



After Nietzsche: Notes towards a philosophy of ecstasy

By Jill Marsden

Palgrave Macmillan, 2002

Reviewed by Christopher Branson, University of Warwick – Humboldt Universität zu Berlin

Nietzsche's thought of eternal recurrence is at once immediate and maddeningly distant. In almost any one of its presentations it strikes the reader as though the demon were there with him. 'Here is something,' one feels: mysterious, enormous, tempting, dangerous. And yet the task of interpreting it is of great difficulty. Anyone who has discussed this thought in an undergraduate seminar knows just how quickly the sensation of deep insight can be lost through pithy extrapolation. The problem seems to be that of capturing the scale of the thought, of attempting to locate just why Nietzsche wrote of it with such gravitas. Perhaps we are guilty of assuming that our felt sympathy towards the thought automatically qualifies us to conceptualize it. As Jill Marsden writes in the preface to her inspiring book, *After Nietzsche*, "Eternal return is above all else a thought of the supreme affirmation of life but what it actually means to affirm life is highly questionable, a phrase too easily uttered and then abandoned unthought" (xiii).

Nietzsche himself warns us that we must take the thought in the correct spirit if we are to know the true weight of it. When Zarathustra experiences his vision of eternal return,

finding himself at the gateway called ‘Moment,’ his arch-enemy, the dwarf-spirit of gravity, makes a mockery of the thought by reducing it to a safe, empty cognition:

‘All that is straight lies,’ murmured the dwarf contemptuously. ‘All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle.’
 ‘You Spirit of Heaviness’ I said angrily. ‘Do not make it too light and easy for yourself!’ (Z:3 ‘On the Vision and the Riddle’)

It is a peculiar mode of thought that resists our cognitive powers and depends instead on something more akin to a musical sensibility—the ability to hear the ‘tone,’ or ‘pitch’ of the thought. This is a queer type of knowledge, paradoxically emerging at the eclipse of our reflective faculties. Marsden’s claim is that such an experience of sensitive knowing entails ‘ec-stasis’ or the exceeding of the self, of passing beyond the form of identity given by the ‘I,’ and thus that ecstasy “is the necessary condition for thinking eternal return” (xi). It is only in the throes of rapture, she writes, that one can feel equal to the demonic call for supreme affirmation: “Amid the dazzlement of erotic love, of sublime entrancement, of visionary and hallucinatory bedazzlement, there is a joy that wills itself so intensely that *it wants itself more and again*” (8).

Whilst the thought of eternal recurrence is perhaps the inspiration behind this book—and an elucidation of the thought is certainly one of its goals—it is not its overarching theme. As the subtitle suggests, Jill Marsden is primarily concerned with developing a philosophy of ecstasy, of investigating what we can learn from the experience of rapture. This is not a phenomenological or descriptive project, however, which would render ecstatic joy an object of knowledge. Rather, it is to pursue the type of thought *generated* by experiences of transfiguration. This, Marsden argues, is one of the unique tasks provided to us by Nietzsche’s philosophy in the wake of the death of God. This event—the collapse of our belief in the principle of identity—brings with it a new trajectory for philosophy. This is to communicate with that which had previously been banished from thought, the realm of experience lying beyond the fictional ‘conditions of possibility’ that the human animal has fabricated and progressively incorporated. This

cannot involve the mere broadening of the thought of the same to include such extreme states, but necessitates a radical turn in our interpretation of what ‘thinking’ entails. Conceptual thinking “will of necessity inhibit any genuine contact with alterity, for specific difference will always be mediated by representation within a concept of identity” (4).

The question is, then, how one is to describe thoughts which reach beyond what is generally taken to be “knowledge.” Jill Marsden’s response is to pursue philosophy as aesthetics, as a science of sensitive knowing, which is taken not to be “a region of philosophy delimited from supposedly non-sensual areas of thought” (31). She argues that the notion of thought as *affective* is developed by Nietzsche all the way from *The Birth of Tragedy* right through to his later works. By ignoring the unfortunate metaphysical vocabulary that he borrows from Schopenhauer in his early work, Marsden reinterprets Nietzsche’s development of Apollinian and Dionysian forces, along with the relationship between philosophy and art, in terms of a “Physiology of Art.” This was the prospective title Nietzsche gave to a series of notes on art and *physis* in the 1880s, which connected his later concerns of embodiment and incorporation with the Apollinian and Dionysian, which are here referred to as “fundamental types”.¹ The relationship between the body and aesthetic experience on the one hand, and the body and knowledge on the other, drives Marsden’s thought.

