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## The Rupture and The Rapture: Eternity in Jan Patočka and Krzysztof Michalski

The author interprets Michalski's philosophical account of eternity presented in his last book on Nietzsche – *The Flame of Eternity. An Interpretation of Nietzsche's Thought*. It is argued that in order to understand Michalski's position one has to contextualize his philosophy, and refer to Heidegger's and Patočka's thought. The author tracks the way of how to understand the problem of eternity by reference to Ancient Greek philosophy, e.g., Anaximander. The thesis presented in the paper is that whereas for Patočka human temporality attains meaning through a movement of freedom in the rupture of eternity, for Michalski human temporality attains meaning through a movement of desire in the rapture of eternity.

**Key words:** Eternity, time, Nietzsche, Patočka, Michalski

### I

A primary concern with eternity once characterized the orientation and significance of philosophical thought. To engage in a life of thinking crystallized around an abiding attunement to eternity as concept, value, and question. This philosophical concern has long become eclipsed in the modern world, if not outright rejected, with its single-minded attention to the temporal condition of human existence, its fragility and finitude. This eclipse of eternity in the light of temporality's sovereign presence defines some of the most influential philosophical approaches to the human condition since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. If the question of time remains inseparable from the question of human existence, such that to ask "what is time?" is to ask in the same breath "who are we?," this double-question

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no longer rests upon a third point of reference with the question “what is eternity?” or better: how is eternity manifest in human experience? Even as Augustine’s meditations on time in the *Confessions* are often invoked in such modern analyses of temporality, as with Edmund Husserl’s 1904–1905 lectures on inner time-consciousness, the alignment of Augustine’s reflections on the temporal condition of human life towards eternity is rarely, if at all, noticed, let alone followed or honored (see de Warren 2016a).

Martin Heidegger’s 1924 lecture *The Concept of Time* is in this respect instructive. Heidegger launches into the question of time with a rejection of a certain formulation of the relation between time and eternity. As he writes:

If time finds its meaning in eternity, then it must be understood starting from eternity. The point of departure and path of this inquiry are thereby indicated in advance: from eternity to time. This way of posing the question is fine, provided that we have the aforementioned point of departure at our disposal, that is, that we are acquainted with eternity and adequately understand it (Heidegger 1992: 1).

In questioning whether human existence is able to take eternity as a point of departure for a reflection on time, Heidegger repeats Augustine’s inversion of the relation between time and eternity. Rather than move from eternity to time (as does Plotinus in the *Enneads*), Augustine in the *Confessions* proceeds from time to eternity. It is through a reflection on the temporal condition of human existence that we arrive at eternity. Time finds its meaning in eternity only to the extent that we have discovered eternity within time. This movement of ascend towards the eternal as the inverse image of the descent of eternity into time brings into one spiraling motion the circuit between time and eternity in the narrative structure of the *Confessions*. Human life is a moving image of eternity that seeks to return to the eternal life from which it first fell. But, even as Heidegger repeats an Augustinian inversion of the relationship between time and eternity, Heidegger’s own analysis of the temporal human condition, as sketched in his 1924 lecture, further elaborated during his Marburg lectures in the mid-1920s, and presented in *Sein und Zeit*, decidedly breaks with Augustine’s alignment of human temporality towards eternity. With an insistence on the authenticity of being-towards-death and the ecstatic structure of temporality, time is not derivative from eternity; on contrary, eternity becomes derived from time in so far as any conception of eternity (as well as time understood as chronology) must draw upon Dasein’s original temporality. In Heidegger’s thinking, human existence repossesses itself from its perpetual distention in the world, not through any appeal to eternal life, but within temporality itself in the turning, or conversion, of Dasein back upon itself in its authentic being towards its own death. If, as Heidegger (1992: 21) remarks in his 1924 lecture, “time

*itself* is meaningless; time is temporal,” then by the same token, eternity itself is meaningless; it is temporal.

With this claim, Heidegger rejects the derivation of time from eternity as well as the exclusive determination of temporal existence in terms of “world-time” or chronological time. Such conceptions of time and eternity, as well as the very contrast between time and eternity, are beholden to a metaphysics of presence and being-present. On Heidegger’s reading, the history of the concept of time is underwritten by an unquestioned adherence to Aristotle’s seminal definition of time as the number of motion with regard to the before and after with its primacy of the now (the present). Within the history of metaphysics, eternity is likewise understood in terms of two alternatives: either as a timeless form of existence or as a permanent form of existence. With both notions, eternity is thought in terms of being-present. Whereas the first notion understands eternity as being-present beyond time, and often ascribed to a perfect or most real being, the second notion understands eternity as being-present for all time.

Linguists have noted that the Greek term for eternity (αἰών) carries an original meaning of “life” with different possible significations (force of life, quality of life, span of life) (Benveniste 1937). In light of this connection between “eternity” and “life,” Heidegger’s statement, quoted above, can be read as a declaration that the meaning of human existence, or Dasein’s temporality, should not be made dependent upon any conception of eternal life, either as an aspiration for eternal life, or immortality, or in relation to an eternal life, or God. This philosophical eclipsing of eternity is mirrored in the cultural and social manifestations of modernity’s experience of time: the acceleration of time, the fragmentation of time, the fetishism of the moment, etc. Much as eternity no longer figures substantially within philosophical reflection, it no longer enjoys any salient place within the relentless, restless pace of modern life. We simply no longer have any patience for eternity; it can no longer be endured for the sake of time.

This intrinsic connection between modernity and eternity is insightfully formulated in Leo Strauss’s observation that

Modern thought reaches its culmination, its highest self-consciousness, in the most radical historicism, i.e., in explicitly condemning to oblivion the notion of eternity. For oblivion of eternity, or, in other words, estrangement from man’s deepest desire and therewith from the primary issues, is the price modern may have to pay, from the very beginning, for attempting to be absolutely sovereign, to become the master and the owner of nature, to conquer chance (Strauss 1957: 55).

Modernity is the forgetfulness of eternity and its indispensable significance for human life. In this forgetting, the “deepest desire” of human existence becomes obscured, as the desire for eternity itself. This eclipsing of the desire for eternity

takes the form of an heightened historical and temporal self-consciousness, even as this modern consciousness rests on self-forgetting and misrecognition, not so much in terms of a lack of self-knowledge, but as the extinguishing of the “deepest desire” of human life. Bereft of any passion for eternity, what remains is an obsession with time and how we never have enough of it. For Strauss, this amnesia of modernity’s self-consciousness is directly connected to the condition of nihilism and the assumed sovereignty of modern subjectivity. The quest for mastery over the totality of beings expresses itself with the infinite desire to conquer chance and to command our encounter with the world according to the totalizing logic of management, optimization, and utility.

