

The Repetition of Eternal Return, or the Disastrous Step

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And what would eternal return be, if we forgot that it is a vertiginous movement endowed with a force: not one which causes the return of the Same in general, but one which selects, one which expels as well as creates, destroys as well as produces?

Gilles Deleuze¹

Everything is played out in the manner in which the thought of Eternal Return is communicated.

Maurice Blanchot²

Has Deleuze unmasked the repetition at the heart of eternal recurrence, deciphered Zarathustra's most burdensome thought, and so too passed the test of the vicious circle's selection? What masks are worn in Deleuze's encounter with that field of disparity, displacement, and repetition, that "multiple" field recognized all too hastily under the rubric of eternal recurrence? Are they masks of joy, affirmation, parody, irony, masks of the theatre? And which masks would lie behind these?—the question must be posed even if it is eventually refused. Are they those most familiar to philosophy, those of the sage, the ascetic ideal, the systematician, perhaps shadowed by the pallor of an old Nordic sun? What indeed "*would eternal return be, if we forgot that it is a vertiginous movement endowed with a force*"? Let us see if we cannot

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 41. Italics mine. Hereafter cited as *DR*.

² Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 176. Hereafter cited as *IC*.

reintroduce with the repetition of this question a maximal modification, or if, in fact, we do not come too late.

Difference and Repetition is a philosophical text in the strictest sense. For in spite of and perhaps because of its insistent *agon* with the law and the rule of identity, its critique of the good will of thought and common sense, its "opposition" to the dialectic and the world of representation, and its insistent encounter with the ontological problematic, its most rigorous engagement occurs at the edge of the question of the transcendental. And Deleuze reminds us on more than one occasion that everything happens at the edge. Perhaps, then, it can even be said that this edge becomes the transcendental condition of transcendental itself, the condition of its reality and not merely a condition of its possibility, as Deleuze likes to say, or in other words, the point of a maximal modification of the philosophical form of the question *par excellence*. The institution of this thought occurs as difference and repetition are understood as signifying the domain of that "more profound game" by which identities are fabricated or produced, by which, we might say, phenomena are birthed. Following Nietzsche, it is now a matter of sense (*sens*) and phenomena (*phénomène*), no longer appearance (*apparence*) and essence (*essence*).³ More importantly, though, appearance and essence are themselves phenomena to be accounted for by way of the more subterranean movements and displacements of difference and repetition. In this sense, *Difference and Repetition* would overturn the moral law (which is to say the *telos* and constraint of philosophy itself) by ascending toward the principles that would govern it, challenging the primary status of philosophical discourse by challenging, displacing, replacing and repeating its fundamental principles. This movement of ascent, which is understood by Deleuze as the movement of irony, is concomitant with a movement of descent, or humor, one that laughs in the face of the consequences of the law, its impotence and self-denial, its inability, properly speaking, to think and to move. Everything happens as the ground rises to the surface, the lightning dragging the sky behind it, the abstract line distributing itself in a space in accordance with no rule, the death of the father, the explosion of the sun. Following the significance of the last in this series of articulations, we might say everything happens in a space of disaster. And yet we must ask if in the course of *Difference and Repetition*, in the midst of the selective account of eternal return, the

³ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 3. Hereafter cited as *N*.

disaster has not been re-placed, situated so as to be accounted for, repaired with a repetition of form and inquiry which indeed repeats, albeit under the illusion of maximal modification. In raising these questions, are we forced to account for this failure, and thereby perhaps repeat it once again? It seems already that "the disaster ruins everything in leaving everything intact."⁴

I. Beginning(,) the transformation of grounds

With these words we return to the beginning of the writing of the disaster, a beginning which is no doubt properly philosophical, even if it is already multiple, invoking the names of Deleuze and Nietzsche, but also, as we will see, the fragment signified by the name of Blanchot. How does the proper philosophical beginning stand in relation to eternal return, and what is the significance of this question?

Although eternal return begins in a certain sense with the rejection of the possibility of ever beginning,⁵ or of ever having begun, we cannot overlook the fact that the heart of *Difference and Repetition*, the chapter entitled "The Image of Thought", begins with the question of beginning. Is the proper philosophical beginning thereby repeated, or is repetition the only philosophical beginning? To be sure, Deleuze affirms the latter, and that by which he begins must be understood as a repetition of the destruction of the true and the apparent worlds announced by Nietzsche in *Twilight of the Idols*. More precisely, Deleuze's repetition of Nietzsche's beginning concerns that text entitled "How the True World Finally Became a Fable", wherein Nietzsche recounts the series of beginnings that belong to the history of philosophy, each one repeating the deterioration of Platonism and the malignancy of the world of representation. Of course, these beginnings do not really properly begin, but this is not simply because they are instituted by way of repetition. Rather, they do not do so because they fail to meet the demand that a proper philosophical beginning be presuppositionless, as for example Descartes would have us believe. More precisely, they fail to properly

⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 1. Hereafter cited as *WD* 1. Trans. modified. See Maurice Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre* (Gallimard, 1989), 7.