Whilst Nietzsche’s thought of eternal return may be described as the caesura of Marsden’s philosophy of ecstasy, marking the birth of new adventures in thought, the problems that it seeks to re-think invariably arise in Kant. Indeed, the Kantian concept of the self haunts this book, representing in its multifarious implications the intellectual errors that a philosophy of ecstasy seeks to overcome. Marsden approvingly cites Deleuze’s argument that Nietzsche’s development of the concept of genealogy can be understood as the culmination of the critical project (15-16). Whilst Kant’s conditions of

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *KSA* 13: 17[9], translated by Jill Marsden, *After Nietzsche*, 191n2. Many of the notes on the ‘physiology of art’ are collected in *The Will to Power*, Ch.IV, ‘The Will to Power as Art’ (794-893).

thought always remained external to the conditioned, Nietzsche's critique of the *value* of values represents an *internal* critique, a concern with the creation of values such as knowledge and truth. In other words, Kant failed to apply his own dictum—that the 'in-itself' is unknowable—to our value judgements. It was through his concern with the genesis of values that Nietzsche's thought was led ultimately to the body as the site of this genesis and the material condition of thought.

In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche presents an account of the development of identity-based 'knowledge' in evolutionary terms. "Over immense periods of time," he writes, "the intellect produced nothing but errors. A few of these proved to be useful and helped preserve the species" (*GS* 110). These errors, such as the notions that there are enduring things, substances and bodies, and that a thing is what it appears to be, proved to be of use in the practical life of the organism, servicing its basic needs of survival, and were thus continually inherited down the generations. It is in this sense that Nietzsche defines the *strength* of knowledge: "[it] does not depend on its degree of truth but on its age, on the degree to which it has been incorporated, on its character as a condition of life" (*ibid.*). The power of knowledge is given by the degree to which it has become instinctive for the organism. The Kantian notion of the self can be understood as the condensation of these errors. This is to relativize the result of Kant's ingenious transcendental deduction: that the unity of the self and the perceived objectivity of the world are in a reciprocal relationship of determination. By understanding this quasi-stable "Self" as the product of a genesis through the incorporation of errors by the body, however, one is able to distinguish between the self, which is given for thought, and the body, which is not. As Marsden puts it:

[I]t is questionable whether the conditions under which 'representations' can relate to 'objects' are themselves invariant. If becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself, the body 'as such' is not to be regarded as a given. If the body is as much a constellation of the rhythm of things as the items in the perceptual horizon, then its status as a form of the same is as illusory as the things it surveys. (25)

Thus, the possibility of thinking beyond the form of the same seems to rely on our ability to perceive beyond the self, by attending to the affective experience of the body.

Curiously, one way in which we may begin to pursue this idea is provided by Kant himself in his writings on aesthetic experience. In perhaps the most exhilarating chapter of her book, Jill Marsden traces the Kantian concept of ‘disinterestedness’ in aesthetic experience, through Schopenhauer’s anti-humanist interpretation, to its revaluation in the Nietzschean ideas of Apollinian and Dionysian rapture (Ch.3: ‘A Feeling of Life, 47-72). What marks the experience of beauty from desire-based satisfactions is that the pleasure it gives us is “useless, gratuitous and literally good for nothing” (50).² That Kant attempts to align beauty not only with embodiment, but also with the Ideas of reason, and thus wants to give it an inspirational role in the supersensible vocation of moral goodness, should not deter us from the conclusion that beauty is itself purposeless: “[I]f beauty is a humanising power it must sustain the rift in order to bridge it” (ibid.).

The key insight with regard to aesthetic experience is of the *form* of judgement it involves. Insofar as it is without purpose, it is disinterested, removed from the self:

To say that such a judgement is ‘free’ from interest means that I cannot choose whether to have a liking for beauty, it chooses me, *it compels me*. In a curious sense aesthetic judgement is *of me* (is grounded in sensations of pleasure and pain) without being obviously peculiar to me (‘interested’). (54)

It is through philosophy pursued as aesthetics that the inhuman or ecstatic form of thought emerges. A normal, ‘interested’ judgement is referred to the presentation of an object’s existence. In his transcendental deduction, Kant suggests that this knowledge of the object is the result of three transcendental syntheses of presentations by the imagination: the synthesis of sense impressions into a single manifold; the reproduction of past impressions in a present manifold; and the recognition of past and present

² The notion of the purposeless expenditure of energy plays an important role in Marsden’s philosophy of ecstasy, being associated with active forces in general (the need for life to squander in its self-overcoming, see 17-18) and sacred experience in particular (125-127).

representations as connected. What is unique about the representations of aesthetic experience is that they reproduce themselves without any acts of the imagination (54-5). “We linger in our contemplation of the beautiful, because this contemplation strengthens and reproduces itself.”³ Intentionality is in thrall when we are captivated by the beautiful.

