The Truth of Extinction

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of ‘world history’, but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die. – One might invent such a fable, and yet he still would not have adequately illustrated how miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature. There were eternities during which it did not exist. And when it is all over with the human intellect, nothing will have happened.

(Nietzsche 1873)¹

Let us guard against saying death is the opposite of life; the living creature is simply a kind of dead creature, and a very rare kind.

(Nietzsche 1882)²

7.1 Nietzsche’s fable

_Nothing will have happened_: Nietzsche’s ‘fable’ perfectly distils nihilism’s most disquieting suggestion: that from the original emergence of organic sentience to the ultimate extinction of human sapience ‘nothing will have happened’. Neither knowing nor feeling, neither living nor dying, amounts to a difference that makes a difference – ‘becoming aims
at nothing and achieves nothing.’ Yet Nietzsche’s entire philosophy is dedicated to overcoming this nihilistic conjecture. It is nihilism understood as the triumph of indeterminate negation, as assertion of the ultimate indifference or convertibility of being and becoming, truth and lie, reality and appearance, that Nietzsche seeks to vanquish by affirming the coincidence of being (identity) and becoming (difference) in a gesture that would simultaneously overthrow both their metaphysical distinction and their nihilistic indistinction. The instrument of this overturning and the focus of this affirmation are provided by the hypothesis of eternal recurrence, Nietzsche’s ‘thought of thoughts’, which is poised at that ‘mid-point’ of (Western) history marking not only the culmination of European nihilism, but also the possibility of its overcoming.

According to Nietzsche, nihilism reaches its apogee in the pivotal moment when truth, hitherto the supreme value, turns against itself – for it is ‘truthfulness’ itself that calls the value of ‘truth’ into question, thereby subverting all known and knowable values, specifically the valuing of reality over appearance and knowledge over life. But truth, the venerable guarantor of value, is also the patron of belief, since for Nietzsche every form of belief is a ‘holding-something-true’. Consequently, the self-undermining of truth calls the very possibility of belief into question: ‘The most extreme form of nihilism would be the view that every belief, every holding-something-true is necessarily false because there is no true world’ (1968: §15). Yet as Nietzsche recognized, the collapse of belief in the true world also entails the dissolution of belief in the apparent world, since the latter was defined in contradistinction to the former. Disbelief in any reality beyond appearance cannot be converted into belief in the reality of appearance. Since the collapse of the reality–appearance distinction undermines the intrinsic connection between belief and truth, it is not something that can be straightforwardly endorsed or ‘believed in’. Thus nihilism appears to undermine itself because it is incompatible with any belief – it seems that it cannot be believed in, for if nothing is true, then neither is the claim that ‘nothing is true’. As a self-proclaimed ‘perfect nihilist’, Nietzsche refuses to retreat from this aporia and insists that it must be traversed, for nihilism can only be overcome from within. How then are we to think the apparently unthinkable thought that nothing is true, which, for Nietzsche, looms at the nadir of nihilism, yet also harbours the key to its overcoming?

For Nietzsche, this aporia of nihilism is simultaneously crystallized and dissolved in the thought of eternal recurrence. The thought of