⁵ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), no. 1062, 1066. Hereafter cited as *WP*.

begin because they presuppose both common sense and the good will of thought, a sort of prephilosophical image that determines the conformity of thought to a principle that at once prohibits its genesis. And in this sense, these "beginnings" do not even begin improperly, a failure that is concomitant with the sterility of their repetition. "[A]s a result," according to Deleuze, "the conditions of a philosophy which would be without any kind of presuppositions appear all the more clearly: instead of being supported by the moral image of thought, it would take as its point of departure a radical critique of this image and the 'postulates' it implies" (*DR* 132). But in what sense would this new critique condition philosophy? As we will see, it is a question of grounds.

In the strictest sense, critique has never done anything except condition philosophy, delimit its possibilities and legitimate the scope of its deployment. Unfortunately, this scope has been too narrowly determined, and the reflexivity or the power of critique, which is supposed to account for itself in critiquing itself, and which would thereby have to step outside itself, has proved to be but a slave to the rule of identity that is abstracted from insignificant facts such as recognition. The transcendental critique that is supposed to provide the conditions of all possible experience in fact provides only the conditions of banal experience, even if this proves to be the only experience properly speaking, namely, the experience of an epistemic continuity that is moral to the core. For insofar as it would take its point of departure from the familiar, critique would literally never do anything other than understand itself by way of what it presupposes and knows all too readily. To be sure, in this self-understanding, critique would submit itself to itself, thereby fulfilling its function, but at the expense of never ascending to the level of the more rigorous transcendental question whose rumor echoes below its foundations and towards which it aspires. Instead, it aspirates on itself, its transcendental not merely accounting for the banality of experience, but itself reproducing this banality in its very function. Although critique would critique itself, it would do so without accounting for itself in the sense that it would fail to open the *question* of its ground. And that is to say, it would critique itself precisely in accounting *only* for itself, and so would remain defective in proportion to the degree that it would suffice, its exercise synonymous with the work of solipsism. Critique, in short, would be nothing more than the activity of self-identity, and so would remain self-enclosed, bearing no relation to the outside, bearing, in fact, nothing. Critique—as conservative as the habit from which it is drawn, a game without risk, not even the simulacrum of thought.

Opposed to this determination of thought, the critique that would alone condition philosophy in the sense indicated by Deleuze is best understood in terms of the extension of the critique of self-identity to its limit, a limit the transgression of which shatters the very demarcation of philosophy, and which is consummate with the production or genitivity of thought. Far from the requirements of a critique of reason, be it pure or practical, that would grant to reason its legitimate scope of application, "we require a *genesis* of reason itself, and also a *genesis* of the understanding and its categories: what are the forces of reason and of the understanding? [...] What stands behind reason, in reason itself?" (N 91) Such, according to Deleuze, is the genealogical question raised by Nietzsche, and the function of genealogy in this sense is double. First, it unmasks the law, driving it beneath its own grounds, and second, in so doing, it reinstitutes the movement that is quelled or excluded by every law. Genealogy is therefore fundamentally revolutionary, and especially insofar as it revolves around the question of the fundament. Its task: a diagnostics of creation, both active and reactive, and a creative diagnostics. Otherwise put, critique and affirmation are bound together in the activity of genealogical inquiry. And it is in this sense that Deleuze insists concerning Nietzsche that "the differential element [in genealogy] is both a critique of the value of values and the positive element of creation" (N 2). Or again, from *Difference and Repetition*, that "the conditions of a true critique and a true creation are the same [*les mêmes*]: the destruction of an image of thought which presupposes itself and the *genesis* of the act of thinking in thought itself" (DR 139, my italics). The condition of the production of thought is thus synonymous with the destruction of critique understood as the critique of self-identity. In this way, Deleuze's insistence upon what we have called the solipsism of critique, its determination by the good will of thought and common sense, opens onto more subterranean and disquieting movements. Would the opening of this field itself be constituted as or by such movement? Our response to this question requires an attentiveness to the manner in which the passage through the critique of self-identity occurs.