Strauss was not alone in recognizing and responding in his own way to modernity’s “oblivion of eternity.” This concern unites a disparate constellation of philosophers (disparate in the sense that each was not necessarily known or influenced by the others) and forms a counter-historical narrative to the history of the problem of time in 20<sup>th</sup>-century thought. On this alternative narrative, the “analytic of finitude,” the “empirical-transcendental doublet,” the “cogito and its unthought” and “the retreat and return of the origin” – to borrow here Michel Foucault’s useful four-fold characterization of the modern *episteme* – would have as its secret plot the forgetting of eternity. If, as Foucault proposes at the end of *Les mots et les choses*, “some event of which we at the moment do no more than sense the possibility (...) were to cause” the modern *episteme* to collapse, so that “one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea,” this event would, when cast in terms of modernity’s essential forgetting of eternity, take the form of an *anamnesis* of eternity (Foucault 1989: 422). Effaced by the waves of time’s unyielding expanse, the human might nonetheless emerge once again, re-born, in the image of an as yet unimagined eternity.

Among those philosophers committed to a recuperation of eternity against modernity’s oblivion, Jan Patočka and Krzysztof Michalski each occupies a unique place in the broader constellation of contemporary philosophical conceptions of eternity. Whereas the significance and configuration of eternity has been explored in Bergson, Rosenzweig, Whitehead, and Deleuze, the same cannot be said of either Patočka or (and especially) Michalski (see Latta 2014; Williams 2011) Unlike these other better known figures, neither Patočka or Michalski produced any systematic exposition of their philosophical views. Both thinkers, moreover, matured philosophically in the political climate of Eastern Europe, thus giving their respective philosophical thinking (as well as intellectual engagement) an unmistakable political edge that lines their common cause to “care of the soul” and “life in truth.” As I shall explore in this paper, both reject classical metaphysical notions of eternity as either a timeless present or a permanent present, as well as any metaphysical idea of immortality. Each develops instead a view of eternity

as an interruption and resistance within temporal existence. This emphasis on eternity as an instance of temporal disruption does not rely on any traditional notion of the “now” in the form of being-present. The instant of eternity is not identifiable as a moment, or now, whether as a permanent present or present without temporal affect. Yet, despite these significant aspects of commonality, Patočka and Michalski diverge significantly in their fundamental conception of how human life becomes meaningful in view of eternity’s disruptions. As I shall propose, whereas for Patočka human temporality attains meaning through a movement of *freedom in the rupture of eternity*, for Michalski human temporality attains meaning through a movement of *desire in the rapture of eternity*.

## II

The concept of eternity is only delineated in fragmentary ways in Patočka’s writings: to the degree that Patočka’s concern with eternity changed over the course of his thinking and to the degree that Patočka did not aspire to a systematic exposition of his thinking during its development. As a defining theme of Patočka’s thinking, the concept of eternity is plotted according to a number of topical coordinates: the care of the soul, the idea Europe, the question of the whole, the movement of freedom, and the meaning of history. Central to Patočka’s guiding claim is the thought that the Idea of Europe, the praxis of politics, and the pursuit of philosophy are each predicated on the discovery of eternity as a vital problem for human existence, not, however, in terms of a desired immortality and promise of existence beyond human mortality, but as a certain authentic shaping of life within the bounds of finite human existence. As Patočka remarks in his home-seminars *Plato and Europe*, “the philosophical discovery of eternity is a peculiar thing.” The peculiarity of this *philosophical* discovery is not *that* human beings have with the epoch of Greek thought and culture become concerned with eternity, but rather *how* this concern becomes grasped in an original way as opening the possibility of a life in truth, philosophically as well as politically. Thus, although mythical consciousness before the Greek discovery of eternity was thoroughly imbued with an aspiration for immortality and vision of eternity (as Patočka explores in his interpretations of the Gilgamesh epic and the Genesis narrative), it is only with the advent of philosophy as “care for the soul” in view of truthful existence (truth of the self in relation to the truth of the whole) that eternity becomes properly discovered, not as an answer to the predicament of the human condition (as with a vision of immortality), but as a fundamental form of questioning and orientation in the world. The peculiarity of this philosophical discovery is this peculiarity of living in the form of an unsettled question and unsettling concern for *more*

than living in the form of time, that is, temporally, without any suppression or abandonment of what makes temporal existence so singular: its finitude.

A further peculiarity of the Greek discovery of eternity is its tragic destiny for Western civilization, or Europe. As roughly delineated and intermittently explored in Patočka's *Heretical Essays, Plato and Europe*, and other writings, the Greek discovery of eternity produced a double-effect: the institution of eternity as an original concern of human existence, thus thrusting human life into history properly speaking, and the institution of the forgetting and obscuring of this original concern. This dimension of self-oblivion inscribed within the destiny of this epochal discovery passes through, on Patočka's telling, four essential inflection points; with each inflection, there is a further unveiling of the value and significance of eternity for human life as well as a further progression in its forgetting and obscuring: Pre-Socratic thinking, Plato, Christianity, Nietzsche. The edges of these four epochal inflections are not clean; each should be understood as a transition and transformation that thickens the narrative of the forgetting of eternity as the veritable plot of Western history leading to the modern age. Patočka does not argue for any *single* moment of origin (the origin is always in the plural): the so-called "original discovery" of the problem of eternity as the question of the care of the soul in Plato is itself preceded by an "original discovery" of eternity in Pre-Socratic fragments, which, in turn, is preceded by an "original discovery" of the problem of mortality, or human finitude, in the Epic of Gilgamesh and Greek tragedy (see de Warren 2016b). In the same vein, the eclipse of eternity with the culmination of the modern age in Nietzsche and the metaphysical catastrophe of 20<sup>th</sup> century does not announce an end without an after life. The question of the end issues from what remains after the end. Ever since "the" beginning, Europe remained after Europe (much as philosophy remained after philosophy), as both what comes *after* the end and as what it is *after* from the beginning.

