, he professed a much more destructive feeling of excess, in which not only God is excluded as a source of sublimity, but also morality and rationality and even individuality.<sup>33</sup> But how can such an excessive experience be redemptive for the subject at all? What happens to the subject in tragedy?

In *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche understands Greek tragedy in light of the duality of the "Apollonian" and the "Dionysian". Apollo is here described as "the magnificent divine image of the *principium individuationis*, whose gestures and gaze speak to us of all the intense pleasure, wisdom and beauty of 'semblance'." Dionysus, on the other hand, represents the breakdown of this very individuality in ecstatic experience: "Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: all nature's artistic power reveals itself here, amidst shivers of intoxication, to the highest, most blissful satisfaction of the primordial unity."<sup>34</sup> In Attic tragedy, Nietzsche sees these two natural powers of the Dionysian and the Apollonian paired in equal measure.<sup>35</sup> However, in later forms of tragedy, visible in e.g. Euripides, the Apollonian tendency towards individual



characters is seen to dominate over the Dionysian emphasis on the chorus. This development marks a tendency toward *theory* that culminates in Socrates' "tendency to murder art", thereby depriving man of tragedy's "metaphysical solace, without which it is quite impossible to explain our pleasure in tragedy."<sup>36</sup>

The redemptive function of tragedy is, for Nietzsche, connected to the restoration of its Dionysian moment: "Yes, my friends, believe as I do in Dionysiac life and in the rebirth of tragedy. The time of Socratic man is past. [...] you must only dare to be tragic human beings, for you will be released and redeemed."<sup>37</sup> Redemption, in other words, implies a reversal of the *principium individuationis*, something that grants the pleasure of "metaphysical solace".

What is meant by this reference to metaphysical solace? To be sure, there are different opinions on whether Nietzsche should be read as a metaphysician or not. What matters to us here, is to get a grasp on how the tragic notion of *eternal return* captures a redemptive experience of time which differs from the temporality of eschatological or messianic hope.

### *Metaphysical solace and the standstill of time*

In Karl Löwith's reading, the doctrine of eternal return as presented in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* offers a metaphysical perspective that differs from the presentation in *The Gay Science*: in *Zarathustra*, "where eternal recurrence is the basic inspiration of the whole work, it is not presented as a hypothesis, but as a metaphysical truth."<sup>38</sup> This implies that the doctrine is no longer just something to be willed, but a doctrine that aims at reconciling free will and fate – or history and necessity – as Löwith puts it in *Meaning in History*:

To conceive [...] a synthesis of the free will which creates history with universal fate or necessity, the philosopher would have to transcend the all-too-human standpoint and look at things from beyond humanity. It is the standpoint which Nietzsche eventually found in his conception of the superman Zarathustra, "six thousand feet beyond man and time."<sup>39</sup>

What does it mean to transcend the all-to-human standpoint and look at things from beyond humanity and time? Löwith points here to Nietzsche's plans to give *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* the subtitle "Midday and Eternity", where midday is to be understood as "noon-tide, as the supreme instant of fulfilment, the climax and crisis in which the vision

of eternity becomes once and for all decisive." This time of eternal return is, according to Löwith, exceeding human time, exceeding the time of *Dasein* and the "will to power".<sup>40</sup>

This vision of eternity is for Nietzsche a redemptive experience. As Löwith points out, Nietzsche's paradoxical experience of an "eternal instant" is described in *Ecce Homo* in terms of an ecstatic inspiration. This experience takes the form of "a conversion and rebirth to a new 'great healthiness' out of an equally great sickness or despair."