The transition takes place by way of the question of what lies behind reason, and indeed of what lies in reason itself. What, in other words, remains dormant in the very ground of critique? The activity of grounding is understood from the outset as the operation of the *logos*, or of sufficient reason, where to ground is to determine the indeterminate (DR 272-74). And every ground, which is to say every determination,

oscillates between the stability it institutes and the indeterminacy it staves off. The genealogical question therefore asks what sort of indetermination or chaos might inhabit the self-identity of critique, what indeed might fragment the self-identity so carefully guarded by the world of representation. According to Deleuze, the dispute between Descartes and Kant concerning the determination of the subject, and so too the rule of identity, is particularly instructive. Taking his departure from common sense, from the "everyone knows, it cannot be denied," Descartes determines the subject as the thinking subject. Everyone knows what it means to exist and to think, and as soon as I conceive of this existence, I surely must be said to exist as a thinking being, this above all being clear and distinct. In this way, the prephilosophical image of thought is raised to the level of principle. Kant's objection consists in the observation that Descartes' determination of the undetermined—his grounding of the "I" by what he calls thinking—is unfounded insofar as it provides no clue as to how the determination of being by thinking would take place. Simply put, although I am conscious of myself in thought, "nothing in myself is thereby given for thought" other than the indeterminate fact of my being.⁶ Descartes' '*Cogito ergo sum*' is therefore analytically correct, indeed cannot be denied, but the *cogito* does not thereby determine the sense of the *sum*. A third "category" is required as a sort of supplement by which determination would be effected, namely, that of the form of time.⁷ Moreover, the introduction of the form of time alone accounts for the discovery of the transcendental, since without the distinction between what determines and determination as such, a distinction made possible first of all by the transcendental aesthetic, no determination or grounding properly speaking could be accounted for at all.⁸ But this means that Kant's

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1965), B 429. Hereafter cited as *CPR*.

⁷ Kant writes, "The proposition 'I think', in so far as it amounts to the assertion, 'I exist thinking', is no mere logical function, but determines the subject (which is then at the same time object) in respect of existence, and cannot take place without inner sense, the intuition of which presents the object not as thing in itself, but merely as appearance. There is here, therefore, not simply spontaneity of thought, but also receptivity of intuition, that is, the thought of myself applied to the empirical intuition of myself" (*CPR* B430).

⁸ In that case, the identity of the determined and the undetermined would collapse into a sort of formless identity, a sheer indeterminacy that could just as easily be understood in terms of an undetermined difference. From this position, Descartes' *cogito* would therefore be determined only by the fiat of the *Third Meditation*.

breakthrough arrives at the cost of a fractured self. To the spontaneity of the Cartesian *cogito*, Kant adds the passive self which experiences that activity rather than initiates it, the minimal requirement for a transcendental account of the determination of the self. The fractured self is, in other words, the necessary condition for the grounding of critique, what is required for the very determination of critique, and it is in just this sense that the ground always oscillates, beginning in fact to give way. Simply put, "the world of the ground is undermined by what it tries to exclude, by the simulacrum which draws it in only to fragment it. [...] An entire multiplicity rumbles underneath the 'sameness' of the Idea" (DR 275).

That this multiplicity is opened by the question of the form of time in the transcendental aesthetic is of the utmost significance. And yet we cannot fail to note that it arises only within — and ultimately promotes — the common sense and dogmatic image it would shake, constituting for Kant a necessary but temporary detour in the return of critique to the service of identity from which it is born. For the attempt to account for the compatibility of the moral and the phenomenal is itself a moral enterprise, an exercise that guarantees the very identity it presupposes by securing for it a space free from fracture, independent of the form of time. In this sense, we can say that Kant wants not so much to unify the first two critiques by way of a third as he desires to maintain the unity of a self-same subject across disparate fields. He therefore merely multiplies common sense across the lines of the three critiques (DR 137), the harmony of the faculties always resting in the unity of the subject, even if this subject experiences its own dissolution as it stands before the sublime. And this is to say that the epistemological dispute between Kant and Descartes that proves so illustrative is ultimately formed from the same moral soil, Kant's fractured subject redeemed by the presupposition of the moral law. For Kant, in short, the ground is moral. But to the extent that every ground is undermined by what it attempts to exclude, we can say that the form of time inhabits this ground, mining beneath the surface. As we will see, the explosivity of this form opens onto the simulacrum of eternal recurrence.

How do we interpret the fracture that undermines the rule of identity? Does it signify a duplicity of grounds, and so a transformation of ground? Would transformation (itself) then be the condition of the ground, the activity of critique transformed by and into the activity of transformation? Insofar as the ground would oscillate in being undermined, it would continually shift, and so remain in some sense groundless, dying in being born, belonging to the order of becoming