The initial decisive impulse in this imbricated discovery of eternity (as both its unveiling and veiling, remembrance and forgetting) is located by Patočka in the Pre-Socratic fragments and, in particular, with Anaximander. In this regard, Patočka follows in the vein of Heidegger's approach to the Pre-Socratic thinkers; his own reading of Anaximander is especially under the sway of Heidegger's thinking. In his 1946 essay "Der Spruch des Anaximander," Heidegger proposes that "das Geschick des Abend-Landes hängt an der Übersetzung des Wortes εἶναι" (Heidegger 1980: 340). In the fragments of Anaximander, Heidegger identifies an unthought ambiguity in the employment of the Greek participle ὄν. As Heidegger comments: "Thus ὄν says 'being' in the sense of to be a being; at the same time it names a being which is. In the duality of the participial significance of ὄν the distinction between 'to be' and 'a being' lies concealed" (Heidegger 1975: 32). This concealment belies and displaces from view, and hence thinking, the ontological

difference between “beings” and “Being.” It is in fact this tension within the participle ὄν, as either a nominal meaning or verbal meaning (“to be” and “to being,” as it were), upon which the metaphysical forgetting of being is grounded and propelled. As Heidegger argues, “the history of Being begins with the oblivion of Being, since Being – together with its essence, its distinction from entities – keeps to itself.” Insofar as this distinction must remain unthought and forgotten for there to be an history of metaphysics, “the oblivion of Being is oblivion of the distinction between Being and beings” (Heidegger 1975: 50). Heidegger additionally discerns in the Greek τὸ χρεών what he calls a first naming of being; it is a naming that bespeaks an experience of being which will become named again, and differently, with other critical (and fateful) terms of Greek thinking: Μοῖρα in Parmenides, Λόγος in Heraclitus, ἰδέα in Plato, and ἐνέργεια in Aristotle. In the fragments of Anaximander, as “the oldest fragment of Western thinking,” Heidegger understands the event of Being – “presencing” – as enjoined in a two-fold absence, as approach to and passing from, or what he terms “jointure” (*Fuge*) – the name given by Heidegger to Anaximander’s Greek term Δίκη (“justice”). Within the reigning principle of “justice” – jointure – there pervades “injustice” or “disjointure” as marking the traces of an ontological difference (Heidegger 1980: 317).<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to Heidegger’s reading, Patočka repeatedly emphasizes in *Plato and Europe* the Greek experience of being as ἀγήρωσ (“ageless” or “never-aging”), thus placing an accent on the dimension of “eternity” as essential for grasping both the difference between beings and Being as well as the consequences of its metaphysical oblivion. For Patočka, it is revealing that Anaximander characterizes τὸ ἀπειρον (“the boundless” or “the infinite”) as ἀγήρωσ in a comparable sense with the Homeric image of the gods as ἀθάνατος καὶ ἀγήρωσ (“immortal and ageless”).<sup>3</sup> As Marcel Conche notes, the boundless as eternal means in Anaximander’s thought “what retains its vital force” (Conche 1991: 148–149). As “deathless” and “imperishable,” as alive and divine, τὸ ἀπειρον, as the principle of all things, “encompasses and steers all things,” where the conjunction of “to steer”/“to guide” and “to encompass”/“to pervade” in Anaximander’s fragment possess cosmological *and* political significance (Naddaf 2005: 66). Patočka lends a self-marking turn (i.e., marking his own thinking) to the meaning of “agelessness of being” in speaking of the resistance within the ebb and flow of manifestation to any seamless consolidation of “what-is” into “being-present.” With this inflection of the agelessness of being as resistance, not only prosaically towards temporal ebb and flow, but more revealing, as resistance to the seamless smoothing, as it

<sup>2</sup> See also the 1941 lectures *Grundbegriffe*. The Anaximander fragment: “Whence things have their origin, there they must also pass away according to necessity; for they must pay penalty and be judged for their injustice, according to the ordinance of time.”

<sup>3</sup> Anaximander, DK 12, A 11, B2.

were, of the constitutive tension within the Greek participle ὄν (as marking the ontological difference), Patočka seeks to reanimate Anaximander's discovery of το ἀπειρον as the ἀρχή ("source" or "principle") of all things. Patočka attempts to extend the experience of what Heidegger called the "epoché of being" (*die Epoche des Seins*) – the manner in which being withholds itself from its own allowance of manifestation – in a more intrepid form in which το ἀπειρον in its "agelessness" exceeds and resists any seamless manifestation. The various names of philosophical thought *given* to this original experience of eternity would thus translate an undecidable principle of resistance against any translation or manifestation of itself. The "substrate" (το ὑποκειμενον) of "the agelessness of infinite" is neither "being" nor a material or spatial thing, but, as Patočka tele-graphs through this reading, freedom as an unbounded resistance against the decline of the world and as an elevation of vitality, or life itself.

Patočka lessens to the point of erasure an *ontological* determination of eternity in speaking repeatedly of eternity as *resistance*. As Patočka proposes: "It [*eternity*] is after all a resistance, a battle against that fall, against time, against the entire declining tendency of the world and of life. In a certain sense, this battle is understandably futile, but in another sense it is not, because the situation in which man finds himself varies accordingly to how he confronts it. And freedom of mankind lies – perhaps – exactly in this!" (Patočka 2002: 13).<sup>4</sup> Patočka's characterization of eternity as "resistance" carries an implicit political significance as well as explicit metaphysical significance. What reigns through the order of being in its double ebbing and flowing, approaching and passing away, is the "disjuncture" or "rift" of eternity as resistance against "the entire declining tendency of the world." In turning back to Anaximander's fragments, Patočka discerns the traces of an *experience* of eternity as disruption ("injustice") within the ontological order of temporality, or being-present. Patočka in this manner retains Anaximander's term "the infinite" (or "the boundless") – το ἀπειρον – to name the source of all things while in the same gesture displacing any ontological determination, or claim, to the meaning of "the boundless" as intellect, space, or even, "Being."<sup>5</sup> As source or principle of all things, το ἀπειρον is itself nothing, neither a kind of being or Being as such. On this interpretation, the "substrate" of το ἀπειρον is freedom as manifest in "unbounded" resistance against the decline of the world in terms of which vitality becomes preserved and elevated. In a primary existential sense, freedom manifests itself in a necessary and liberating form of *injustice*. This injustice of eternity expresses an absence of power, or, formulated more explicitly, the power of powerlessness. The "agelessness of being" of "the unbounded" is

<sup>4</sup> As Marcel Conche suggests, the boundless (*aperion*) as "eternal" (*aion*) signifies in Anaximander's thought "what retains its vital force." See Conche 1991: 148–149.

<sup>5</sup> On the different possible interpretations of [arche] and [apeiron], see Conche 1991: 54–77.



movement of resistance, or “disjointure,” of eternity’s higher of law of injustice.<sup>6</sup> As Patočka proposes in other writings, and explicitly in his essay on the Czech poet Mácha, “original temporality, with its moments of being-ahead, repetition, and the instant, are manifest in Mácha in the rupture operated in the midst of time by eternity.” This experience of the “ecstasy of eternity,” here understood as the rupture or shaking of freedom from perpetual decline and the pre-giveness of the world, is figured as “nothing,” or, in Mácha poetic image, an “obscure sentiment” of emptiness (Patočka 1990: 269). As Patočka comments: “We actually find in the poet the distinction between vulgar time, which is an ‘eternal here’ [*eternal it was*], and the rupture operative by eternity which announces itself as ‘nothing’ with which one must come to terms, towards which one must be ahead of” (Patočka 1990: 272).<sup>7</sup> This experience of eternity does not represent a “pallid intellectualism” or “idea” in an abstract sense, as either psychological illusion, metaphysical existence, or Idea of reason. Instead, this pursuit of eternity as an aspirational resistance against the decline of the world is embodied in a form of life dedicated to the care of the soul.

