

Nietzsche's Amor Fati:

The Embracing of an Undecided Fate

by Friedrich Ulfers and Mark Daniel Cohen

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There is in Nietzsche an unequivocal affirmation of life, and it would be precisely wrong to say, “*notwithstanding* the equivocality that he injects into his every assertion,” for there is nothing in Nietzsche that withstands his equivocality. Yet, it speaks to the essence of Nietzsche’s posture to observe that there is nothing diffident or less than forthright in his work—he makes assertions, enormously complex assertions, and they are clearly intended to be taken as asserted. Nietzsche means what he says. It is his saying that bears the complexity in its method, which practices the undermining and enhancing of inherited terminology and philosophical principles, often in ploys of overt contradiction, to propose what is unequivocally meant. One must follow him in his every move, through each verbal gambit, to get at a meaning that always constitutes straight answers to straight questions, at a meaning that presumably requires the richness of literary strategy, of complicated saying, to be formulated at all. The idea dissolves without the verbal underpinning. It evaporates in the absence of his statement. It is so subtle, even as it is so clear and unequivocal once grasped. In short, nothing in Nietzsche goes without saying.

One could be clever and say merely that, with Nietzsche, his very equivocality is itself equivocal, and it would be right to say so. However, left at that, such a characterization initiates a spiral of thought that burrows itself into the soil. It is the business of philosophy to digest such material, to sift it for its intrinsic clarity—otherwise, philosophy would be nothing more than gamesmanship and scholarly fantasy. And so it is as much to the point to observe that Nietzsche is dealing with conceptions that defy simple expression, that he is laced in and trussed by conventional terminology that resists the statement he needs to make, terminology that has been filtered by and formulated according to the very conceptions he wishes to deny, conceptions that frequently establish themselves as opposites, as choices one is required to choose between, and that he is seeking to say that which has not yet found its unequivocal terminology, which stands beyond the perimeters of established options. His verbal play is a ploy. It is a means to an end, not the end itself, not the thought but the only available statement for getting at the thought, and it is our business to find our way to it.

And so there is an unequivocal affirmation of life in Nietzsche, but it is not such as one would think, nor perhaps one that many readers would be prepared to affirm. The very category of expression becomes transformed under Nietzsche’s hand, by his voice. An affirmation is, by definition, an act of counsel: it is an attitudinal posture, a judgment of value, an expression out of a principle of appropriateness, which is recommended to the reader, which is voiced for the purpose of exhorting the reader to do likewise. Implicitly, it is intended as guidance. But if one asks if this is Nietzsche’s intention, if he

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), § 276, p. 223.

² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), § 12, p. 12.

³ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), § 49, p. 554.

affirms life so as to suggest to readers that in a matter open to discretion they choose to affirm life, the answer is as complex as is his personal rhetoric: it is both yes and no. In essence, the category of recommendation does not fit, not even so far as to warrant denial. Something subtler is at work here.

One of Nietzsche’s most overt, and perhaps his best known, assertions of affirmation for life is his clear exhortation: “*Amor fati*”—the love of fate, the acceptance of necessity. From his first expression of the thought in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche makes it clear that his reference to fate is a reference to necessity: “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! . . . And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer.”¹ The issue of fate is not to be misread here. Nietzsche means the necessary, but it is not the necessary in an ordinary sense.

And so, to understand Nietzsche’s *Amor fati*, one must first comprehend what Nietzsche means by “fate,” what quality of the fateful is possible within Nietzsche’s ontology, within his vision of the world. The idea of fate is not to be understood as a fixed and unalterable orientation of events on a necessary outcome. It is not a promise and eventual achievement, extending from some source capable of guaranteeing outcome, of a final state, for oneself, humanity at large, or the world, and after the accomplishment of which, eventuality—the playing out of result—comes to an end. There is no teleology in Nietzsche’s universe—nothing comes to an end. The process that is the world, that is reality, is incessant. And so, Nietzsche’s fate must not be understood in the context of a determinism that takes the form of a finality that the world or the self are “fated,” or promised, to achieve. Nor is it fate in the sense of some categorical, transcendental moral imperative to which we owe absolute allegiance and under which we are laden with a sense of absolute responsibility. The incessant process, the continuous “Becoming” of the universe, leads to nothing in the end, for there is no end: “becoming aims at *nothing* and achieves *nothing*.”²