even in resisting it. For Deleuze, this constitutes nothing less than "the discovery of a ground behind every ground, the *relation* between the groundless and the ungrounded, the immediate reflection of the formless and the superior form which constitutes the eternal return" (DR 67, italics mine). Behind the ground of critique, then, beneath critique as the activity of grounding and self-identity, lies another ground, one that consists in the *relation* between the groundless and the now ungrounded or fractured. And this *relation* is further determined as the coexistence of the reflection of formlessness and a superior form. Understood in terms of this coexistence, the ground would indeed be transformed, constituted by what would be excluded from it by the strict sense of critique. And this is to say that the activity of determination not only presupposes the indeterminate in the formal sense that would be required in order for determination to function at all — a claim that ultimately belongs to the logic of origin(s) — but also that the very functioning of determination would repeat that which it excludes, and that it would do so precisely in its activity of exclusion. The determination of the formless must therefore be heard in the double genitive, the work of determination always the reflection of formlessness, its welling up beneath the "ground", its emergence constituting the very activity of determination. Surely, it is in this sense that Deleuze insists that "to ground is to metamorphose" (DR 154). The conception of ground that belongs to critique in the strict sense would therefore not only come to be through such transformation — it would in fact be nothing more than a particular distribution of this becoming, albeit one that has long dominated the history of the West. It is to just this metamorphosing that the fracture would point, but also to its double, becoming and the being of becoming. With this we arrive again at Nietzsche's impossible beginning, the eternal return, what Deleuze refers to as the form of formlessness (DR 55). It is the eternal return that rumbles beneath the surface.

When Nietzsche poses the question of the value of critique, this intensification of the question must not only evidence the fracture that permeates critical inquiry from the outset, but it must also expose the manner in which resistance to the fracture inhibits philosophical movement. And Deleuze's own treatment of the question of repetition and the failures of the rule of identity—its inability to account for difference, repetition, individuation, stupidity (*bêtise*), creation—must be understood as critique in just this sense, as opening thinking to the power of an aggression which has in fact always threatened to tear it apart. The fragmentation towards which it is drawn is demanded from

the outset insofar as the metamorphosing of the ground outstrips the law of identity. And this is to say that this transformation marks a change in the same, and thereby forces the same outside of itself, forces the difficulty of its non-identity. Determination is always the determination of difference, and according to Deleuze the challenge of eternal return arises in conjunction with the demand that this difference be repeated. He states,

That identity not be first, that it exist as a principle but as a second principle, as a principle *become*; that it revolve around the Different: such would be the nature of a Copernican revolution which opens up the possibility of difference having its own concept, rather than being maintained under the domination of a concept in general already understood as identical. Nietzsche meant nothing more than this by eternal return (DR 41).

Eternal recurrence and yet another Copernican revolution—whatever else might be said concerning this coupling, we cannot ignore the force of Deleuze's insistence that the poverty of representation makes itself felt at every turn. For the difference that lies under every determination cannot be illuminated by the work of analogy, as if the groundless and the ungrounded were related not only by way of something they held in common, but also as if the identity of that by which they would be related could be presupposed. What then would it mean for difference to have its own concept? We should not be surprised if we do not recognize such a concept, nor if it turns out to be impossible.

In fact, a concept of difference in Deleuze's sense requires above all a constant redistribution of the transcendental and the empirical. We have already seen how the rule of identity is abstracted from the form of common sense and the good will of thought, raised to the level of principle that secures the dominance and transcendental status of its meagre empirical origins. The world of representation thereby achieves a prominence that secures a structural blindness, restricting thought to a circulation within its vicious circle. The economy of this circulation retreats from both the question of the outside and that of the fracture, reducing the former to madness, the latter to error. The transcendental function of representation, therefore, not only fails to account for its own genesis, as we noted above, but it fails to account for this failure, one which accordingly both belongs to it and exceeds it. And it is in just this sense that "we always discover the necessity of reversing the supposed relations or divisions between the empirical and the transcendental"

when we encounter the limits of representation in this way (DR 167). In fact, it is this very failure that *forces* Deleuze to redistribute the transcendental in terms of difference and repetition: What is the "more profound" repetition behind that which proceeds by generality? What is the concept of difference behind every merely conceptual difference? What is the condition of the ground? Each of these questions repeats the transcendental structure of the question by way of an intensification and proliferation, each repetition selecting from the transcendental the possibility of repeating its form and raising it to a new level, all the while destroying the rule of its former deployment. According to Deleuze, the elevation of the transcendental cannot be understood as the movement of *Aufheben*, for nothing of the former distribution is preserved. To constantly reverse the relation of the transcendental and the empirical does not mean that we now begin with one, later the other; such a reversal is nothing more than a repetition of the economy of representation and its circularity. It means rather that these relations constantly be encountered otherwise than by way of representation, such that everything has to with the encounter that representation would prohibit, and that nevertheless haunts this very prohibition.

That which is experienced in the encounter situated at the limit of representation is nothing less than the principle of a superior transcendental empiricism, the problem of the ontological in all its difficulty. "Empiricism truly becomes transcendental, and aesthetics an apodictic discipline, only when we apprehend directly in the sensible that which can only be sensed, the very being of the sensible" (DR 57). To better understand this, it is helpful to juxtapose it with yet another passage from *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, one where Deleuze states that "[w]ithin critique it is not a matter of justification, but a different way of sensing: an other sensibility" (N 94).¹⁰ And this other sensibility is understood by Deleuze as a sort of category shift that opens within the space of the fracture, and that is expressed elsewhere in terms of the displacement of the possible by the virtual, the general by the universal, the particular by the singular. To be sure, each of these formulations

⁹ "Our problem concerns the essence of repetition," writes Deleuze. "It is a question of knowing why repetition cannot be explained by the form of identity in concepts or representations; in what sense it demands a superior 'positive' principle" (DR 18).