In Patočka’s narrative of the discovery of eternity amongst Greek thinking, it is Plato who discovers eternity as indispensable for a genuine form of human life (both individual as well as collective). As Patočka remarks: “for the first time [*in Greek culture*] the soul [*with Plato*] is something that even in its fate after death is something that lives from within. Its fate after death becomes a component of its entire concern and care of itself” (Patočka 2002: 126). Even as Plato discovered the care of the soul in its orientation towards eternity, Patočka argues that Plato mis-understood the significance of his own discovery. Plato’s dialogues present different images of the soul’s aspiration to eternity that confuse an openness towards eternity with the soul’s achievement of immortal existence. Central to the “care of the soul” is the question of immortality: “that, if the soul is immortal, we must care for it, not only in respect to this time, which we call life, but in respect to all time, and if we neglect it, the danger now appears to be terrible. For if death were an escape from everything, it would be a boon to the wicked, for when they die they would be freed from the body and from their wickedness together with their souls. But now, since the soul is seen to be immortal, it cannot escape” (*Phaedo*, 107c). The care of the soul is orientated towards a preparation, or care, for death (μελέτη θανάτου) which Socrates equates with the beginning of philosophical thought and the life of philosophy. As Patočka remarks: “In relation to itself, the soul is the discoverer of eternity. The soul extends toward eternity, and its most

<sup>6</sup> See Derrida’s reading of Anaximander and the “undecidable” of the “higher law” in *Specters of Marx*.

<sup>7</sup> For Mácha’s poem *May*: <https://czech.mml.ox.ac.uk/karel-hynek-macha-maj-1836> (access: 23.04.2019).

proper problem – the problem of the status of its own being – is the problem of this constitutive relation to eternity: whether in its being it is something fleeting, or whether in its depths it is not something eternal” (Patočka 2002: 125).

The care of the soul can be disassociated from any *necessary* philosophical commitment to immortality, while still retaining what is central to its philosophical significance, an elevation of human life. With eternity as the animating principle for the care of the soul’s elevation, the achievement of a *life worth living* takes an orientation towards eternity, and not immortality, if latter represents an imperishable state of being or after-life. Whereas the quest for immortality is predicated on the abandonment of the body, as the embodiment of natural decline and decay, the pursuit of eternity remains bound to the decline of the world. As Patočka states: “This is the attempt to embody what is eternal within time, and within one’s own being, and at the same time, an effort to stand firm in the storm of time, stand firm in all dangers carried within it, to stand firm when the care of the soul becomes dangerous for a human being” (Patočka 2002: 87). An orientation towards eternity is anchored within the soul’s care for itself *before* death, and not a concern with securing the soul’s continued existence *after* death. The soul’s orientation towards eternity within its mortal existence is thus different in practice and concept from a vision of the soul’s immortal endurance after death. With the latter, death represents a moment of separation, when the soul attains immortality for itself. With the former, caring for one’s death in view of eternity allows for an orientation towards life from within life itself. As Patočka suggests, to live *in* eternity is to embrace life in a transcendence, or exposure, to something greater than life itself – to the “higher law” of injustice, or freedom in resistance to pre-given meaning and repetitive attachments within the order of being.

Within the wider scope of Patočka’s narrative of Western metaphysics, the epochal transformation of Christianity produces a “deepening” of the Platonic understanding of the care of the soul, and hence, of the sense in which the “soul has its own eternity,” not, however, in any terms of *being or becoming* eternal, i.e., immortal, but in terms of possessing itself authentically in an exposure towards eternity (Patočka 2002: 12). The defining insight of Christianity, its “abysmal deepening of the soul,” is principally understood by Patočka through the concept of the person (i.e., care of the soul) as an immanent self-responsibility in an absolute transcendence towards God. As Patočka explains: “The responsible human as such is *I*; it is an individual that is not identical with any role it could possibly assume.” The non-identity of the self with its objectified roles and functions in the world establishes the locus for its constitution as responsibility. Self-responsibility centers on an inscrutable axis of conversion. The responsible self shoulders its own existence in opening itself to a transcendence beyond the world of pre-given meanings and towards a God who sees without being seen, hidden,

as it were, beyond being. This inscrutable transcendence, or mystery, manifests itself, or “breaks through,” with the experience of death as an ontological revelation. As Patočka writes: “in the confrontation with death and in coming to terms with nothingness it [*the person*] takes upon itself what we all must carry out in ourselves, where no one can take our place” (Patočka 1996: 107).

Christianity, however, despite this “deepening” of the significance of eternity for the care of the soul critically leaves the concept of the person inadequately thought. In a clear allusion to Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, Patočka proposes that the person is “vested in a relation to an infinite love and humans are individuals because they are guilty, and *always* guilty, with respect to it” (Patočka 1996: 107).<sup>8</sup> The image of transcendence towards God and eternity, in terms of which human existence becomes vested with an inscrutable and absolute responsibility, thus rupturing its attachments to the world for the sake of their transformation and authentic re-positioning, remains captivated by a Greek understanding of transcendence. Christianity has yet to arrive at itself in remaining the hostage of Greek thinking (Plato) even as it breaks with Plato’s “anonymous” transcendence of the Good. On the one hand, as Patočka writes: “Nietzsche coined the saying that Christianity is Platonism for the people and there is this much truth in it, in that the Christian God took over the transcendence of the onto-theological conception as a matter of course.” On the other hand: “Christianity remains thus far the greatest, unsurpassed but also un-thought human *élan or upswing* that enabled humans to struggle against decadence” (Patočka 1996: 108; my italics, translation modified).

### III

This opposition between Nietzsche and Christianity plays a critical role in Patočka’s understanding of modernity as forgetting of eternity. Nietzsche’s effort to surpass and over-turn Christianity hinges on this argument that Christianity represents a trans-valued form of Platonism – a Platonism for the masses. In his manner, Nietzsche proposes that Christianity contains the impulse for its own collapse into modern nihilism. The Christian foundation of the world of becoming in the eternal being of God becomes inverted into its opposite. In response to the nihilism of the “Last Humans,” Nietzsche’s image of the “Over-Human,” for Patočka, represents the reversal of Christianity. As he writes: “In place of the ideals of the beyond, Nietzsche establishes the project of becoming master of the earth, and to submit the planet to the will to will.” As he further remarks: “A novel doctrine of time and eternity comes to crown this metaphysics of worldliness.” The

<sup>8</sup> For an interpretation of the importance of Dostoevsky for Patočka, see de Warren 2015.