Nietzsche’s “fate” is something more complex than the nominal concept of fate as pure necessity, for as with everything in Nietzsche’s conception of the universe, it is riddled with its own opposite—the intricacy of opposites is the principle of relation in Nietzsche’s understanding of reality. Nietzsche emphasizes the aspect of necessity in his first explicit reference to *Amor fati*, yet he again and again returns to linking necessity and freedom in his conception of fate. It is an ideal, an ideal of *Amor fati*, that he envisions in his characterization of Goethe and the poet’s “fatalism”: “Such a spirit [as Goethe] who has *become free* stands amidst all with a joyous and trusting fatalism, in the *faith* that only the single is loathsome, and that all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole—he does not negate any more.”³

The fatalism of *Amor fati* involves an insight into Being as that which is, as Jacques Derrida phrased the comparable idea, “a third irreducible to the

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dualisms of classical ontology”⁴ whereby Becoming negates Being. For Nietzsche, fate and the love of it involve us in a knowledge, amounting to wisdom, of an “excess”⁵ beyond Being with Becoming as its negation, beyond the value of truth with non-truth as its negation, in a state of awareness that is beyond normative conception and that leaves him who “knows” it “only as a Yes-sayer.”

This saying as an intricacy of opposites—of those which are opposite from the logical point of view, which functions by means of an operative stipulation that everything is to be conceived according to what it is not, according to its negation—is a philosophical strategy, a tactics of proposition, that Nietzsche initiated at the beginning of his career, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, with his analysis of the tragic view of the world. There, the tragic, rather than constituting the “negating” side to an opposed “affirming,” embodies, through the conception of opposites as interpenetrating, what Nietzsche calls an irreducible “contradiction.”⁶ “Contradiction,” for Nietzsche, does not mean the violation of binary logic, but an “intricate relation”⁷ between opposites, such as bliss and pain, that simultaneously unites them and holds them apart.

The tragic worldview, then, is a chiasmic unity of opposites, one with neither negation nor affirmation, because as a medium that permits “Yes” and “No” to interpenetrate, it affirms them both equally, leaving affirmation affirmed precisely to the degree that negation is.

Thus, comparable to the tragic, as conceived in the tragic worldview, fate for Nietzsche is a seeming contradiction in terms—the terms of “freedom” and “necessity.” The solution is not a resolution, for no solution is required, for in a truer sense than that conveyed by phrasing the matter as “interpenetrating” opposites, there is no contradiction. Nietzsche does not attribute necessity to fate as determinism vs. freedom; he ascribes both qualities to fate in equal measure. The necessity of fate rests in Nietzsche’s insight that it is unalterably—eternally, necessarily—“free” in a playful elusiveness.

Nietzsche disabuses us of the interpretation of *Amor fati* as an embracing of fate without interpolation of freedom by linking it to the poetic. This linkage is particularly evident in one of Nietzsche’s *Dionysus-Dithyramps*, “Only a Fool! Only a Poet!” (*Nur Narr! Nur Dichter!*), which alludes to the foolishness, or playfulness, of the poet as the epistemological frame within which to address the excess beyond truth and its opposite, the excess that is fate for Nietzsche.



You, the suitor of truth? [. . .]
No! Only a poet! [. . .]

May I be banished
From all truth,
Only a fool! Only a poet!⁸

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 165.

⁵ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), § 4, p. 46. “Excess revealed itself as truth.”

⁶ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, § 4, p. 46.

⁷ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, § 21, p. 130.

⁸ Nietzsche, KSA 6.377. “Der Wahrheit Freier - du? [. . .] / Nein! nur ein Dichter!” “[. . .] dass ich verbannt sei / von aller Wahrheit, / Nur Narr! Nur Dichter!” Translation by the authors.

⁹ Nietzsche, KSA 6.402.
"Meine Liebe entzündet
/ sich ewig nur an der
Nothwendigkeit. / Schild der
Nothwendigkeit! / Höchstes
Gestirn des Seins! / - das
kein Wunsch erreicht / das
kein Nein befleckt, / ewiges
Ja des Sein's, / ewig bin
ich dein Ja: / denn ich
liebe dich, oh Ewigkeit! - -"
Translation by the authors.