The critical time in which, out of sickness, great health is born, is referred to as "the highest time" in the double sense of despair, when time is running out, and of blessed climax. Preceding the stillness of supreme blessedness is the ghostly stillness of despair. The dialectic of despair and redemption, of depth and height, of darkness and light is finally overcome in an "abyss of light", the time of which is a "standstill of time."<sup>41</sup>

Although sickness or despair here seem to be conditions for redemption, the notion of a "standstill of time" is seen to extinguish not only despair, but also the whole *dialectic* of despair and redemption. This emphasis on the extinction of dialectics, which we find emphasized even more in the readings of Gilles Deleuze,<sup>42</sup> points to an end to eschatological time and the hope to redeem the past by means of a messianic future.

Löwith's reading is not based on any exact reproduction of Nietzsche's text, but extracts and interprets various passages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in particular those preceding and succeeding the section called "Of Redemption". Let us turn to this section in order to gain a more precise idea of what the redemptive experience of eternal return is about.

### Thus Spoke Zarathustra: eternal return *as redemption from a guilty past*

In the section "Of Redemption", Nietzsche's Zarathustra preaches the doctrine of eternal return in a manner similar to Jesus' preaching of the Christian gospel. The words "Thus spoke Zarathustra" – alluding to the biblical "Thus spoke the Lord" – appear regularly throughout the book, and the figure of Zarathustra has disciples and speaks in a prophetic and sometimes cryptic voice. In this section he is even surrounded by

cripples and beggars. One of the cripples, a hunchback, suggests to Zarathustra that he convince the people by healing the cripples, thereby teaching them faith, whereupon Zarathustra answers:

If one takes the hump away from the hunchback, one takes away his spirit – that is what the people teach. And if one gives eyes to the blind man, he sees too many bad things on earth: so that he curses him who cured him. But he who makes the lame man walk does him the greatest harm: for no sooner can he walk than his vices run away with him – that is what the people teach about cripples. And why should Zarathustra not learn from the people, if the people learn from Zarathustra?<sup>43</sup>

Zarathustra thus claims to learn from the wisdom of “the people” in refusing to heal the cripples. To his disciples he goes on to complain about something worse than cripples; what he calls “inverse cripples” (*umgekehrte Krüppel*): those who lack everything except one thing, of which they have too much – an ear or a mouth or perhaps a stomach. Although often judged by others to be a great human or a genius, Zarathustra sees in these inverse cripples something “pitifully small”, often filled with envy or arrogance.

This terrible spectacle – of cripples and inverse cripples – belongs for Zarathustra both to the *present* and the *past*, which is filled with “fragments and limbs and dreadful chances – but no men.” The only reason why all this is bearable for Zarathustra is because he is also a *seer* looking into the *future*: “A seer, a willer, a creator, a future itself and a bridge to the future – and alas, also like a cripple upon this bridge: Zarathustra is all this.”<sup>44</sup> Although Zarathustra does not exclude himself from the assembly of cripples, he also emphasizes his ability to (poetically) *invent*, which is crucial for the redemption from the “*grauser Zufall*” of the past:

And it is all my art and aim [*Dichten und Trachten*] to compose into one thing and bring together what is fragment and riddle and dreadful chance. And how could I endure to be a man, if man were not also poet and reader of riddles and the redeemer of chance! To redeem the past and to transform every “It was” into “I wanted it thus!” – that alone do I call redemption!<sup>45</sup>

Redemption is in other words understood as the aesthetic – or poetic – act of changing every “it was” into “I wanted it thus”. Interestingly, this

poetic act not only redeems the will from its incapacity to change the past, but it also redeems the will from itself. For whereas Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* presented the doctrine of *eternal recurrence* as a demand for the will, the will is now also problematized, as captive: "Will – that is what the liberator and bringer of joy is called: thus I have taught you, my friends! But now learn this as well: The will itself is still a prisoner."<sup>46</sup> It is captive precisely because it is powerless against the past – it "cannot will backwards". This impossibility of undoing the past tends to evoke the spirit of *revenge*, Zarathustra proclaims, which hypocritically is called punishment in order to preserve good conscience. But such attempts of redemption through atonement are futile, as Nietzsche's personified figure of madness proclaims: "Can there be redemption when there is eternal justice? Alas, the stone 'It was' cannot be rolled away: all punishments, too, must be eternal!"<sup>47</sup>

