

***The Eternal Sunshine and Eternal Recurrence:***  
**The Interval Between Memory and Forgetting**

Presented to the La Trobe Philosophy Postgraduates' Colloquium, 12 October 2005

Eternal recurrence is elucidated only twice within Nietzsche's published writings, and even then it appears more as a poetic device than a philosophical argument. The reader is asked to submit himself to a thought experiment: he is addressed by a demon who challenges him to relive every moment, great and small, innumerable times more.

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!"

The test, for Nietzsche, resides in one's affective response to this possibility:

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine." 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. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal? (Nietzsche 1974, §341, 273 – 4)

This passage is generally considered in existential terms, as an affirmation of immanence: a revaluation of life in response to the death of God, and a challenge to take responsibility for the meaning of the earth. For Pierre Klossowski, by contrast, the thought represents the apotheosis of Nietzsche's philosophy and life: that highest point wherein he achieved lucidity, and was thereby finally transported to the perilous heights of disintegration, or madness. In what follows I wish to draw what are hoped to be instructive parallels between Klossowski's use of eternal return and Gondry and

Kaufman's film *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, in terms of the shared themes of repetition and memory. Of importance is not whether Gondry's direction and Kaufman's screenplay were influenced by Nietzsche's work, but rather the degree to which issues taken up by the thought of recurrence can be experienced through viewing the film. First, then, to eternal recurrence.

Klossowski characterizes return in terms of what he calls 'anamnesis' (literally 'un-forgetting,' or recollection), which is for him a curious amalgam of, or equivocation between, remembering and forgetting. According to Klossowski, there is an indivisibility of forgetting and remembering in the thought of return. For while the 'self'—at least according to Locke—is predicated upon a continuity of memory that unifies its experience, it also finds itself by virtue of a forgetfulness of those moments and selves that compromise such unity. Recurrence is the mechanism by which this interchange of forgetting and remembering is playfully reenacted—but this play also brings to the fore the rupture at the heart of identity. As a condition of their repetition, the moments that constitute the life of the self are separated. The 'same' becomes internally differentiated, and the subject-unity is thereby destroyed; reduced to the gap between an incongruous collection of impulses, and the 'self' understood as a mischievous representation of their unity. The self is thus instituted upon the forgetting, or denial, of all other possible selves; and return provides an access to these forgotten selves by means of a *Stimmung*, or tonality, through which they are provisionally 'unified' or affirmed. Hence the sensation of being both completed and ruptured by return.

A further sense in which the Eternal Return signifies the disintegration of identity rests upon the manner in which the thought opens Nietzsche's bodily impulses to the reader, engendering within her the same quality, and thus destabilizing distinctions between Nietzsche and his reader. For the figure of recurrence simulates Nietzsche's high tonality, and is supposed to evoke in the reader the fullness of "Nietzsche's" own experience. Yet the fullness of Nietzsche's experience—his body—is only a lure for the reader, return's principle effect being nothingness, dissolution, destabilization of the self. It is "Nietzsche," as the claimant of any experience in particular, that is put into question by return; and the experience to which the thought refers is precisely that of not having a unity, or 'self,' which would subtend that experience. The dangerous truth of return that Nietzsche attempts to share with his friends and readers should open them,

too, to such dissolution, and on this basis the thought selects: it measures the extent to which the reader is able to withstand, and even affirm, a relinquishment of unity, and to open themselves to becoming.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, too, poses the question of the relation of identity to memory, by conceiving of a technology through which the self can be cultivated, or at least edited, by means of the erasure of incongruous memories. Nietzsche's words are evoked by Mary the receptionist in support of this process—

“blessed are the forgetful, for they get the better even of their blunders”—indicating his understanding of forgetfulness as an active capacity of overcoming. After finding that his girlfriend, Clementine, has had him erased from her memory after an argument, Joel Barish



decides to have the procedure (Lacuna™) as well. The centerpiece of the story, however, is Joel's relentless effort throughout his own Lacuna™ procedure to salvage his painful memories, precisely because they cannot be separated from his most pleasurable moments, and indeed, from his rather tenuous sense of self. Joel's heroism is located in his attempt to subvert the procedure by seeking out, and identifying with, his most painful, repressed memories: those hardest to get at moments, where he might secure his beloved, and swiftly vanishing, Clementine. His most desired and most derided moments are thus coupled, in a similar fashion to the portrayal of return as anamnesis—and as with eternal recurrence, the self is positioned in the interval between memory and forgetting.

As things transpire, the procedure is an apparent success, and Joel is able to wake the next morning oblivious to Clem's existence, though disoriented and groggy. By obeying a latent impulse, however, he finds himself reunited to her, through a chance meeting in Montauk. And thus history repeats itself, as an eternal return of the same... boy meets girl, boy and girl fall in love, boy loses girl. Possibly what this chance meeting and recommencement of the cycle indicates is that we can never extract from ourselves the dominant impulses that motivate our actions. That Joel and Clementine will fall in love and then destroy each other, just as the woman in the Lacuna™ waiting room will buy another dog, and Mary the receptionist will want to have an affair with her father-figure employer.<sup>1</sup> There are some 'mistakes' that people refuse to learn from,

regardless of whether or not they have the option to erase their memories. However, what is truly heroic about Joel and Clementine at the end of this film—and what brings them into alignment with Nietzsche’s experiment of recurrence—is their conscious refusal to learn from the mistake of being together, even after the shock of confrontation with the most painful consequences of such a coupling. In terms of eternal recurrence, their affective response to the prospect of repetition is to say ‘once more,’ overcoming the pain of memory, and thus in Nietzsche’s terms, they affirm life and becoming.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, in another respect, *Eternal Sunshine* poses a question to identity and the manner in which it is constructed in relation to our significant others: not only with respect to our conscious memories of their part in our lives, but also the degree to which they play an unconscious role in the delineation of the self. Perhaps, for instance, Joel was not willfully placing Clementine in the most humiliating and repressed corners of his memory, as much as finding her there already and *against* his will. Perhaps the viewer is led to misapprehend as agency, what is in fact a passive observation of the process of memory erasure—which must meet at least with some imaginary resistance. And perhaps each subjective experience of the Lacuna™ procedure is characterized by a delirium in which one’s past is reclaimed. Perhaps, then, there is already an intrinsic connection between those we love, and the parts of our selves that we dislike and would want to reject.<sup>3</sup> This may also account for Clementine’s presence in Montauk, not because she, too, had attempted to salvage Joel from oblivion during her own Lacuna™ procedure, but rather, because she is condemned to find Joel wherever she seeks her self. And if, as Joel says, her personality promises to take you beyond yourself, but is as such only an elaborate ruse, perhaps this is because Joel seeks through her both an escape from and a return to himself. The film thus elaborates how the erasure of the other is impossible apart from a correlative process of self-destruction. As Dr Mierzwiak retorts when Joel asks if the procedure will cause brain damage, “Technically, this procedure is brain damage.”

## Notes

1. Psychologically, this kind of repetition accords to the death drive, as the transference.
2. Arguably the true hero of the film, however, is Mary Svevo, the receptionist, who calmly and professionally intervenes by sending patients back their memories.
3. It is, after all, the mother who catches Joel in the act of masturbation, and the place Clementine finds to hide, in the recesses of Joel's distant past, also accords to the maternal role.

## Works Cited

Gondry, Michel & Kaufman, Charlie. *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Universal Studios, 2004.

Klossowski, Pierre. *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1974.

© Joanne Faulkner, 2005.