It is the playfulness/foolishness of the poet and poetry—that is, of the ambiguity or indeterminacy of poetry’s metaphorical core—that would be able to capture the elusive “truth” of fate. But as before, Nietzsche ties together the “freedom” of fate—freedom in the sense of not being restricted by the oppositional logic of discursive language—and the dimension of “necessity” he acknowledges in fate. Thus he writes in “Praise and Eternity” of his love of fate as necessity:



My love is lit eternally
Only by the fire of necessity.

Shield of necessity!
Highest constellation of Being!
Not reachable by any desire,
Not sullied by any No,
Eternal Yes of Being,
Eternally I am your Yes:
For I love you, oh eternity! - -⁹

This interpretation of fate—which braces each with its opposite, rendering a “conception” that is “above,” inclusive of, paired normative conceptions in their definition by opposition, and which Nietzsche renders late in his philosophical career—has been implicit in all of his thought, in various guises. It is present in his view of the world as not being determined by the “outside” of some final cause or meaning that serves as its goal, that is not judged as “guilty” by the “No” of the fixity of transcendental Being for being “playful” in its ceaseless, goalless Becoming. In other words, fate, as Nietzsche interprets it, is the emblem of his insight that there is nothing—*nihil*—outside the transitoriness of the world of eternal Becoming. Fate, then, is the name for a totally immanent, perpetually transitory world that is not subject to the finality of a goal outside of it, the achievement of which would redeem the “guiltiness” of Becoming. *Amor fati* is the embrace of the world that is as it is—eternally Becoming—not as it “should” be, for there is no “should,” no imperative that it be, or be transformed into, something other than it is. Put differently, *Amor fati* is the embrace of a world that is an implicate order of freedom and necessity: of freedom in that it is free from any “should” that would judge it to be deficient, and from any goal that “should” be attained, and of necessity because the lack of a goal to be achieved allows the world its “must,” its having to be what it is, not what it is made by an authority beyond the perimeters of the world.

In particular, it can be said that Nietzsche’s appeal to love of fate is the consequence of his thesis of the “death of God,” love of a supreme center of the value of Being that guaranteed meaning to a meaningless world of Becoming—the authority beyond the limits of the world. The fate of *Amor fati* “frees” us, then, to a world of radical immanence, a world beyond the

dualism of immanence and transcendence. Nietzsche characterizes this world as whole in the sense of an interconnectedness or web-like structure Nietzsche describes as *Verhängnis* (literally a “hanging together”), a word that also means “fate.” Given that the world of interconnectedness (*Verhängnis*) is its own fate (*Verhängnis*), it is beyond any outside determinism because there is no outside to the whole. Given a radically holistic world, there is no outside to its *Verhängnis*, and thus we must be what we are: *Verhängnis*. As Nietzsche puts it succinctly: “One is necessary, one is a piece of fatefulness [*Verhängnis*], one belongs to the whole, one is the whole.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “The Four Great Errors,” § 8, p. 500.

¹¹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, § 374, p. 336.

¹² Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, § 343, p. 280.

It is clear that the freedom of *Amor fati*, of Nietzsche’s fate, of Nietzsche’s universe, is a “freedom from”: a freedom from a fate imposed upon the world from “outside” the world, the freedom from ultimate, absolute authority. The recipient of freedom in the interpenetration of necessity and freedom is the world, and thus is Becoming. With his appeal to *Amor fati*, Nietzsche affirms the lack of a center of Being, and thus recognizes a world without the horizon that Being would set to its Becoming. The world has been set free in this thought, and is free to become whatever it will. It is not “guilty” for departing from what it is or only approaching, eternally approaching, what it “should” be. It is innocent in that it is free to become anything—nothing is disallowed, there is no outside authority to disallow.

The realization of *Amor fati* thus brings us a “new ‘infinite’.” “Rather has the world become ‘infinite’ for us all over again, inasmuch as we cannot reject the possibility that *it may include infinite interpretations*.”¹¹ A world open to potentially infinite interpretations is one without the institution of a given, unalterable meaning stemming from the metaphysical source of meaning. And with the death of God, with the realization that the necessity of the world is that it must be free from the imposition upon it of any determining authority, “At long last the horizon appears free to us again, even if it should not be bright; at long last our ships may venture out again . . . the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never yet been such an ‘open sea’.”¹²

Thus, Nietzsche is giving us *Amor fati* as the emblem of a world that demands to be interpreted beyond the “corner” of metaphysics, that is, beyond the reign of a dualistic perspective that insists on *one* interpretation of the world: the interpretation, the ultimate truth, of the supremacy of Being and its variants functioning as perfection, goal, meaning, and judge over the world of Becoming, the world that is, apart from its interdiction, eternally in process. The world is free in that no such interdiction is possible.