¹⁰ Translation altered. See Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1962), 108. "Dans la critique, il ne s'agit pas de justifier, mais de sentir autrement: une autre sensibilité." Tomlinson translates this: "The point of critique is not justification but a different way of feeling: another sensibility" (N 94).

testifies both to the domain and the difficulty of Deleuze's inquiry. Still, we miss the force of this thought-movement entirely if we understand it in terms of the institution of a new set of categories, and for this reason we must avoid fetishizing the language of transformation at all costs. It is not a matter of establishing the virtual, the universal or the singular: it is certainly not a matter of the reification of that which is expressed in these shifts, but rather concerns going to the heart of the space that this language attempts to hold open. For aside from the fact that such an understanding would quite literally be impossible, the understanding belonging to a predetermined distribution and legitimation of the "proper" categories, what interests Deleuze is the *structure* of the shift itself, and we are already in it in a certain sense. "It is not enough, therefore, to propose a new representation of movement; representation is already mediation. Rather, it is a *question of producing movement*, making movement itself a work, without interposition; of substituting direct signs for mediate representations," states Deleuze (DR 8, my italics). Can this structure be written in such a way that it is not smothered by its very articulation? Can writing bear the eternal return? What is presupposed in our posing these questions in terms of capacity or capability? "It is [indeed] a matter of knowing what it means to 'produce movement,' to repeat or to obtain by repetition" (DR 11).

In the "Preface" to *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze describes his work as a sort of philosophical collage. The names of Plato and Aristotle, Descartes and Kant, Leibniz and Hegel, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, to mention but a few, mark intensities within this complex, the points at which images border one another producing the contrasts and voicing the differentials by which the whole comes into view. And the same can be said for the two quotations we have just cited. In the first, Deleuze speaks directly of the question of producing movement, while in the second he places this production in quotation marks, suspending or interrupting its work, at least temporarily. The entire text is in fact constituted by such claims and their withdrawal, statements repeated by virtue of their suspension, always operating within the space of this give and take. If we are to understand what it means to repeat, or to obtain repetition, we must be attentive to this tension, the difference that substitutes direct signs for mediate representations, and the suspension of these direct signs in favor of what they would signal, this suspension itself repeating the withdrawal of that which exceeds representation, even at the risk of reinscription. The difference is situated along the lines of the being of the sensible and the problem of passage,

or of the passage of the being of the sensible into thought, its eruption, interruption, and corruption within the world of representation. We must therefore pay heed not only to the movement of Deleuze's text, but its very disappearance.

The being of the sensible, the object of encounter that forces thought and that alone constitutes the proper "object" of philosophical inquiry, is indeed imperceptible, inaccessible to the world of representation. This is because representation encounters the sensible only where it bears directly upon the senses in an object that can also be recalled, imagined, or conceived. In short, for representation, the sensible is that which cannot *only* be sensed, but rather that which can in principle be accounted for by faculties other than sense, for example by way of analogy or judgment, always presupposing the exercise of the senses and the other faculties in a common sense. Within representation, sensibility does indeed grasp what is given, but it does not aspire to that by which the given is given. Although Deleuze says for this very reason that the whole of phenomenology is constituted as a mere epiphenomenology (DR 52), we cannot help hearing at this point at least a distant resonance with Heidegger. As Deleuze puts it, "It is not a sensible being but the being of the sensible" that we are after. "It is not the given but that by which the given is given. It is therefore in a certain sense the imperceptible [*insensible*]" (DR 140). And like Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which opens with the perplexity of the *Sophist*, Deleuze insists that this being moves the soul, 'perplexes' it, forces it to pose a problem (ibid.), and that it does so only when encountered in its strangeness.

The "object" of philosophical discourse, the being of the sensible, is then that which is unsaid in critique, that which critique in the strictest sense cannot even say, that which in its very exclusion comes to the fore as forgotten. To be sure, it is not empirically forgotten, something that at one time must have been seen, heard, imagined or thought. What is encountered in the heart of critique is instead a sort of transcendental forgetting, and it is in this way that the encounter is itself raised to the level of the transcendental. The fracture of critique is therefore not merely the point of access to the transcendental, as if one could choose to proceed further or decline to do so, but rather the *very force* of the transcendental, the point of its intensification. Confronted with such an "object," and unaware of this confrontation precisely insofar as the "object" is imperceptible, the faculties find themselves before their limits, forced into a transcendental exercise drawn not from the empirical, but from that which is, strictly speaking, transcendent. In this

