

Preface: The Myth of the Eternal Return

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Basically, time is a physical magnitude suitable for measuring the duration of events or the separation of objects. That said, in occidental culture time is characterized by a linear projection (past – present – future) – an aspect profoundly steeped in Judaeo-Christian thinking; this projection also characterizes space at microcosmic and macrocosmic levels. From this – in general terms and accounting for exceptions – we envisage our space and our time as unique, irreversible: nothing that has happened will again; the importance that we give our time and space comes out of their irreversibility.

On this point, the majority of cosmologies show their particular differences with respect to that of our Western civilization. For the most part in Asian, African and indigenous American cosmologies, the time and space of the cosmos are marked by a circular projection, at both microcosmic and macrocosmic levels. Following on from this general conception, any space and any time are not unique; they will come again. By positing that something that has come to pass will again come to pass, the myth of the Eternal Return contradicts the principle of irreversibility.

In view of this disparity in the perception of the passing of time, Cultural Mythcriticism can provide a number of illuminating hints regarding the Eternal Return—every myth invokes an absolute cosmogony or eschatology.

1. Eliade: “the end of the world has already taken place”

This categorical statement from the historian of religion accurately reflects the imagined world of primitive societies, for whom the birth and death of the universe are incessant. These societies do not conceive of the passing of life and epochs as separate, yoked to a continuous profane time like our own, rather as regulated – following a transhistorical model – by a series of archetypes that give all of their metaphysical value to human existence. From this pre-Socratic perspective, every *ad quem* is only apparent, as is any value given to the objects of the exterior world: all of these objects fundamentally depend on their participation in a transcendental reality. A vulgar stone may, by virtue of its symbolic value, or its origin (celestial or marine), acquire a sacred character (a meteorite, a pearl). The same applies to human acts. Nourishment or marriage are not mere physical operations, rather they reproduce a primordial act, repeat a mythical example: the communion with nature or another human being; properly speaking, archaic peoples knew not any act that had not been lived previously by another with whom they established a transhistorical and, in a certain sense, sacred communion.

Let us take the case of the flood. All cosmic cataclysms tell of the destruction of the world and the annihilation of humanity, save for a few survivors: the end of one humanity and the appearance of another. From this eschatology, a virgin earth emerges, the symbol of a cosmogony, which leads to another eschatology and so on. This knowledge of universal happening would disappear without representation: New Year's rituals in Semitic civilizations pour libations that symbolize the coming of life-giving rains and, above all, the recreation of the world. But we must be careful not to limit ourselves to a material interpretation. These ceremonies go far beyond a merely physical sense; they symbolize another metaphysics and cosmos: the flood signifies the end of a world branded by evil, the victory over the flood as an "incarnation of chaos" and the emergence of a new world.

2. Kalachakra, the wheel of time

In Jainist cosmology (Jainism is an ancient religion of India, which today has around 5 million followers) both the universe and time lack beginning and end. From the three parts into which the universe is divided (upper, middle and lower), the time of our part is represented through a wheel (*Kalachakra*) which turns ceaselessly, divided into two aeons (series or half-rotations), one descending (*avasarpīī*) and another ascending (*utsarpīī*); each half-rotation contains six epochs or eras (*ara*). The ascendant series is characterized by the progressive character of the duration of its epochs, the happiness and prosperity of humanity, their longevity and size, their goodness and virtue. The descendant series is characterized as exactly the opposite. Thus, we now live in the fifth stage, which began in 522 AD, which will last 21,000 years, without spiritual guide and with an abundance of evil, while in the sixth stage the totally depraved humans will barely measure a metre and a half, and will only live 20 years. When the sixth stage or *ara* of this descending aeon or *avasarpīī* concludes, our universe will wake up in the first *ara*, at the beginning of the ascending aeon or *utsarpīī*. In ethico-chronological terms: when the stage following our own descends – because of human wickedness and the destruction of nature – to the point of being almost unbearable, the ascending series will begin, and so on *in æternum*. The Hindu conception of time coincides, basically, with that of Jainism, as well as Mayan cosmologies.

In these cultures, in general, cosmogonic chronology and eschatology is circular and, as a consequence, infinite, eternal: ceaselessly turning and returning. Gods are symbolic personifications of the laws that govern the flow of life forces; that is to say, they appear with those forces and with them they disappear. To put it another way, the gods are not eternal. To put it yet more starkly: we are before the authentic Eternal Return.