And the awareness of this freedom of the world, the freedom from a truth about which it, and we, would have no choice, is for Nietzsche a “new knowledge” and “the sun of a new gospel”—the gospel of necessity that sets us free and returns us to an innocence in place of the guilt that is inherent in being subject to an ultimate authority, an authority that sets a truth one can never become and a responsibility one can never meet, caught in a state of mutability, in a process of incessant change.

¹³ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, vol. 1, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), § 107, p. 58.

¹⁴ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, § 24, p. 141.

¹⁵ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 292.



The sun of a new gospel is casting its first beam on the topmost summits in the soul of every individual: there the mists are gathering more thickly than ever, and the brightest glimmer and the gloomiest twilight lie side by side. Everything is necessity—thus says the new knowledge; and this knowledge itself is necessity. Everything is innocence: and knowledge is the path to insight into this innocence.¹³

The necessity is the necessity of play, play that is aesthetic, as the world has been for Nietzsche from the start, from the assertion in *The Birth of Tragedy*, “existence and the world seem justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon.”¹⁴ That play, that integration of integral opposites, qualifies even the aspect of existence, subtending beneath it both existence and non-existence. The affirmation of life, the affirmation of fate that is life as necessity, as play, is, as Derrida put it in his reading of Nietzsche, an affirmation that determines the absence of a center of Being (“presence”) “otherwise than as loss of the center.” This interpretation is one in which “play must be conceived before the alternative of presence and absence,” that is, the alternative of Being and Becoming. It is an interpretation that is not “negative, nostalgic” about the lost center of Being but “the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming,” an affirmation that “tries to pass beyond man and humanism . . .”¹⁵

The sense of the affirmation of life, of fate, as a thought that moves “beyond man and humanism,” of a qualification of existence that intertwines it with non-existence as a condition of its existence, points to the reason that underlies Nietzsche’s rhetorical strategies and that renders the terminology he employs impertinent to the truth he wishes to reveal—for there is a truth to “things.” Meaning is infinitely interpretable, but there is a reality to which we are subject, of which we are—the reality whose meaning is infinitely interpretable. There is a reason that fate for Nietzsche is authentically fatalistic and which compels all the standard terminology established for contending with questions of meaning and existence capable of nothing better than interpenetration and unending play.

The events of the world are not fatalistic in the sense that there is an ultimate eventuality, an outcome, and thus a meaning to which they always are trending and which puts an end to the process of eventuality. The process is unending, and it is for us fatalistic in that it is beyond our capability to influence. The freedom in necessity is for the world, but it is not for us. We cannot direct or curtail the course of events because we are not present within the course of events. We are, as is all else, merely momentary presences, our lives a sequence of disconnected, flashing events that demonstrate a sequence only for our perceptions. In themselves, they are as glimmering lights on an ocean of glimmering lights, in incessant motion but flowing

nowhere. “Here I sat waiting . . . all time without aim”¹⁶—all time without goal, without finality.

We are without integrity, neither self-sustaining objects nor subjects in the world, for nothing is a self-sustaining object. There is freedom only for the world as there is necessity only for the world, for there is only the world. The rejection of individual integrity, of individual existence, can be found at the start of Nietzsche’s thought, as one can find the philosophical foundation of the aesthetic nature of existence and the world. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche dismisses the reality of the *principium individuationis*,¹⁷ the principle of individuality, of the integrity of the object and its individual presence. There are, for Nietzsche, no “things,” no existences that stand apart in any way from all of existence. All exist only in the web-like structure of *Verhängnis* and exist in no other sense. Our conception of individual existences is a function of our error regarding the sense of unity. “We need ‘unities’ in order to be able to reckon: that does not mean we must suppose that such unities exist. We have borrowed the concept of unity from our ‘ego’ concept—our oldest article of faith. If we did not hold ourselves to be unities, we would never have formed the concept ‘thing.’”¹⁸

There is thus no free will, not for individual beings, “we realize the impossibility of any *liberum arbitrium*, or ‘intelligible freedom.’”¹⁹ The Will to Power is the motivating impulse to apparent eventuality—more, it is the “substance” of constant eventuality rather than the power “behind” it—but the Will to Power is not ours. Our personal impulses to action are not freely chosen, we do what we do just as objects subject to interaction, subject to laws of physics, subject to the slip of gravity, do what they do—without motive, without intention. Our motivating impulses function something more like instincts than intentions. They function in a law-like fashion.