But if it is impossible to be redeemed from guilt through punishment, how is then redemption from will's captivity possible? As Joan Stambaugh has remarked, Nietzsche "does not speak of redemption from *time*, but rather of redemption from *revenge*," and points out that "[t]he instinct of revenge looks for a ground, a reason for its suffering."<sup>48</sup> The meaning of redemption thus seems to imply a change in our attitude towards our suffering, which for Nietzsche is only possible by radically transforming the will, by becoming what Zarathustra calls a *creative will* ("schaffender Wille"): "'The will is a creator.' All 'It was' is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful chance – until the creative will says to it: 'But I willed it thus!' Until the creative will says to it: 'But I will it thus! Thus shall I will it!'"<sup>49</sup>

The creative will thus redeems the subject from the feeling that things should be undone, and thereby also from the feelings of sin and guilt. Instead of clinging to the hope of a future that saves us from a guilty past, Nietzsche attempts to secure the innocence of the subject by redefining the past, the present and the future by means of a creative will. This is also in line with what Nietzsche wrote in a note from 1882-83: "I have always striven to prove to myself the innocence of Becoming [Unschuld des Werdens]; and probably what I thereby wanted to achieve was the feeling of complete unaccountability – to make myself independent of all praise and blame."<sup>50</sup>

In Stambaugh's reading, "the innocence of becoming means that there is no unchanging being beyond or outside the world of becoming; and thus becoming is 'guilty' of, is *lacking*, nothing."<sup>51</sup> Becoming is hence not to be conceived in relation to some teleological goal, but rather has the structure of *play* – something that is characteristic to

the artist, but also to the child: "In play, the child is free to create the new because it is unfettered by the past and not enthralled with the future. It plays in the magic of the present."<sup>52</sup> The innocence of becoming thus not only implies a redemption *from* the guilty past and the spirit of revenge; the absence of guilt also redeems us *to* something new: the freedom to create.

### *Nietzsche's countergospel*

The sharp contrast to Christian notions of guilt, forgiveness and hope is at first sight striking. In Löwith's reading, the notion of eternal return is the principle of the "Umwertung aller Werte",<sup>53</sup> not only because it redeems us from the guilty past, but also because it challenges the whole Christian eschatological scheme:

And just as the *Will to Power* has as its critical motive and aim the transvaluation of all Christian values (The *Antichrist* being the first book of the *Will to Power*), so *Zarathustra* is the most elaborate countergospel to the Christian gospel and its theological presuppositions, for the doctrine of Eternal Recurrence counteracts the doctrine of creation with all its moral consequences.<sup>54</sup>

Instead of regarding man as a *creature* waiting to be redeemed in the future, characterized by hopes of the "Hinterweltler", man is thus regarded as a *creator* of an aesthetic or poetic redemption here and now. And instead of the notions of sin and guilt, presumably stemming from resentment and envy, Nietzsche professes an embracement of *life* and *world*. These radical transvaluations notwithstanding, several readers have pointed to the fact that Nietzsche in his effort to combat Christianity preserves some essential characteristics of this very faith itself, as Löwith also remarks in *Meaning in History*:

Nietzsche did not realize, however, that his own *contra Christianos* was an exact replica in reverse of the *contra gentiles* of the Church Fathers. [...] Thus *Zarathustra* is from cover to cover a countergospel in style as well as in content. Far remote from being genuinely pagan, Nietzsche's neo-paganism is [...] essentially Christian, by being anti-Christian.<sup>55</sup>