3. Persephone: the return of the seasons

Greek mythology shares, for the most part, this circular representation. The myth of Persephone is of great utility in the study of its cosmogonic and eschatological implications. The most illuminating and emotive telling of this myth is provided by the anonymously authored *Hymn to Demeter* (7th century BC). Persephone relaxes in the company of friends and nymphs in a meadow carpeted with flowers in Nyssa (Cappadocia). Distracted whilst cutting a daffodil, Pluto abducts her and drags her

down into the Underworld. We all know the sequence of events: the waywardness of her mother, Demeter; the visit to Eleusis; frustration with the rituals carried out on Prince Demophoön; the construction of the temple in honour of the goddess; the barren earth; Zeus sending Hermes to the Underworld; the rescue of young Persephone and the final compromise: she will spend six months in Hades, six on the surface. No sooner does Demeter accept the deal than the Earth begins to cover itself with flowers and leaves once more.

The hymn to Demeter has been interpreted by numerous anthropologists as a personification of the crop cycle, a seed which spends various winter months interred beneath the ground before coming back to life. Many others have criticised, not without reason, the simplifications presented by this reading. What is clear is that the chronology of any mythical cycle, in addition to lending itself to multiple interpretations, can provide a key to the myth of the Eternal Return.

Catabasis and anabasis present themselves as multi-faceted and every voyage into the Underworld (from our world to that one, and the return) irresistibly invites a perception of repetition: from one voyage our imagination makes many; the descent and ascent become themselves “repetitive”. The reason for this imaginative process is highlighted in the circular movement – anabasis and catabasis form a cycle – circular by definition, and similar to the *Kalachakra*, the wheel of Jainism.

4. Nietzsche: “the greatest burden”

Numerous works of philosophy and literature can be related to the Eternal Return (Gnosticism, neo-Platonism, occultism, illuminism), but none have achieved such success as Nietzsche’s cosmological conception, first articulated in *The Gay Science* and subsequently developed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Here it becomes evident that the Eternal Return is the philosophy of indifference. We return to the absolutely relative worlds of the Asian and indigenous American cosmologies: if everything is equivalent, everything is indifferent: the heavens, Earth, gods, human kingdoms, animal, vegetable or inert. Everything is futile, not only from a philosophical perspective, but also from a moral one, “beyond good and evil”.

For Zarathustra, all of the eternities and every instant converge. Before this revelation, it is necessary to adopt a negative attitude (to rebel against this disquieting absurdity), or a positive one (embrace the will to triumph over time, make the agonizing “what happened” a “as I wanted it”). The prophet takes the Eternal Return as the utmost truth.

In his argument, Nietzsche rejected decisively any rectilinear, historical culture, not only the Christian (where time is determined by a succession that is clearly differentiated: creation, fall, redemption), but also whatever other that proposes a completely transformed future (Marxist, technological or capitalist). This Nietzschean critique is the critique of the modern epoch from the position of subjective liberty. Modernity, established following the Enlightenment, appears overburdened with historical knowledge. Against the compensatory illusion of historicist memory, Nietzsche proposes exploding the rational façade of modernity.

Put forward with mythological aspects, but in by any means mythical, Nietzschean thought is, on principle, anti-transcendental. Time ceases to be the physical

scale we use to measure things, and converts itself into a pure cyclical movement, without beginning or end, in an absolute negation of whatever metaphysical structure of the world. That said, if time is marked only by eternal revolution, equally all things are in time, in a repetitive succession that evens them out between each other: everything is equal to everything else and, thus, everything is nothing. Nihilism and indifference become identified with each other.

With respect to the indigenous American and Asian cosmologies, Nietzsche shares the circularity of time: in a broader sense, we can say that he adds his doctrine of the Eternal Return to them. But two differences impede us in speaking of myth in the philosopher's work. In the first place, there is no absolute event here; his relativism is nihilistic. Second, there exists only a will here, that of the man who either wants or rejects all possible events. It is not like this in Asian and indigenous American cosmologies, impregnated as they are with the absolute nature of all events and infiltrated with a doctrine of salvation, of the liberation of the soul from all material bonds. Distinct from Nietzschean thought, Asian and indigenous American cosmologies are open to transcendence and, consequently, their literatures are amenable to mythocritical analysis.

There is nothing more paradoxical than concluding a preface about the Eternal Return. Rather, it is incumbent on us to present a survey. In the first instance, it is necessary to ask what induces this cyclical perception of the universe, common to so many cosmologies in every epoch and latitude: the desire to master the future; the terror the inexorable passing of time inspires – the principal vector of existential emptiness (*horror vacui*); or, the impression left in our imaginations by the continual repetition of events? Humans are beings of routine.

Secondly, s/he is also a being who is eager for knowledge. Along these lines, it is important to know why the Eternal Return is indissociable from other myths pertaining to knowledge: catabasis (Persephone, Orpheus, Theseus, Eneas) and numerous prophecies reveal (*Ultima Thule, Apocalypse, Chilam Balam of Chumayel*), in their own way, what has happened and what will. Probing other cultures and ourselves, we are beings of habit who crave understanding of our enigmatic world.

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