Weakness of the will: that is a metaphor that can prove misleading. For there is no will, and consequently neither a strong nor a weak will. The multitude and disgregation of impulses and the lack of any systematic order among them result in a “weak will”; their coordination under a single predominant impulse results in a “strong will”: in the first case it is the oscillation and the lack of gravity; in the latter, the precision and clarity of the direction.²⁰

Comparable to gravity. Law-like, but our impulses are as if controlled by natural law within a universe free of outside imposition, free of imposed requirement. We follow what the universe does—we are of it, and are nothing else.

And it is the nature of Nietzsche’s universe that necessitates the absence of

¹⁶ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, “Sils Maria,” p. 371.

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, § 1, p. 36.

¹⁸ Nietzsche *The Will to Power*, § 635, p. 338.

¹⁹ Nietzsche *The Will to Power*, § 8, p. 11.

²⁰ Nietzsche *The Will to Power*, § 46, pp. 28-29.

²¹ Nietzsche, KSA 7.575. “Es ist nur von Zeitpunkten zu reden, nicht mehr von Zeit.” Translation by the authors.

²² Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Vorwort, KSA 6.263. “An diesem vollkommenen Tage [. . .] fiel mir eben ein Sonnenblick auf mein Leben: ich sah rückwärts, ich sah hinaus, ich sah nie so viel und so gute Dinge auf einmal. [. . .] Wie sollte ich nicht meinem ganzen Leben dankbar sein?” Translation by the authors. See also *Ecce Homo*, “Preface,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, p. 677.

²³ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, § 55, p. 36.

²⁴ Nietzsche, KSA 7.575. “Der Zeitpunkt wirkt auf einen anderen Zeitpunkt, also dynamische Eigenschaften vorauszusetzen.” Translation by the authors.

²⁵ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, § 1, p. 35.

integral, individual existences—specifically, the nature of his temporality. In Nietzsche’s ontology, there is no time line, no movement from the past to the present and into the future, not as a continuous flow upon which all events and existences are buoyed, like leaves meandering down a stream. Time has no currents. There is no continuance. There are but isolated moments in time, points of time—“It is possible to speak only of points of time, no longer of time”²¹—and nothing endures, thus there is nothing to endure, for there is no time for anything to continue to exist.

The moment is an expansive idea, increasingly expansive over the course of his career to the point at which it becomes the central image of his ontological vision, comparable to, and explicative of, the Will to Power. It becomes the setting for the realization of the truth of the world. “On this perfect day [. . .] a glance of the sun fell upon my life: I looked backward, I looked outward, I never saw so much and so many good things at the same time. [. . .] How could I not be thankful to the whole of my life?”²² It is important to realize that the perfection Nietzsche refers to here is not the perfection of Being beyond the world of Becoming but the contemplative experience of a moment, of a wink of an eye—*Augenblick*—during which time is a Becoming without the striving for a goal, and thus is not deficient, that it is “perfect,” complete unto itself, in the world of Becoming. The gratitude Nietzsche expresses for the time of his whole life, out of the experience of the perfection of the moment, is an affirmation of fate as the irreducible interplay of time and eternity, for the moment and eternity as an immeasurable moment become interlaced. “Can we remove the idea of a goal from the process and then affirm the process in spite of this?—This would be the case if something were attained at every moment within this process—and always the same.”²³ The moment is ever the moment, what is “attained” is “always the same,” but it is always something “attained,” always something newly achieved. The moment of attainment never departs, and Being and Becoming are inextricably intertwined under the aegis of the moment, of the point of time, as under the aegis of the Will to Power.

Yet, normally, we do not experience the moments, the time points, as always the same attainment—we experience them as constantly shifting, constantly transforming into something different and following each other in a sequence. The time points are isolated in the sense that each is a span of duration limited by its nature as a dynamic “atom” of time, but they are not isolated from each other in terms of influence—they are not walled off from each other. “The point of time affects another point of time, thus dynamic properties are to be presupposed.”²⁴ Thus, a world can exist—it does not flash into and out of existence, all time points compounded in some sense upon each other, with no time line along which to distribute them. And thus we are capable of interpreting—misinterpreting—a personal history, a continuing appearance of self, a memory. The appearance of distinct, individual, continuing identity becomes what was analyzed in *The Birth of Tragedy* as the Apollinian “beautiful illusion”²⁵ that obscures the Dionysian vision of continuous flux, the flux of incessant moments of time that somehow are always new and yet always the same—the “article of faith” of the idea of unity, which permits us to

“reckon”: the reduction of the flux down to the appearance of a coherence of existence.