“Over-Human” is “perfectly worldly” in regarding the world as “infinite reserve of energy” within an infinite of time of repetition. On this reading, Nietzsche’s doctrine of the eternal recurrence represents the triumph of “mechanistic metaphysics” and technological science, and, in this regard, marks the final eclipsing of eternity as rupture of transcendence within the world.

In his reflections on the meaning of history in the *Heretical Essays* – essays which partially emerged from a young Michalski’s instigation – as well as in a significant continuation, and perhaps even re-calibration, of Patočka’s thinking in one of his final texts, *Autour de la philosophie de la religion de Masaryk*, Patočka recognizes Nietzsche as bringing metaphysical thinking to its consequent end, as the fulfillment of modern subjectivity’s self-appointed mastery over beings (see Patočka, Michalski 2015). On this reading, nihilism is considered as an elemental constituent of Nietzsche’s philosophy of history and his incisive critique of the historical present. In underpinning the crisis of modernity, nihilism does not just define the predicament of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but, as Nietzsche explored in his writings, brings to its culmination the history of Western metaphysical thought since its Greek and, more pointedly, Platonic origins. In keeping with the guiding line of Heidegger’s influential interpretation, Patočka argues that nihilism represents in Nietzsche’s thinking the metaphysical condition of the modern age. Under the title of Platonism, metaphysical thinking established a validation of the world based on an ontological difference between “being” and “becoming,” between the eternal, conceived as a transcendent form of presence without beginning or end, and time, conceived as the immanent texture of becoming; on this image of thought, the many senses of what it is to be in the world are determined by an appeal to an order of being, of what truly is, or obtains, which itself remains indifferent to becoming. This metaphysical difference between eternity and time becomes repeated and displaced with the advent of Christianity and its institution of a kingdom of God, whose perfected being radically transcends the world of becoming. With the “death of God” so vociferously proclaimed by the avatars of the Enlightenment, the emergence of nihilism in the modern age attests for Nietzsche to the self-implosion consequence of such a metaphysical interpretation of the world.

The devaluation and forgetting of eternity defines modernity with two alternatives, both of which are rejected by Patočka. Either the rational alternative proposed by Kant – human life can support itself only the basis of postulates of practical reason, which are heuristic devices to secure the sense of eternity *as if* eternity remained a vital principle; or Nietzsche’s alternative of the Over-Human and the Will to Power. For this Nietzschean view, on Patočka’s reading, human beings can no longer rely on a world “beyond” or on a transcendent signifier (“God is dead”) and must instead find (a) source(s) of meaning in its own affirmation of power and mastery of the world, thus giving birth to a new form of humanity, the

Over-Human, which declares itself autonomous and the source of supreme value. This is mirrored in the thought of eternal recurrence, which Patočka understands as eternal repetition of the same (identical). This thought is the “absolutization” of the instinctual, corporeal self, such that subjectivity elevates itself, appoints itself, affirms itself as supreme source of meaning in the form of an “unconditioned animality” – to wit a new form of animality, beyond traditional difference between animal and human. Whereas the Kantian alternative subsumes religion, the relics of religion, to a secular form of reason, the Nietzschean alternative envisions an Over-Human, makes the Human into a new form of divinity.

Seen through the lens of Nietzsche’s thinking, Patočka distinguishes between two contrasting forms of modern nihilism: passive nihilism and active nihilism. Passive nihilism revolts against any appeal to a transcendent being or beyond, yet nonetheless finds itself unable to accommodate itself to a world bereft of any sheltering sky with the death of God. This revolt against God reaches a perfect pitch of intensity with a self-destructive rage against the world in the absence of God. As with Ivan Karamazov, passive nihilism suffers from what it vigorously denies only to surreptitiously desire it *ex nihilo* in a profound resentment against God, to be a God. At the core of passive nihilism resides the yawning chasm of a metaphysical horror that breaks into the world even as this world bereft of God strives to keep the revelation of Horror – the Apocalypse – at bay.

Active nihilism represents Nietzsche’s response to nihilism. As critically understood by Patočka, the death of God, as Zarathustra announces, heralds the birth of the Over-Human and the doctrine of the Will to Power. Nietzsche’s Over-Human represents the affirmation of the Will to Power and unchecked amplitude of modern subjectivism: in the absence of any transcendent God, the human being affirms itself as a new god. In keeping with basic outlines of Heidegger’s influential reading, the modern age of metaphysics is formed from active nihilism and the transformative dominance of technology. In lieu of any traditional transcendent values – God, historical progress, etc. – the modern age promises the emergence of new humanity through technological transformation and mastery of the Earth, or the totality of beings. The Over-Human attains the place once represented by transcendence in affirming itself the immanent master over beings. Time is not suppressed or surpassed through an appeal to eternity, but on the contrary, time becomes fully dominated, controlled, and programmed.

For Patočka, there are two direct consequences of this Nietzschean endorsement of active nihilism. The Will to Power defines in metaphysical terms the essence of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as war. Central to this drama is the not only the perpetual and destructive conflicts of wars without end, but the irruption of another scene of war, or *polemos*, between the Last Humans and the Over-Human, as momentarily glimpsed with the frontline experience of the First World War in its eschatological

(albeit failed) promise in the writings of Jünger and de Chardin. The Will to Power represents the affirmation of Titanism, or the mastery of beings through the self-affirmation of modern subjectivism, with the caveat, however, that the veritable subject, or agency, of modern subjectivism is, in fact, technology. In its mobilization of power over beings, the essence of modern technology follows an autonomous, self-propelled course of expansion and development, under the Promethean guise of serving as a mere instrument for the realization of the worldly projects of human life. In truth, technology drives subjectivism; the modern subject, in its dependence on technology for the reshaping of the world in its presumed image, transforms the world into an inhuman image in which the subject nonetheless persists in the illusion of its own autonomy. As Patočka observes, in the doctrine of the eternal return, “eternity will not exist in transcendence but here in the absolute down-below in the form of infinite repetition.” The infinite becomes the repetition of the same in the complete erasure of any ontological difference and resistance of disjointure, or injustice. “The eternal return would be an ‘idea’ that could inspire the activity of men dedicated to worldly fanaticism and who aim at taking possession of total truth and exclusive possession of beings” (Patočka 1985: 200).