sense, "the transcendental form of a faculty is indistinguishable from its disjointed, superior or transcendent exercise" (DR 143). And this means that the forgetting here at issue is itself a positive power, that which forces a thought outside of representation. We must therefore return to a passage cited earlier, where Deleuze states: "the conditions of a true critique and a true creation are the same: the destruction of an image of thought which presupposes itself and the genesis of the act of thinking in thought itself" (DR 139). With this Deleuze indicates not so much that the conditions of true critique and true creation would be the same, but that insofar as this is the case, the destruction of the image of thought that presupposes itself is itself the genesis of the act of thinking in thought. Nietzsche puts the point more succinctly when he describes the Dionysian as "the eternal will to procreation, to fruitfulness, to recurrence; the feeling of the necessary unity of creation and destruction" (WP 1050). Or again, when he writes in *Ecce Homo* that "negating and destroying are *conditions* of saying Yes! (*Jasagen*)"¹¹

With this, we return to the question with which we began, the question of the condition, or rather, the question of the condition is returned to us in the form of an affirmation. According to Nietzsche, eternal return is that by which all other modes of thought will perish (WP 1053), and by which thinking and life will be returned to the innocence of *amor fati*. We in fact witness the destruction of the dogmatic image of thought throughout Nietzsche's work, especially when he diagnoses the need to believe in being, unity, the subject, cause and effect, the moral life, or grammar — in short, the necessity of the work of illusion in the preservation and constitution of a certain kind of life. But it is when his texts turn upon themselves, diagnosing their own restrictions and excesses that Nietzsche's work is at its most revolutionary. One such text he refers to as the high-point of his meditation, and it is no doubt the starting point for Deleuze's understanding of eternal return. It is found in *The Will to Power* no. 617, where Nietzsche writes: "That *everything recurs* is the most extreme *approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being*" (WP 617, trans. modified). To say that eternal recurrence *approximates* a world of being, even in this most extreme manner, in no way indicates an identification of the world of being with that of becoming. Two points of extreme importance follow. First, insofar as the world of being is nothing more than a useful fiction, eternal return approximates a necessary illusion. And the approximation of an illusion

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1989), "Why I am Destiny," 4. Italics mine.

is not even illusory, although perhaps no less necessary. More importantly, though, insofar as the usefulness of this fiction is proportionate to a condemnation of and discontent with becoming, eternal recurrence would be the approximation by which becoming would resist itself, contesting its own identity. Deleuze has something like this mind when he states, "*It is not the same which returns*, it is not the similar which returns; rather, the Same is the returning of that which returns, — *in other words, of the Different*; the similar is the returning of that which returns, — *in other words, of the Dissimilar*" (DR 300). In short, it is difference that returns, returning each time in all its difference.

Difference and Repetition sets out to account for just this difference, and so too the necessity of the *approximation* indicated in the high-point of Nietzsche's meditation. But if eternal return marks the deferral of difference and thereby repeats it, could we even understand this marking as an account of the movement of difference? What would be the difference between difference and repetition, on the one hand, and the thought of eternal return as an *approximation* thereof, on the other? Might this difference be disastrous, situated at the very limit of writing?

According to Deleuze, of course, eternal recurrence is selective. Whether it functions as a cosmological or physical doctrine, or as an ethical test, Deleuze understands this selection in terms of an intensification of the transcendental, as the repetition by which the transcendental encounters the ontological. Under both aspects, selection at once names the transcendental forgetting at the heart of critique and the force of affirmation. What is affirmed is the repetition and distribution of difference, or more precisely, the distribution of difference in repetition is itself the affirmation and being of becoming, a formula Deleuze does not hesitate to invoke.¹² He means by this above all that the return here at issue is not the return of a preformed, presupposed identity. Instead, what returns is nothing more than returning itself, the recurrence of becoming that is required if becoming is to become at all. It is for this very reason that Deleuze insists on the selection of eternal return, indicating that such a thought would be contradictory if the reactive returned as well as the active (N 72). We miss this point altogether if we insist upon the fact that Nietzsche is explicit that *everything* returns, active and reactive, and that Deleuze's interpretation fails insofar as it does not take this into account. For such an insistence would require that we conceive of the return as the return

¹² "The eternal return is the being of becoming" (N 71).

of existing identities, as the bare repetition of what already exists, and so in turn, as the closure and impossibility of becoming. It would, in other words, return us to the economy of representation. And even if such a return eventually proves necessary for Deleuze, it will occur along other lines. Neither the importance nor the failure of Deleuze's account of eternal recurrence has anything to do with its adherence to the letter of Nietzsche's text. Rather, the significance of Deleuze's account lies in its repetition of the *approximation* of a world of becoming to a world of being, in its pursuit of the most extreme ontological question and the expression of becoming therein. Indeed, according to Deleuze, eternal return expresses nothing less than the attainment of the univocity of being. It is the form of formlessness, the form of change or transformation itself, the unity of the univocity of being and the difference of which this being is univocally said. Such difference is realized only through repetition, and repetition produces only the realization of difference. It is no doubt in this sense that Deleuze says that "the only realized Ontology — in other words, the univocity of being — is repetition" (DR 303). Repetition in the eternal return expresses the univocity of being precisely insofar as returning is understood as the being of becoming, that which is only insofar as it continues to become. Repetition is on this account synonymous with selective being, for the repetition of becoming requires that much be forgotten, left behind, destroyed (DR 298). With the eternal return, difference is discovered, but behind difference there is nothing (DR 56).