Löwith's scepticism towards the *gospel*-character of Nietzsche's work has to do with its presumed inability to escape the modern eschatological

scheme: "[T]hough he intended to revert modern man to the ancient values of classical paganism, he was so thoroughly Christian and modern, that only one thing preoccupied him: the thought of the *future* and the *will* to create it."<sup>56</sup> To be sure, Nietzsche is striving for a new meaning of transcendence. In Stambaugh's reading, transcendence is no longer based on something beyond us, but rather on man's activity or self-transcendence. This means that he opposes the spirit of revenge that "stems from *wishing* that things were otherwise" to the "*willing* that they *become* otherwise."<sup>57</sup> Nietzsche wanted, in other words, to criticize a passive notion of religious hope to the benefit of a more active and creative attitude. At the same time, Stambaugh also emphasizes the strong *mystical* element in Nietzsche's thought, and claims that "[i]n some sense, the whole distinction of passivity-activity needs to be rethought."<sup>58</sup>

The distinction between activity and passivity may also be questioned in light of Nietzsche's descriptions of the subject and its relation to the world. On the one hand, Nietzsche is often harsh in his polemical attack on both "world-denying" Christianity and on what he finds to be a similar pessimism in Schopenhauer's ascetic attitude.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, Nietzsche's affirmation of life is not just the opposite of asceticism, but seems to imply another kind of asceticism, perhaps even stronger than the Christian one, visible in a certain aristocratic withdrawal from the herd. As Ted Sadler has pointed out, this attitude means a redemption from what is normally taken as world, even to the point of a certain melancholy or homelessness.<sup>60</sup> This philosophical asceticism presupposes a solitary subject, but this subject is in Sadler's reading also open to a certain *mystical* experience:

"My whole *Zarathustra*", Nietzsche tells us in *Ecce Homo*, "is a dithyramb on solitude, or, if I have been understood, on *cleanliness*." The instinct for cleanliness drives the Nietzschean philosopher further and further into solitude, but into the kind of solitude which is also a "mystical sensation of unity": solitude as purification and cleansing, as obedience to the "divine element" in man.<sup>61</sup>

These reflections on solitude point to a certain asceticism in terms of a self-overcoming of the spiritual lower orders, which, after all, is not so different in *form* from the Jewish-Christian notion of conversion from sin and guilt.<sup>62</sup> If we go more into the critique of Nietzsche and his

interpreters from the point of view of a modern Jewish tradition, however, we may get a better grasp of how the notion of *eternal return* may be read as expression of an *aesthetical* redemption that radically differs from a *messianic* notion of hope and redemption.

### *Messianism and myth*

Let us return to the claim that one of the characteristics of modern Jewish thought is a discussion with Greek tragedy, understood in terms of a discussion between different religious principles or sensibilities: “the tragic vision of the eternal return of the same” and “the messianic vision of the Exodus from the circle of nature, which offers the individual a chance to ‘get out’ [...] to *individuate*.”<sup>63</sup>

As we saw, the question of individuation was already emphasized in Nietzsche’s appreciation of solitude. But this solitude was then again entangled with a Dionysian de-individualizing unity with the primal One. In contrast, many of these messianic thinkers would seek to prevent such a return to unity, and instead maintain the possibility of an exodus from the sameness and repetition which in their eyes characterizes modernity conceived as *myth*, as is visible in e.g. the analyses of Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer.<sup>64</sup> The question is to what degree such an exodus is really possible. An interesting common feature among modern Jewish thinkers is that Nietzsche’s nihilist starting position is not entirely rejected, but rather re-interpreted in a way that also offers resources for a radical re-thinking of the notion of hope.