#### IV

In *The Flame of Eternity*, Michalski responds to the modern oblivion of eternity through a deeply personal confrontation with Nietzsche’s thinking shaped around the central claim that the central problem which animates Nietzsche’s writings is the question of time *and* eternity. Noticeably, this emphasis on eternity in Nietzsche’s thinking takes its bearings from a reference point that shadows Michalski’s thinking, one very much inscribed within his own personal biography (see Patočka, Michalski 2015). Although never explicitly referenced, Michalski’s guiding insight into the centrality of eternity innovatively takes up Patočka’s claim that philosophy discovers eternity as its principal theme. Yet, against Patočka’s critical appraisal of Nietzsche as marking the completed forgetting of eternity in its devaluation as the eternal return, Michalski proposes a novel interpretation of Nietzsche’s celebrated and contested doctrine both against the grain of Patočka’s own reading and yet in the grain of Patočka’s own insight into the “higher justice,” “nothingness,” and “resistance” of eternity’s instants of rupture. Michalski’s redemption of Nietzsche from the history of metaphysics as the closure of eternity further deepens the sense in which Patočka considered Christianity as the unsurpassed yet unthought *élan* against the decline of the world.

Michalski’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s thinking revolves around the figure of Zarathustra, whose embodiment of truthfulness as the highest of virtues, whose

overcoming of the pretensions of morality, and whose efforts to awaken the Last Human from his dogmatic slumber are probed and pursued over the course of his reflections in *The Flame of Eternity*. The proposition here is that “understanding what links these seemingly conflicting, or even mutually exclusive, concepts – eternity and passing, Paradise and its loss – this is the task Nietzsche posed to himself in the story of Zarathustra. Zarathustra, *the teacher of the eternal return*” (Michalski 2011: 155). If Nietzsche could write in *The Birth of Tragedy* the celebrated statement that “only as an aesthetic phenomena are existence and the world justified,” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche is able to more fully express this defining human need for redemption under the heading of the eternal recurrence of the same: “To redeem that which has passed away and re-create the ‘It was’ into a ‘Thus I willed it!’ – that alone should I call redemption!” As Zarathustra declares: “‘It was’: that is the will’s gnashing of teeth and loneliest sorrow (...). Backwards the will is unable to will; that it cannot break time and time’s desire – that is the will’s loneliest sorrow” (Nietzsche 2008: 121). The problem – for Zarathustra and for Michalski – is that the sadness of time and the search for innocence as a revitalizing movement of life against nihilism, or the redemption of life from its temporal existence, defines what matter most for human life. It is not an issue of either truth or justification, but something more akin to a creative freedom within time (not from time) that would usher forth in a “sacred affirmation” of life. As Michalski formulates the desire of philosophy: “To the liberation of the freedom hidden within our lives, which have been distorted by nihilism. To affirmative creation” (Michalski 2011: 15).

A concern with eternity animates Nietzsche’s writings until its final crystallization in the thought of the eternal recurrence in the teachings of Zarathustra. This refraction of eternity within Nietzsche’s *oeuvre* reflects Michalski’s contention that eternity constitutes an intrinsic element of time, but not as standing outside or beyond time, nor as what might robustly endure in sempiternal indifference towards time’s passage. Eternity is neither for Nietzsche just an idea or a concept, but, as Michalski stresses, a *physiological* notion. It is the body that expresses most intimately and inescapably the temporality of human life in its ebb and flow, within which burns the flame of eternity. As developed by Michalski, Nietzsche’s thinking does not consider eternity as involving a suppression, abandonment, or transcendence of time. In the thought of the eternal recurrence, eternity is not envisioned as a present without beginning or end, nor as an indeterminate present extended to infinity, nor as cyclical repetition. Eternity is what Michalski calls the “core” and “essence” of time – ever present, ever returning, yet never enjoining a fixed position within the succession of time. Eternity is not a moment *in* time nor a moment *outside* of time; eternity is the instant in which time becomes renewed, but never exactly as the same time which just was or just will be. There is thus an essential difference between the moment and the instant: whereas the moment is the form

of an experience of the now inscribed within the passage of time, hence a moment with regard to before and after, the instant is the experience of a renewing disjunction of time's sedimentation and progression.<sup>9</sup> The instant of eternity opens a breathless interval within time in which time as such, and my life in time, can be renewed as a whole without thereby becoming a whole. This interval of eternity – the instant – is not an interval spanning before and after, which would allow for a passage from one moment to the next. Rather, this instant marks a disruption of temporal existence in its unquestioned self-acceptance. Eternity is thought under the sign of a fracture within life as the impossibility of uniting life in its passing into a unified totality, or whole. This recurring, yet seized instant of eternity holds life apart from itself by rupturing any definitive self-enclosure of life within itself or, indeed, within the world of its mundane cares.

## V

Zarathustra's speeches are structured dramatically into a *Bildungs* narrative, which gravitates around the visions he receives in Part Three while aboard a ship crossing the sea from the Isles of the Blest. Part One of Nietzsche's operatic work centers on the announcement of the death of God and the overcoming of the Last Human. At the beginning of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, after his salutation to the sun, Zarathustra descends to bring fire into the hearts of men, the Last Humans, who wish to know nothing of the twilight of the gods. Brusquely rejected by the crowds of the market-place, Zarathustra searches for companions – animals, beggars, cripples – for his teachings, who in turn fail to understand him. In "On Redemption," Zarathustra identifies the eternal recurrence as critical to his teachings yet remains himself inadequate to the demand placed upon him by this singular thought. In Part Two, Zarathustra's speeches center on the Will to Power and the Over-Human. Freedom is here the driving thought. Part Three finds Zarathustra, the Wanderer, having abandoned his friends upon the Isles of the Blest. He sets across the sea by ship, where along the way he is graced with a revelation of his guiding star, the eternal recurrence of the same, in "On the Vision and Riddle." Whereas Zarathustra announces the death of God and the death of the Last Human to everybody (in the market-place) and then teaches the Will to Power and the Over-Man to fewer (to his companions after his rejection in the market-place), the eternal recurrence is only spoken to himself – to everybody and to nobody.

<sup>9</sup> Michalski himself does not clearly distinguish terminologically between "the moment" and "the instant." I am here delineating this difference in order to render more explicit Michalski's operative distinction between the moment, as a moment *of* time, and the instant, as the instance *of* eternity within time.