It is at this point that everything collapses, although not because the selective account fails, but rather because it works all too well. If the selection of eternal return is to succeed, surely eternal return must submit itself to this selection, for Deleuze is emphatic that nothing that denies the selective principle returns. Otherwise put, if the repetition of eternal recurrence is understood as "the formless being of all differences, the formless power of the ground which carries every object to that extreme 'form' in which its representation becomes undone" (DR 57), surely such a repetition would have to undo its own account, contesting every form that arises, including its own. But this is to say that the selective doctrine of eternal return cannot pass the test of its own selection, or that it can do so only at the cost of its destruction. If the selective account of eternal recurrence returns, then its selection will have failed, proved illusory, sending back only itself, returning with its identity in tact. If it does not return, however, we still cannot affirm its selection in any fashion, since it would leave no trace of "itself," since

there would be nothing left to be affirmed. The selection of eternal return therefore confronts us as what Benjamin refers to as a purple passage, "one which is more successful than everything else and after which you suddenly do not know how to go on. Something has gone awry. It is as if there is such a thing as bad or unfruitful success ...".¹³ Such would be the success and the force of Deleuze's repetition of the transcendental, perhaps closing down that which it would open. And the structure of selection would thereby repeat the *force* of critique, situating itself within its own unravelling, disappearing in the midst of its very constitution. The eternal return of eternal return as the most burdensome thought, the repetition of oblivion, an impossible affirmation. Or to quote Nietzsche: "'Change' belongs to the essence, therefore also temporality: with this, however, the necessity of change has only been posited once more conceptually" (WP 1064). Our language and our thinking would bear the eternal return only in its effacement and disillusion.

II. ... Into Fragments ...

With this remark, Nietzsche calls our attention once again to the extremities of the ontological problematic, the limit where 'change' and essence, transformation and being, are said to belong together. In assigning 'change' to essence, Nietzsche indicates that its necessity is *only* posited once again, reduced to a conceptual necessity. But what is the necessity of this 'once more', and what of the qualification that accompanies it, the "*only* [...] once again" upon which Nietzsche insists? How does the necessity of change stand in relation to the need to repeat it conceptually? Could there be another sort of positing, one that would not be conceptual, or, on the other hand, perhaps a relation to 'change' outside of discursivity? Is this what would be indicated by the quotation marks that Nietzsche places around this most elusive word, suspending it such that its movement would be effected in its effacement and effaced in its effect? This question is indeed situated at the limits of language. While both Deleuze and Blanchot insist upon the necessity of plural speech, however, it is for Blanchot a necessity that "constitutes" the

¹³ Walter Benjamin, "Once is as Good as Never," in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, 1927-1934, trans. Rodney Livingstone, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 739.

exigency of the fragment. And it is to this exigency that we now turn, to the fragment of a conversation (*entretien*) or relation between....

The text comes from *The Infinite Conversation*, the section entitled "On a Change of Epoch: The Exigency of Return," and it is situated within a dialogue concerning the end of history and eternal return, the closure of metaphysics and the openness of the future. Blanchot suggests that we should be attentive to what is said with "the end of history," since the eternal return borrows its formulation from this end, even in exceeding it. For from a certain point of view, that *everything* returns presupposes a completed totality. The conversation begins with the question of how this returning might be said otherwise, with how the end of history might be marked differently.

"Saying it differently", what exceeds the whole, what (forever) exceeding the whole, can "say" itself "differently"?

"We know by hypothesis that this—this speech or this non-speech—still belongs to the whole.

--Certainly, by hypothesis.

--But, by hypothesis, it marks itself off from it.

--Yes, by hypothesis

--We therefore have something that is of the whole, that totalizes itself therein, and, as such, marks itself off from it."

Is this not what the Eternal Return says (neither hypothetically nor categorically)? (*IC* 276)

From the outset of this *entretien*, what is at issue is the possibility of a different kind of saying. And in the very first lines, Blanchot attempts to let this difference be said, doubling it by way of a repetition, but also withdrawing it. "Saying it differently," the first clause of the fragment, is at once pulled in two directions. It refers to both what would be said differently in repeating the question of history as eternal return, but also indicates that this different way of saying is expressed in what follows, in the phrase which says differently in its specific repetition of the question. For in the midst of the question that would say differently, both the saying and the difference it would bear are suspended in quotation marks, never to be returned to transparency. They are suspended because the question of a different way of saying, a saying situated outside the whole, is precisely what is in question.