Thus there can be the appearance of personal outcome, of an inexorability to personally significant events, of eventuality on an individual level—of personal fate—but the viewpoint of integrity is our own Apollinian construction. It is error, but it is not our error, and it is not our Apollinian construction in the sense of personal commission. The construction is made, the error of interpretation committed, but they are not made and committed by us, for that could be so only if we created ourselves. Only then would we be present to construct the illusion of our own existence. We would then be *causa sui*, self-generating, and in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche committed himself to the unacceptability of *causa sui*,²⁶ to the absurdity of the claim of self-creation, on the basis of logical flaw.

Which is to say that, in Nietzsche’s universe, we can exercise no influence over events because we do not exist. We are mere appearance, delusions suffering the delusion of ourselves, apparent presences by our natures strangely capable of being aware of ourselves as appearances and incapable of seeing past the deceptive appearance of our natures. “ ‘Mankind’ does not advance, it does not even exist.”²⁷ We are not the source of events, and thus not in a position to be the source of any influence over events—we are events, comparable to all other events, appearances thrown up by the dynamism of the Will to Power, the active and sole reality of the world. In more technical language, we are epiphenomenal—moved as are all apparent “things” and incapable of moving them, patterns among the patterns woven and re woven into the tapestry, and thus the center of a philosophy that “tries to pass beyond man and humanism . . .”

“World wheel . . . blends us in too,”²⁸ which is to say that Nietzsche’s is a nihilistic vision, a vision in which all that we know and all that we are is rendered void of reality: we are “something” done by “something” else. “It is only late that one musters the courage for what one really knows. That I have hitherto been a thorough-going nihilist, I have admitted to myself only recently.”²⁹ But for Nietzsche, Nihilism is a complex matter: “Nihilism. It is *ambiguous*: A. Nihilism as a sign of increased power of the spirit: as active nihilism. B. Nihilism as decline and recession of power of the spirit: as passive nihilism.”³⁰

Passive nihilism, also “Nihilism as a psychological state,”³¹ is a widespread and historically significant condition of despair, following upon the collapse of values that have been revealed to be untenable, that can no longer be believed. This is the psychological repercussion of the death of God, the loss of the sense of an outside authority to constrain the Becoming of the world and give it a fixed meaning, an ultimate and final goal. For Nietzsche, after 2,000 years of Christianity and its moral interpretation of the world, its belief that the world is organized by principles of good and evil, that principles of good and evil are *true*—a self-aggrandizing faith that envisions the world on the model of

²⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, “On the Prejudices of Philosophers,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, § 15, pp. 212-213.

²⁷ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, § 90, pp. 55.

²⁸ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, “To Goethe,” p. 351.

²⁹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, § 25, pp. 18.

³⁰ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, § 22, pp. 17.

³¹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, § 12, pp. 12.

³² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, § 12, pp. 14.

³³ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, § 55, pp. 35.

³⁴ Nietzsche. *The Will to Power*, § 12, pp. 12.

³⁵ Nietzsche. *The Will to Power*, § 32, pp. 22.

³⁶ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, § 54, pp. 33.

³⁷ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, § 32, pp. 22.

ourselves, that sees the world as centered on us and our fate, “the hyperbolic naiveté of man: positing himself as the meaning and the measure of the value of all things”³²—the forced loss of faith in these values, the recognition of their arbitrariness, their lack of truth, brings about the “decline and recession of power of the spirit”—a general dispiritedness. Under the principle that attitudes give way to their opposites—“Extreme positions are not succeeded by moderate ones but by extreme positions of the opposite kind”³³—the loss of faith results in a yearning for nothingness. “At bottom, man has lost his faith in his own value when no infinitely valuable whole works through him; i.e., he conceived such a whole in order *to be able to believe in his own value*.”³⁴ Once we realize “the world does not have the value we thought it had,”³⁵ we become as nothing to ourselves, and the world loses all worth.