An example of this ambiguous relation to Nietzsche’s insights may be found in Walter Benjamin, who, despite his critique of mythical thinking, would not entirely reject the value of tragedy. Bielik-Robson points to how Benjamin in *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* at first distances himself from Nietzsche’s “aestheticization of tragedy, which pushes tragedy back into the world of myth and away from the world of history.”<sup>65</sup> Benjamin here criticizes „Der Abgrund des Ästhetizismus“ implicit in Nietzsche’s claim that „nur als ästhetisches Phänomen ist das Dasein und die Welt ewig gerechtfertigt.“<sup>66</sup> However, Bielik-Robson also notices that Benjamin does not regard the tragic as *overcome* by the messianic, but rather “inscribes the messianic *into* the tragic”<sup>67</sup> – in terms of a messianicity that is not a revelation, not intentional, but a “cry of protest”:

Greek tragedy would then represent messianicity in its most original form, yet uncontaminated by a manifest idiom of revelation. I deliberately use here Derrida's term "messianicity" to underscore the pre-revealed, non-specific and non-intentional character of this primordial "cry of protest" against the forces of the demonic, which lies at the bottom of Benjamin's tragic Gnosis.<sup>68</sup>

What kind of hope results from this kind of messianicity? How is it possible to conceive of hope before any theology of revelation? Bielik-Robson here draws parallels between Benjamin and the "creaturely theology" we may detect in Gershom Scholem and particularly in Eric L. Santner: "Not strictly opposed, although also not completely non-agonistic towards the divine theology, the creaturely (psycho)theology creates its own language of revelation. It is a revelation that does not come from above but raises from below."<sup>69</sup> But what makes such a creaturely theology "from below" different from Nietzsche's embracement of life and the world?

I believe the crucial difference has to do with the relation between aesthetics and dialectics or difference. According to Gilles Deleuze, Nietzsche did not develop the tension between the primitive unity of Dionysus and the individuation of Apollo as a dialectician, although the contradictions and resolutions of this scheme make Nietzsche later remark that the *Birth of Tragedy* "smells offensively Hegelian."<sup>70</sup> "Marrano-Jewish" thinkers – such as Derrida, Benjamin, Adorno and Horkheimer – are for their part not against aesthetics, but their aesthetical approaches are all marked by some kind of messianic difference or dialectics, preventing our view of reality from being too consoling. This implies a different relationship to the past, in which suffering is not repressed in a poetic act, but rather maintained in a messianic difference or dialectics.

The aesthetical approaches of the messianic thinkers can thus not be seen apart from their ethical concern to avoid the reduction of suffering to something meaningful. As Bielik-Robson points out, however, the messianic impulse is not primarily a matter of *vision*, but a matter of *action*. In this regard, she contrasts messianism with mysticism: "The rule of the mystic is 'If we could only *see* better ...' – whereas the rule of the messianic is always 'If we could only *do* better ...'."<sup>71</sup> She is aware, however, that the price of following this messianic impulse can be high:

Suspicion, vigilance, anxiety, incertitude – all these costly affects are the necessary price the individual life must be ready to pay for its



right to dream and then act on the grounds of the messianic hope to get out, to live a better, happier, freer, truly singular life. The moment this “price of messianism” (as Taubes called it) is felt to be too high, the singular living immediately loses hope: gives in to nostalgia and a secure sense of belonging to a re-mythicized totality, which it sublimates by a recaptured notion of “mystery”.<sup>72</sup>

Messianic hope is, in other words, a fragile thing; it easily turns into disappointment and melancholy. But without this messianic impulse, without the dialectical responsibility it entails, we may, according to this tradition, also risk sinking into an aestheticized and potentially irresponsible attitude towards reality – which certain interpretations of Nietzsche’s notion of *eternal return* also seem to justify. Instead of seeking to *poetically* overcome what Taubes described as a “dualism between the ideal standard and the status quo of man’s situation”, and instead of willing the past and embracing its suffering as pleasure, it is here a matter of maintaining a sort of *ethical* difference or dialectics that preserves the memory of the suffering of the past.

Theological hope would then be more than an illusion which helps us to endure life, as the Pandora myth taught the Greeks, but also less than the apocalyptic and potentially irresponsible hope of a new heaven and a new earth. Instead of linking theological hope to the discourse of progress, as Löwith would argue, most of these messianic thinkers would rather attend to the past, and thus come close to what Jayne Svenungsson has described as a restorative messianic tradition of Judaism, in which a recurrent theme is a “dialectic of memory and hope.”<sup>73</sup> This implies an ethical attention to the suffering of the past, as well as the hope of a messianic exodus from what is conceived as the mythicized totality of an eternal return.