The conversation that follows repeats the fragility that this language would bear, a repetition whose insignificance will be of the utmost

importance. From the outset it indicates that the speech that would "say differently" — and so too, then, the very speech in which we would now find ourselves — is known to belong to the whole by hypothesis. Indeed, "[c]ertainly, by hypothesis." And this is to say that the manner in which this speech would be known to belong to the whole would itself be uncertain, since no hypothesis is the bearer of certainty. To the extent that it is opened within the hypothetical, though, even this uncertainty belongs to the economy of calculation, throwing the dice only in accordance with the probability of a favorable return, and so offering no relief to the different way of saying that would belong to the cruelty and risk of eternal return. The conversation continues within this circuit, and suggests that at the same time, by hypothesis, such a saying would mark itself off from the whole, thereby indicating this saying as both belonging and not belonging. Insofar as this too is understood by way of the hypothetical, though, the insufficiency of the conversation to voice this difference becomes all too apparent. This inadequacy is marked as the conversation ends, and at the same time is repeated in this phrase, which (we will not say hypothetically) neither belongs nor does not belong to the conversation: "Is this not what the eternal return says (neither hypothetically nor categorically)?" writes Blanchot. The eternal return would then say what no communication could bear, bearing itself in this impossibility, in the failure of the language that would be drawn from it and that it draws along with it, such that "'the everything comes again' has already ruined itself."¹⁴ The exigency of return would arise in the space of the failure of its expression, its expression nothing but the failure that (cannot) bear(s) it, the expression of a neuter, *un pas au-dela*. Therefore, Blanchot repeats once again the exigency of repetition: "'Saying it differently', to write the return, is always already to affirm detour, just as it is to affirm by repetition difference without beginning or end" (*IC* 277).

What is the character of this affirmation, the affirmation of detour that Blanchot says is affirmed just as difference is affirmed by its repetition? If difference is affirmed by repetition, indeed affirmed in (all) its difference, the affirmation of *détour* that would be affirmed in the same way would necessarily be affirmed differently. Or, to put it otherwise, if the affirmation of difference in repetition is such that each repetition must differ in order to bear this difference, then surely the affirmation of detour must repeat this differentially. This differential is

¹⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, trans. Lycette Nelson (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 15. Hereafter cited as *SNB*.

marked in Blanchot's repetition of eternal return in the form of hesitation, an uncertainty that is by no means certain. He writes, "Let us gamble on the future: let us affirm the indeterminate relation with the future *as though* this indeterminacy, by the affirmation that confirms it, were to render the thought of return active" (*IC* 280, my italics). The differential of this repetition is marked by the 'as though', a hesitation that does not precede the dice throw, but rather accompanies it in awaiting the fall of the dice to the earth. Blanchot's affirmation, in short, hesitates to affirm the being of becoming, what Deleuze also refers to as the becoming-identical of becoming (*DR* 41). It hesitates, in other words, to affirm Deleuze's affirmation, and perhaps thereby repeats it. *As if* we do not know what it would mean for return to return as active, our relation to the return a relation constituted by what Blanchot calls the "greatest power of lack" that belongs to the future. In this sense, "[o]ne cannot [even] believe in the eternal return. This is its only guarantee, its 'verification'" (*SNB* 14). Such would be the difference of eternal return as deferral, affirmation coming always too late or too early, the affirmation of the impossibility of affirmation.

To forget that eternal return is a vertiginous movement endowed with force would therefore be to return to the return the force of forgetting. Saying this, to quote Blanchot, "we say almost nothing," but neither do we simply repeat Deleuze's claim that eternal return indicates that difference lies behind everything, and behind difference there is nothing. Rather, we repeat it differentially, and so take from it the lesson it would give, all the while leaving it behind. It is in this sense that the exigency of the fragment opens within the failure of the selective doctrine, reminding us that this failure perhaps says almost nothing. And we should not underestimate the weakness of this conditional, which entreats (*entretien*) the thought of eternal return to the point of its collapse, returning to it the fragmentation of its expression. To forget that eternal return is a vertiginous movement endowed with force is thus also to remember, although without repairing or putting back together, Nietzsche's notes from *The Will to Power* 1057, where he indicates not only the need for a means by which eternal return would be endured, but also the necessity of its disposal. To forget that eternal return is such a movement is to return the return to the space of the fragment, the neuter, to enter into the destructive element. Almost nothing opens from the space of the eternal return of the fragment — this, perhaps, we have almost said. And so to repeat once again, "everything is played out in the

manner in which the thought of eternal return is communicated," and so in the oblivion that this communication in all its repetition would bear.