But there is also the form of active Nihilism, which in individuals of strength—the virtue that Nietzsche admires most, “I teach the Yes to all that strengthens, that stores up strength, that justifies the feeling of strength,”³⁶ a quality one may think of as fortitude—can realize the “new knowledge,” “the sun of the new gospel,” can observe the freedom of the world that is absent the imposition of a fate imposed from without. In the same conditions that bring about the despair that yearns for nothingness, in the collapse of all old values, “we find the pathos that impels us to seek new values. In sum: the world might be far more valuable than we used to believe; we must see through the naiveté of our ideals, and while we thought we accorded it the highest interpretation, we may not even have given our human existence a moderately fair value. What has become *deified*? The value instincts in the community (that which made possible its continued existence.)”³⁷

In this, we are given the indication of the new value, of the higher aspiration that is revealed when we are made aware of the freedom of the world from outside authority and forced meaning, when the scales fall from the eyes of those who formerly believed in the values that imposed our image on our vision of the universe. The new value is that of the “community,” as conceived in the opening of *The Gay Science*, the species, that to which we are sacrificed: the existence that continues as we, as individuals, do not, but that depends on our fortitude to preserve it. (Indicating what Nietzsche makes clear in numerous passages: that which breaks the credibility of the values that held sway over us for 2,000 years is evolution, the realization that we do not come from a source outside the earth, that we are born of this world.) And, as the title of the book conveys, the tragic philosophy has been re-envisioned as something joyous.

“

Whether I contemplate men with benevolence or with an evil eye, I always find them concerned with a single task, all of them and every one of them in particular: to do what is good for the preservation of the human race. Not from any feeling of love for the race, but merely because nothing in them is

older, stronger, more inexorable and unconquerable than this instinct—because this instinct constitutes the essence of our species, our herd. . . .

Pursue your best or your worst desires, and above all perish!— In both cases you are probably still in some way a promoter and benefactor of humanity and therefore entitled to your eulogists—but also to your detractors! . . . I mean, when the proposition “the species is everything, one is always none” has become part of humanity, and this ultimate liberation and irresponsibility has become accessible to all at all times. Perhaps laughter will then have formed an alliance with wisdom, perhaps only “gay science” will then be left.³⁸

³⁸ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, § 1, pp. 73-74.

³⁹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, § 1066, pp. 548.

⁴⁰ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, § 1067, pp. 550.

As with Goethe, “all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole.” Here is the affirmation of life, the essence of *Amor fati*: we must learn the joy of perishing for the life of the species, of being sacrificed, as we have no choice but to be, for the continuance of life that both is ours and is not ours: not our individual lives but the life of the whole of which we are a part. We must learn to face with joy, with the Yes of affirmation, our part in a world that “lives on itself: its excrements are its food,”³⁹ and we are among what is consumed. For that is the continuing, unending eventuality of the Will to Power, and it is the counsel offered, the recommendation made, that there is joy in realizing “*This world is the will to power—and nothing besides!*” And you yourselves are also this will to power—and nothing besides!”⁴⁰

But there is an anomaly in this affirmation; there is a logical absurdity in the counsel offered. There is a flaw in this Yes to life that recommends itself to its readership. There is a ghostly presence haunting every proposition that Nietzsche propounds, brooding and questioning the very core of the philosopher’s reasoning. If there is no free will, then to what purpose the recommendation of a posture toward existence, an acceptance of fate—what point to *Amor fati*? To what purpose advising an attitude toward existence to those who do not exist, who “are also this will to power—and nothing besides”? What is the point of a new gospel? How can it be possible to choose to formulate new values in reaction to a recognition of necessity? How can one be exhorted to affirm necessity? If we should acknowledge fate, if we can, then isn’t it all something other than fated? If fate is something to which we owe “absolute allegiance” and from which devolves upon us “absolute responsibility,” if that allegiance is ours to give or not, if the matter even arises, then where is the fate? And if there is no mankind, if it “does not even exist,” then to whom is Nietzsche writing, and who is speaking? Where is the sense in all this?

The questions are right, for there is nothing in Nietzsche to indicate that fate is merely a quality of large-scale patterns of events whereas the petty events of

an individual life occur freely, as if too unimportant to be noticed—the standard bail-out position for those reading denunciations of free will, as if Cassandra-like, we act and speak by our own discretion within an unalterable flow of history. And it is right to say that non-existence is a chiasmic unity of existence and non-existence and is not a pure quality different from its opposite, to say that freedom and necessity are two sides of the same infinitely self-differentiating and ontologically variegated coin. It would even be necessary to say it, but it would not be sufficient.