Significantly, Zarathustra reveals his vision while aboard a ship at sea, addressing “you, bold searchers” and “whoever has embarked with cunning sails upon terrifying seas” (Nietzsche 2008: 134). In this vision, Zarathustra recounts how, while climbing upwards at twilight, he discovers on his shoulder a strange, whispering creature – half dwarf, half mole. Zarathustra challenges the dwarf to bear his own “abyss-deep thought,” and as the dwarf jumps down from Zarathustra’s shoulder, they find themselves standing in front of a gateway. Zarathustra declares: “Behold this gateway, dwarf! It has two faces.” It is a gateway between two paths, one extending back into the past for eternity and the other reaching into the future for eternity. The gateway, as inscribed above, is the Moment in which both paths meet yet diverge. The dwarf rejects a linear reading of this metaphor of time: for the dwarf, “time itself is a circle,” for whatever has been will always be, much as whatever is to be will always have been. As he pronounces: “And this slow-moving spider, crawling in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself (...) must we not eternally come back again?” Suddenly, Zarathustra’s conversation with the dwarf is interrupted by a dog’s howling. The scene transforms, as Zarathustra now finds himself alone, without the dwarf, no longer standing at the gateway, “in the most desolate moonlight.” Zarathustra now beholds a frightening spectacle: a young shepherd, writhing and convulsing, with a large black snake emerging from his mouth. Desperately, Zarathustra tries to pull the snake from the shepherd’s mouth and cries out to bite the snake’s head-off. The shepherd bites and spits out the snake’s head. No longer shepherd, no longer human, he laughs. Zarathustra closes his account of this cryptic vision with the challenge: “Guess for me this riddle that I saw then; interpret for me the vision of the loneliest!” (Nietzsche 2008: 138).

Michalski’s reading of this vision of the loneliest calls attention to the shift from the discussion with the dwarf standing before the gateway “the Moment” to the frightful scene of the shepherd and the emerging snake from his mouth. The gateway poses the question of time, to which the dwarf represents, or proposes, an answer.

What is this question? The passage of time does not merely split a past that once was from a future yet to be. Within this streaming of time, there is a continual slippage of possibilities, of times not taken or seized. Against these slippages of times within time, we desire to hold onto every moment, as if we could hold in every moment today and tomorrow (today for tomorrow and tomorrow for today), a moment that would never pass us by, a moment we would never miss; and in such a pristine moment we would dream of plunging and submerging ever deeper, so as to never return to the unceasing ebb and flow of moments forever passing by, and so find refuge from the ravages and sadness of time. Every moment takes shape as something like a decision that separates a time that could have been from a time that will have been. With each decision in our lives, we feel as if life becomes split

in two, the one we have become and the one we might have become. With each moment as a decision, we continue to live down the path we have chosen, to which we are riveted; and yet remain haunted by the shadow of another life, or lives, that might have just as well been, and which, even with its separation into the never-was, still accompanies us as we careen down the path we have chosen for ourselves. We might begin to regret this other life not taken, and all these other lives which continue to speak to us from afar, calling upon us to re-make a choice that cannot be undone. Is there something like a kipple of lives which we accumulate as we live: the kipple of paths not taken, lovers not chosen, and decisions not made or made otherwise? We are burdened by this kipple of our own lives, cast away as shadows of what might have been and who we might have become; but we never lose anything about ourselves, and, in this sense, nothing is ever left behind; we seem to carry ourselves fully, and that is the weight that crushes us.

Michalski does not frame the eternal recurrence in terms of the weight of decisions, whose consequences can be neither known nor controlled, and, in this sense, he follows Zarathustra's rejection of the dwarf's spirit of gravity. He equally rejects the popular rendition of what Kundera (2009) called Nietzsche's "mad myth," namely, that Nietzsche's "idea of eternal return is a mysterious one, and Nietzsche has often perplexed other philosophers with it: to think that everything recurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum." The mystery, for Michalski, lies elsewhere than with this apparent puzzle of a recurrence ad infinitum. The attempt to decipher the parable of the gateway and the dwarf's response does not involve alternative interpretations. Rather, the transition to the scene of shepherd and the snake represents a transformation of the *situation* in which the question of time becomes posed, confronted, and engaged. As Michalski observes: "It is not, therefore, primarily the words (of the dwarf) that stand corrected but the situation in which they are said. This is why there is a change of scene" (Michalski 2011: 181). Flashing forth like a nightmare in the twinkle of an eye, this scene with the shepherd and the snake shifts the focus from the Moment to the Instant, where the instant of eternity is not understood as a gateway between an infinite past and infinite future. The instant of the eternal recurrence can only be grasped, or lived, by a person who, like the shepherd, is struggling inwardly with time itself, i.e., with the snake. The implicit point is that the shepherd is, in fact, Zarathustra himself: only Zarathustra can answer the riddle of his vision; only a person in whom Zarathustra lives can likewise speak to the riddle of Zarathustra's vision.

In contrast to the moment, the instant is not open to another instant placed in the future. It is, instead, pregnant with a future that is not entirely defined or anticipated by the present and the sedimentation of the past. The instant is here characterized by the shepherd's violent dismembering of the snake. As a representation

of time in its sinuous progression, as either an image of a continuous linear progression or, as with the mythical Ouroboros as a representation of the eternal cycle of renewal, the snake becomes severed. In mythical thought, the image of a snake eating its own tail (the Ouroboros) signified the cycle of life and death. Yet, it is precisely this notion of the eternal recurrence that is literally bitten-off with the shepherd's transformative experience. The instant is this act of self-transformation; the shepherd has been liberated from images of time as either cyclical return or as the gateway between two eternities. The past becomes released, much as Zarathustra is no longer burdened by the spirit of gravity (the dwarf sitting on his shoulder), in the laughter of an affirmative "Yes" to time once again; the act of biting off the snake's head keeps the mouth open for the emergence of yet another snake (to keep within the logic of this image). Eternity is not the snake that encircles, but the snake that engorges the shepherd while at the same time, by the shepherd's very action, becoming decapitated, severed, and disjointed. In this sense, the shepherd's biting off the snake's head becomes itself repeated eternally. It is not a liberation *from* time enacted once and for all, nor a submission to the cycle of undifferentiated repetition. The snake will return to engorge the shepherd; the shepherd will once again, and always, bite off the snake's head; and the shepherd will laugh, repeatedly, albeit differently, until the end of time.

Michalski further proposes that the instant takes on a special meaning for Nietzsche's thought of the eternal recurrence. The instant is neither singular nor plural. It is neither an unrepeatable instance nor a repeatable moment. It is not singular because the instant is not self-enclosed; it is not plural because it cannot be repeated. Neither singular nor plural, the instant is the instance of self-renewal and self-transformation in otherness. As he writes: "Eternity is its hidden current, its inextinguishable fire – its vitality, which shatters any form it may attain" (Michalski 2011: 187). If, as suggested by this reading of the shepherd and the snake, the instant of eternity does not liberate life completely, once and for all, from time, the implication is that Zarathustra's own vision of the eternal recurrence does not represent a refutation of the dwarf's cyclical image of time. In Nietzsche's parable, the dwarf represents knowledge, the termites of reduction, and the spirit of gravity, while Zarathustra represents lightness, laughter, and the abundance of overflowing freedom. This conflict is itself unending. As Michalski states: "The dwarf and Zarathustra, the spirit of gravity and the dancing god, the peace that knowledge brings and the risk of life: two human/inhuman figures bound together by an irresolvable conflict, empty so long as I do not inscribe them within my own life. The human condition" (Michalski 2011: 199).