Whilst Kant describes interested engagement with an object as the product of desire, meaning that it is empirical, pure disinterested contemplation is transcendental in nature and hence ‘free’ of reality (51-2). This is because contemplation of beauty entails making a ‘reflective judgement.’ Kant defines judgement in general as “the ability to think the particular as contained in the universal.”⁴ Since the universal, or rule, is not given in the experience of the purposeless artwork, the judgement made is a *reflection* on the particular, and is not determined from without. This reflection is referred by Kant to the question of *how* the subject feels itself affected by the presentation, which he calls a ‘feeling of life’ [*Lebensgefühl*].⁵ It is this aspect of ‘disinterested’ experience that Marsden finds crucial to Nietzsche’s project:

It is particularly significant that Kant should propose that representations be referred to this *Lebensgefühl* because this implies that aesthetic judgement always entails an *evaluation* of life—a consideration of its pains and pleasures. Pleasure is aligned with a sense of life enhancement (‘the furtherance of life’) whereas displeasure signifies a sense of its inhibition or restriction. (52)

Marsden compares Kant’s description of the beautiful with Apollinian rapture, in terms of the way the intuition of the flow of time (given by the syntheses of the imagination) is stalled and intensified (55).⁶ It is in her alignment of Kant’s analysis of the sublime with Dionysian pathos, however, that she suggests a link between ‘disinterested’ experience and the supreme affirmation of eternal return. Unlike the experience of the beautiful,

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, translated by W.S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987): 68.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*: 18-19.

⁵ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*: 44.

⁶ For Marsden’s excellent discussion of Apollinian rapture and its relation to the Dionysian, see 30-47.

where the subject is rapt in an ‘inhuman’ perception of form, the sublime experience involves the confrontation with that which cannot be rendered harmonious. This involves a far more ambiguous ‘feeling of life’ than the straightforward response of pleasure before beauty. Pleasure in the face of the sublime arises only indirectly from the momentary inhibition of the vital forces, followed by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger (56). In other words, in the experience of the sublime pleasure and pain engage in a dynamic of perpetual overcoming, which leads Marsden to the conclusion that, in spite of Kant’s attempt to reel in the destructive power of the sublime, where it would only inspire in us a transcendental purposiveness, a darker thought might have been sewed. “Maybe beauty only emerges as a supremely *pure* and *idealizing* power when re-energised by the Sodom of ‘our’ destitution and despair” (ibid.).

The revaluation of suffering is central to Nietzsche’s critique of values, but its relation to the concept of affirmation is not always given due thought by commentators. It is a truism to say that if we wish to affirm life, and life contains suffering, then we must affirm suffering too. In Marsden’s interpretation of affirmation, where affirmation is not given by cognition but by the lived flourishing of active (i.e. vital) forces, suffering plays an essential, constitutive role in this flourishing. And if affirmation is accompanied by the feeling of joy in the organism, then the affirmation of life *per se*, as opposed to human life, would come with an unbounded pleasure, the ceaseless augmentation of pleasure by its antagonism with pain, and thus a constant overcoming. For Marsden, the most powerful experience of this exquisite paroxysm of joy in pain is given in Apollinian rapture. In Ch.2, ‘The Tempo of Becoming’ (24-46), she argues that, whilst the self-differentiating power of the Dionysian is the more fundamental force, since “the difference between Apollinian and Dionysian *ecstasy* is already thought *within* the Dionysian” (42), it is in Apollinian ecstasy that the vital energy inherent in both is concentrated and contracted, forming an eternalised image of this activity. With regard to the antagonism of pleasure and pain, she writes of the “secret violence” of Apollinian rapture:

It attenuates the moment, retards the feeling of space and time, stalls the orgasm of Dionysian frenzy, *refuses to let go*. This is not the conservative activity of the functional body, eternally sheltered against desires which would delight to death. It is a far more subtle yet highly charged knowledge, an eroticism which palpably 'knows' its bounds, presses tantalizingly up against its carefully retained limits. (72)

If I find a flaw in Jill Marsden's reading of Nietzsche, it is precisely in the privileging of ecstasy as the site of affirmation. It strikes one as akin to remarking that it was only in their orgiastic frenzy that the Greeks loved life. Nietzsche describes the "craving for the ugly" of the best Greeks as an example of "neuroses of health" (*BT* 'Attempt at a Self-Criticism,' 4). If affirmation is to be given a physiological sense, in the sense of the active flourishing of life, then I believe that it should not be reduced to the extreme moments in the individual in which the Self is overcome in ecstasy. It should also, I believe, have a historical and communal dimension that refers to the flourishing of a people: "the youth and youthfulness of a people" (*ibid.*). It is in this broader sense of affirmation that the "weight" of the thought of supreme affirmation is revealed.

From his first sketch of eternal recurrence, Nietzsche associated the thought with specific tasks, perhaps the central one of which pertains to knowledge, and more specifically, the incorporation of truth.⁷ In section 110 of *The Gay Science* (the first part of which, concerned with the emergence and incorporation of the errors of knowledge, we discussed above), Nietzsche writes that it was only very late in the development of the organism that truth emerged, as a different form of knowledge to that which had previously been experienced. He writes that "the ultimate question about the conditions of life" has now been posed: "To what extent can truth endure incorporation? That is the question; that is the experiment" (*GS* 110). In a rich and instructive discussion of this thought, Keith Ansell Pearson argues that 'truth,' obviously a problematical term for Nietzsche, should here be understood in two senses. On the one hand, truth should be taken to mean the practices of truthfulness, such as "doubt, suspicion, critical distance,

⁷ See *KSA* 9: 11[141], translated by Keith Ansell Pearson in 'The Eternal Return of the Overhuman: The Weightiest Knowledge and the Abyss of Light,' the *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Issue 30 (2005): 2-3.

subjecting all things to scrutiny, and so on”.⁸ On the other hand, it refers to the ultimate “truth” which Nietzsche understands modern science as entropically indicating. This is “the knowledge that all things are implicated in a perpetual and eternal flux [...that] we are not what we take ourselves to be *either* as moral agents *or* as thinking subjects”.⁹

The specific historical event that we find ourselves living through is that of the death of God. Jill Marsden is right to point out that this collapse in our faith of “the eternally transcendent One” does not announce “a new beginning or starting point for thinking but a *return*” (7). We do not start again from nothing. God *is* dead, but his shadow is still shown in the caves of men. The will to truth, the critical drive which has undermined the form of identity, is still to be pursued to its limit. Whilst in our moments of rapture, be they erotic, aesthetic or religious, we may experience a joy so great that we will it again, the lightness of these moments casts the rest of our lives in shadow. This is the flipside of the thought of eternal recurrence, the great weight of its challenge. Whilst the ‘Self,’ in all of its reactive evaluations, persists in us, the thought that there is no redemption still carries the power to crush. *Who* can bear this thought? Perhaps a people yet to come. The incorporation of truth is the transformative task Nietzsche designates for those who will to bear it. And for this task we must also acquire a passion for the knowledge we wish to incorporate, which means to pursue knowledge as an experiment in gay science.

If, in spite of our best endeavours to appear good Nietzscheans, we are sometimes horrified that there is no redemption, that the universe is without purpose, then this indicates that we are still some way from acquiring the great health that wills the ugly and terrible, that sees beauty in horror. Nietzsche writes of his will to such health: “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” (GS 276). With this thought he introduces Book Four of *The Gay Science*, which culminates in the thought of eternal return and the

⁸ Keith Ansell Pearson, ‘The Eternal Return of the Overhuman: The Weightiest Knowledge and the Abyss of Light,’ the *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Issue 30 (2005): 7.

⁹ Keith Ansell Pearson, *ibid.*

introduction of the figure of Zarathustra. The development of an aesthetic taste for necessity (“*Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth” (ibid.)) is thus deeply bound up with the thought of affirmation. Nietzsche tells us that the changing of a taste is dependent on the development of new habits, which may then be experienced as needs (GS 39). And, as we know, our habits are deeply connected with knowledge. To repeat, the *strength* of knowledge depends “on the degree to which it has been incorporated, on its character as a condition of life” (GS 110).