For just to say precisely what Nietzsche has told us is merely to say precisely what Nietzsche has told us. That is mere reiteration, a parroting of endowed phrasings, a demonstration of memorization, of received input, as if we were without the freedom to consider, to understand. We have yet to digest what we have been told. We have yet to see what sense it makes. We have yet to sift it for its intrinsic clarity. We have yet to make something of it.

In the end, there is only one answer, if one is to take Nietzsche seriously and not qualify what he has said without qualification, not partialize him where he has been impartial, so as to leave room in what he says for his act of saying it. Nietzsche is playing the game he must play, the game all philosophers must play, in order to write at all, in order to think at all. The necessity, the Nihilism of non-existence, of being an appearance generated by something he is not, applies to him as much as to everyone, but he writes as if he is exempt from his own conditions, from his own mental scenario, from the truth he is telling—as if he stood “outside” and commented on what lay under the gaze of his mind. To write at all, to think at all, is of necessity to do so—one cannot stand at both ends of the microscope at the same time. To announce the non-existence of free will, and of us, is significant only if the announcement is freely made. If one could not have done other than say it, then there is no significance in its being said, no more significance than there is in an earthquake, or a tidal wave, or any natural event—no more significance than in the falling of a leaf. When something is said, there must be a reason, and if the reason is that it had to have been said, that it could have not been other than said, that it was compelled, mindlessly, there thinking is at an end.

Here, Nietzsche has no choice but to place himself in the position of the Cretan Liar—if he chooses to speak the absence of free will, then he gives evidence of free will; if he says nothing to deny free will, then it is possible at least that there is no free will. If he denies existence, then he cannot not exist; if he does not arrive to deny it, then it might be there is no individual existence. But then, this is what it is to philosophize. All philosophers place themselves under the rubric of the Cretan Liar. All make themselves, as they have no choice but to do as they theorize conditions, exemptions from the conditions they theorize. To philosophize is that as much as it is anything more: to make oneself, for the moment, apparently, an exemption—an eye gazing in from somewhere else, from outside the philosophical vision.

However, there is a moral imperative here—for Nietzsche, for any thinker of

integrity who confronts the image of deception entailed by the very attempt to state the truth. Given that the acts of thinking and speaking necessarily falsify themselves and imply the denial of what is being thought about and spoken of, and given that one has no choice but to think and speak—for to refuse to think about the absence of free will because there is no free will is as willful an act as deliberately to proclaim the absence of free will because there is no free will—it is an obligation, an imposition not out of authority but out of a sense of honesty, a sense against the odds, to speak so as to correct the inherent error in speech, to militate against the implication that speech is free and there is someone speaking, to speak what one seems to deny by speaking.

In the end, there is no guarantee, because there is no discretion—we cannot choose to be able to choose, that too would be *causa sui*: freedom creating itself. There is no set of appearances that could demonstrate that the appearance of freedom is freedom, even when the freedom appears through the act of deliberately denying freedom. It could well be that Nietzsche writes what he writes because he must, because he is the creature he is, and that there is no choice in his assertion of necessity or in his suggestion by demonstration that there is freedom in the saying. So too, we could be reading Nietzsche because we are fated to and thinking what we think of him because it is determined that we will. And it could be we are certain that the constraint of thought is palpably absurd—because we have no choice but to so think. “Everything is necessity—thus says the new knowledge; and this knowledge itself is necessity.”⁴¹

But to philosophize at all, one must embrace the contradiction and remain content that one will, of necessity, undermine the credibility of anything one can say by the act of saying it—one must affirm that contradiction. This would make philosophy itself the very image of life, and of the affirmation of life, and of *Amor fati*: the enthusiastic embrace of necessity, which is itself, in its simplest sense, an utter contradiction, a nonsensical counsel, as if necessity could care whether we embraced it. Thereby, freedom and necessity become a contradiction that does not entail a violation of binary logic but rather an intricate relation that simultaneously unites them and holds them apart. Thereby, we become what we already are.⁴² And thereby, Nietzsche can be said to have affirmed life not so well by what he said as simply by his saying.

⁴¹ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, vol. 1, § 107, p. 58.

⁴² See Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*: Fourth and Last Part, “The Honey Sacrifice,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, p. 351. “Become who you are!” - “Werde, der du bist!”

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