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## Notes

1. Taubes, *From Cult to Culture*, 178.
2. Assmann, *Of God and Gods*, 122.
3. For a lucid presentation of different ways of understanding messianic hope, see Jayne Svenungsson's book *Divining History*.
4. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 204.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 60.
8. *Ibid.*, 189. As Jayne Svenungsson has convincingly argued, Löwith's analysis of the connection between eschatological hope and totalitarian politics relies on a selective and problematic reading of the Jewish-Christian tradition which leads him to over-emphasize the apocalyptic tendencies and hence not recognize the restorative and deeply ethical grain of this tradition, in which man is not only a passive receiver of salvation, but co-responsible for the realization of justice in history. (*Divining History*)
9. Löwith, "Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence," 274.
10. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [D 10,3], 119.
11. Taubes, *Political Theology of Paul*, 76–88. See also the chapter "The Justification of Ugliness in Early Christian Tradition" in: Taubes, *From Cult to Culture*, 76–97, as well as the recent reading of these texts in Løland: *Pauline Ugliness*.
12. The concept "Marrano theology" here alludes to the experience of a group of Spanish Sephardic Jews who, during the inquisition, were forced to convert to Christianity, but preserved their Jewish faith in secret, and Bielik-Robson here goes into the secret or undercover Judaism of thinkers such as Benjamin, Derrida and Adorno and Horkheimer, among several others. (*Jewish Cryptotheologies*)
13. Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Cryptotheologies*, 41–42.
14. Although Nietzsche himself claimed this doctrine to be his most important discovery, Paul S. Loeb remarks that "even Nietzsche's admirers have conceded that his emphasis on the complete qualitative identity of eternal recurrence renders his idea insupportable, insignificant, and incoherent." ("Identity and Eternal Recurrence," 171)
15. I will thus neither attempt to draw any systematic theological consequences of this analysis. For an excellent discussion of how Nietzsche's ideas are crucial in a conception of modernity as a crisis for theology, and how this conception still appears as an inevitable condition of the possibility of doing theology, see the recent dissertation of Sjöberg, *En annan Abraham*.
16. Sadler, *Nietzsche: Truth and Redemption*, 148.
17. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 273.
18. *Ibid.*, 274.
19. Kaufmann, "Translator's Introduction," 17–18.
20. Heidegger, *Nietzsches metaphysische Grundstellung*, 20.
21. Anna Sjöberg discusses the relation between Nietzsche's active and passive nihilism thoroughly in *En annan Abraham*, 55–99.
22. Löwith, "Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence," 276.
23. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 283–285
24. *Ibid.*, 289–290.
25. *Ibid.*, 219.
26. Löwith, *Nietzsche: Wiederkehr des Gleichen*, 127.
27. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 223.