Thus we come to an understanding of why affirmation is to be pursued through *Wissenschaft*, and the incorporation of “truth” in particular. By teaching ourselves the truths of life, we may come to develop a taste for this naturalised understanding, and eventually a love of fate and necessity. Nietzsche emphasises that love always has to be learned. He describes this in terms of the development of appreciation of a strange form of music. First we must learn to detect and distinguish the elements of a melody. This requires the good will and the exertion to tolerate it in spite of its strangeness. (This good will may be understood in terms of the cheerfulness of gay science; the exertion in terms of our instinctive resistance to certain truths.) The final result is, however, glorious:

Finally there comes a moment when we are *used* to it, when we wait for it, when we sense that we should miss it if it were missing; and now it continues to compel and enchant us relentlessly until we have become its humble and enraptured lovers who desire nothing better from the world than it and only it. (GS 334)

The result of immersing ourselves in the truths of knowledge will be their incorporation, and our eventual affirmation of them. This is the process of making truth a condition of life. In Jill Marsden’s terms, we may say that this is to make the “feeling of life” one experiences before this knowledge the joyful sensation of life’s enhancement, as opposed to the pain of its hindrance, of confronting ideas that our instincts react against. Even if the thought of eternal return that Nietzsche experienced near Lake Silvaplana was borne in ecstasy, the thinker was nevertheless faced with the task of learning to love it:

What shall we do with the *rest* of our lives—we who have spent the majority of our lives in the most profound ignorance? We shall *teach the teaching*—it is the most powerful means of *incorporating* [*einzuverleiben*] it in ourselves. (KSA 9: 11[141], translated by Keith Ansell Pearson)¹⁰

It is through the consideration of the task of incorporating truth that we can situate and appreciate Jill Marsden's explorations of the philosophy of ecstasy. Her commitment to the pursuit of thinking beyond identity, which is suggested in the experience of ecstasy, is itself an experiment in the pursuit and incorporation of "truth" (as the ultimate truth of the flux of eternal becoming). Furthermore, her development of the "physiology of art" as a philosophy of affectivity provides us with great insight into how thought and the body are related, and thus furthers our understanding of the mechanism of incorporating knowledge.

I should also point out that, whilst the content of Marsden's book is largely concerned with what type of knowledge is communicated in the throes of rapture, the self-body relation which it describes by no means excludes affirmation (as self-overcoming) outside of these extreme states. To think that the case would be to deny Marsden's insight that the body is not given for thought, and thus to make of ecstatic rapture a difference experience *in kind* from 'normal' life (a transcendental experience, *à la* reflective judgement in Kant), rather than a privileged intensification of it, in which the libidinal undercurrents of life are revealed. And, finally, I should also warn against the impression that, for Marsden, the thought of eternal recurrence is readily given in the experience of ecstasy. Hers is, after all, also a philosophy of experimentation and transformation. The thought of eternal return certainly is ecstatic, but, as she warns us, "What eternal return will be for us is a matter of what we shall be for it—what we shall be capable of embodying" (121).

This is only to describe and begin to engage with some of the thoughts that Jill Marsden pursues in her book. One cannot adequately introduce all of its adventures here, which

¹⁰ Keith Ansell Pearson, 'The Eternal Return of the Overhuman: The Weightiest Knowledge and the Abyss of Light': 2.

also include the exploration of the idea of rapture as the precondition of artistic creation, the notion that extreme states of health and sickness are the material conditions for overcoming the form of the same, and the interpretation of mystical experience as the site of thinking union without unity. As its modest subtitle suggests, the book does not attempt to provide a finalised system of thought, but consists of interrelated investigations into aspects of ecstatic experience. In doing this, using Nietzsche as the site of multiple vectors of thought, Marsden also engages with the works of Deleuze and Guattari, Bataille, Irigaray and Bergson amongst others.

Whilst I find an ultimate flaw in Marsden's interpretation of affirmation, this book demands to be read. It is a work of original and often highly incisive scholarship, which contributes much to the task of thinking beyond the human condition. And what is truly remarkable—an all-too-rare delight in academic writing—is that the book reads as though it were conceived and written *in* ecstasy. It communicates, like an artwork, something of the conditions of its genesis: the joy borne of rapture. The reader may be 'affected' by its thought for some time.