28. Stambaugh, *The Other Nietzsche*, 75–86.
29. Heidegger, *Nietzsches metaphysische Grundstellung*, 19.
30. *Ibid.*, 27–29.
31. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 113.
32. Heidegger, *Nietzsches metaphysische Grundstellung*, 29–30. It is here worth noting that *Will to Power* was not a text published by Nietzsche himself, but was composed of his “Nachlass” under the influence of his sister Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche. For a discussion of what this means for the status of this work, see the introduction to Nietzsche’s later writings in *The Nietzsche Reader*, 305–308.
33. As Karl Ameriks has pointed to, Nietzsche’s position is defined by “tragic wisdom”, which is seen as “the conviction that there are fundamental limits to the capacity of human reason and to any teleological framework that presupposes the ultimate satisfaction of reason.” (*Kant’s Elliptical Path*, 305)
34. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 17–18.
35. *Ibid.*, 14.
36. *Ibid.*, 83–84.
37. *Ibid.*, 98.
38. Löwith, “Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence,” 276–277.
39. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 215.
40. Löwith, “Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence,” 277–278. In his book on the doctrine, Löwith is more explicit in his critique of Heidegger’s interpretation of the noon-tide: “Wer jedoch liest, was Nietzsche über den Mittag sagt, kann nur darüber staunen, was Heidegger an Nichtgesagtem und Nichtgemeintem herausliest.[...] Als eine ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen kommt sie [die Ewigkeit] in Heideggers Auslegung nur noch darin zum Vorschein, dass sie der Wille zur Macht, von dem aus er die Wiederkehrlehre einseitig interpretiert, den beständigen Bestand seiner selbst für ein ‘möglichst gleichförmiges und gleichmässiges’ Wollen sichere.” (*Nietzsche: Wiederkehr des Gleichen*, 224)
41. Löwith, “Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence,” 277–278.
42. In his book *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Gilles Deleuze presents Nietzsche precisely as an anti-dialectical thinker, who, instead of dialectics, emphasizes a notion of difference that is affirmed in itself and not in opposition to what it is not: “Nietzsche’s ‘yes’ is opposed to the dialectical ‘no’; affirmation to dialectical negation; difference to dialectical contradiction; joy, enjoyment, to dialectical labour; lightness, dance, to dialectical responsibilities.” (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 9)
43. Pearson and Large, *The Nietzsche Reader*, 274.
44. *Ibid.*, 275.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*, 276.
48. Stambaugh, *The Other Nietzsche*, 53–54.
49. Pearson and Large, *The Nietzsche Reader*, 276.
50. Quoted in Sadler, *Nietzsche: Truth and Redemption*, 135.
51. Stambaugh, *The Other Nietzsche*, 98.
52. *Ibid.*, 103, 117.
53. Löwith, *Nietzsche: Wiederkehr des Gleichen*, 64: „Der Grundgedanke des Zarathustra – die ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen – ist bereits das Prinzip der Umwertung aller Werte, weil er den Nihilismus umkehrt.
54. Löwith, “Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence,” 280.

55. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 220. See also Ted Sadler's discussions of the structural parallels between Nietzsche's path to redemption and the Christian one in *Nietzsche: Truth and redemption*, 6–8.
56. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 221.
57. Stambaugh, *The Other Nietzsche*, 4–8.
58. *Ibid.*, 133, see also 135–151.
59. The attack on both Christianity's and Schopenhauer's asceticism is exemplified in e.g. § 346 of *The Gay Science*.
60. Sadler, *Nietzsche: Truth and Redemption*, 159. He writes: "The detachment or 'homelessness' of the philosopher is one of the most constantly recurring themes in Nietzsche's writings. By contrast, it is precisely the spiritual plebe who Nietzsche portrays as clinging to the 'things of this world', who is so very interested in the business of this world, who is so utterly at home and secure within it."
61. *Ibid.*, 173.
62. *Ibid.*, 171–172.
63. Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Cryptotheologies*, 41–42.
64. The relation between modernity and myth is particularly emphasized in *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, in which Adorno and Horkheimer claim that the Enlightenment's attempt to overcome mythical thinking and replace it with rational thinking has failed and led to an even deeper involvement with myth. This failure is visible in the dominance of instrumental reason, in which singularity and individuality get lost. Enlightenment's hope of an exodus or exit – which literally comes to expression in Kant's description of Enlightenment as an "Ausgang" – is in their eyes turned into a disappointment and hopelessness even more devastating than the boredom of myth. (*Dialektik der Aufklärung*)
65. Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Cryptotheologies*, 87.
66. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, 281
67. Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Cryptotheologies*, 84.
68. *Ibid.*, 90.
69. *Ibid.*, 100.
70. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 11.
71. Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Cryptotheologies*, 272–273.
72. *Ibid.*, 312–313.
73. Svenungsson, *Divining History*, 6, 16, 168.

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