This stress on the disruption of eternity in time, as a leveraging instant for the transformation of life, shatters the binding of the past without leaving it behind. The instant of rupture produces a discontinuity that does not sever time from

itself, erasing or suppressing the “it was” as if it never was. Instead, the transformation of time is thought as a re-contextualization or resituating of the past (and future) with regard to the renewed present that finds its axis on another vector of life. The past is not left behind but assumed once more, yet from a perspective that this very past could neither anticipate nor inhibit. The past is, when continually renewed, re-inscribed into life to become sedimented once more. In this manner, the instant of eternity does not break the horizontal line of time in favor of a vertical height of transcendence. Michalski abandons the classical topology of horizontal and vertical: the flow of time becomes circumscribed once again from an eccentric axis that is other than the axis along which time, and my life in time, has hitherto unfolded. As Zarathustra remarks: “Die Mitte ist überall. Krumm ist der Pfad der Ewigkeit” (Nietzsche 2008: 190).<sup>10</sup>

Eternity is an instant, yet this instant interrupts the immanence of time so as to incite a rupture within the seamless continuity of temporal progression and its supported fixed world of meanings, leaving us momentarily breathless. The instant of eternity does not have the form of the now. The instant stands opposed to the now: for if every now can in principle enter into a settled relation of before and after then the instant disrupts the chronological structuring of time. If eternity, as the instant within time that finds no place in time, is understood as the force of temporal disruption, then this disjointing of time does not open *another* temporality along a vertical line. The instant throws time off its axis, either in terms of a past that has become monumentalized (or antiquated) or in terms of a future that has been immortalized (as the telos of history, ideal of human perfection, etc.). In throwing time out of joint, the instant does not displace time onto another axis, certainly not onto the axis of God’s glory or a Kingdom of Ends. On the contrary, the instant of eternity decenters time without providing its own center, another center. In this sense, there is no “order of eternity” or “eternal order,” nor does Michalski ever succumb to the temptation of adopting the geometry of verticality in speaking of eternity. Eternity is not an axis of orientation in contrast to the horizontal axis of time. The disruptive instant of eternity never arrives from where we expect it nor from where we last experienced it. It enters into time sideways on and slips into life like a knife. The classical configuration of time and eternity as the intersection in every moment of a horizontal sequence of nows and the vertical transcendence of the Now is surpassed. Temporality is woven from a pluralization of angular vectors within time without any stabilizing verticality or uniform horizontality.

Along with this angular interaction between eternity (the instant) and time (the now with regard to before and after), the meaning of “shattering” itself changes.

<sup>10</sup> “The center is everywhere. Crooked is the path of eternity.”

This notion of shattering, central to Michalski's conception of the care of the self, exhibits an evident proximity with Patočka's thinking. Such a "shattering" communicates an image of radical transformation in terms of action, such that when Michalski speaks of the Will to Power as self-overcoming, popular images come to mind of being born again, changing radically our clothing, our views, or other forms of heroic elevation. Such images might further raise the suspicion that a Romanticism, revolutionary or spiritual, still lingers in Michalski's thinking, or even a certain decisionistic heroism. Yet, Michalski does not endorse such radical self-transformation in terms of action or revolution. His guiding thought is rather the Biblical image of the Apocalypse, which, in its original Greek meaning of "uncovering" or "disclosure" (ἀποκάλυψις), assigns to such a transformation the essential mode of *seeing*. Self-transformation is predicated on assuming a radically different way of seeing, as seeing myself beyond and other than myself, as open to what Michalski calls "new spaces of possibilities." These "new possibilities" are fraught with risk and allow my life as such to become "re-dimensionalized" so as to give myself more leeway within my own life-span to become myself anew.

In this optic, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* comes to be regarded as the Revelation of John of Patmos retold and reconfigured. Zarathustra is Christ reborn. As Michalski proposes: "Perhaps, however, the Nietzschean interpretation of life as the *will to power* implies not only a critique of Christianity but also a unique reading of the Biblical story of Jesus" (Michalski 2011: 175). Against the grain of Nietzsche scholarship, Michalski argues that Nietzsche's thinking is profoundly haunted by a "struggle with God." This struggle with God "opens the door to an understanding of religion that may also prove convincing to a mind living among a multitude of incompatible meanings, a diversity of cultures, in a modernity permeated by science." Zarathustra's announcement of the death of God and the rebirth of Dionysius does not foretell a world without God, but a world in which the radicalism of God can be thought and experienced anew. In a world marked by an ever-increasing quotient of conflicting systems of meaning, the true conflict is announced with this possibility of experiencing again the call to God which, in Iwaszkiewicz's words, is that "little bee that calls from nowhere as no one does." The presence of Christ is the burning touch of God that "undermines everything I have been." The radicalism of Christ in the world of contemporary culture, as Michalski ever so slightly insinuates, is the radicalism of the declaration: *all temples are fragile and temporary*. This, then, is the meaning of the slogan "the death of God" when no longer understood as either frivolous or self-congratulatory.

Michalski discerns various echoes of the Biblical Jesus in Zarathustra's narrative, beginning with the kenotic salutation to the sun at the beginning of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Much as the sun is not self-sufficient, since it needs otherness to which it shares, or gives, its light, Zarathustra's wisdom is characterized

as a cup that overflows: “Behold, I am weary of my wisdom, like a bee that has gathered too much honey; I need hands outstretched to receive it.” Although Michalski remains on this point discrete, it must surely have been known to him that Nietzsche himself makes an explicit connection between Dionysus and Christ (Steigler 2011: 281–282). Even as Zarathustra announces the death of God, and even as Zarathustra, in his self-identification with Dionysus reborn, is declared the Anti-Christ, the veritable meaning of Christ, shorn of Christianity and liberated from a God who guarantees a stable order of things, becomes lived again. As Bataille noted: “The extreme, unconditional longing of humanity was expressed for the first time by Nietzsche *independently from a moral goal and from serving a God*” (Bataille 2015: 4). Zarathustra or Christ *names* this unconditional longing in its sublime independence. Much of the rhetorical prowess and cunning of Michalski’s reading hinges on the default assumption that Zarathustra represents the death of God and the extreme expression of the Anti-Christ. Much of Michalski’s boldness stems from this provocation of reading Nietzsche as the Crucified. It is a reading most likely to be favorably received by nobody. *The Flame of Eternity* thus shows its hand as a book for everybody (all will reject this thesis) as well as for nobody (none will accept or welcome it).

## VI

The instant of eternity is the time of the Apocalypse and the Second Coming. In what constitutes a significant juncture in Michalski’s thinking, he contends that there are two basic ways of reading the Apocalypse of John. One way is to read it as the revelation that awaits us in the future, such that time would progress towards the fulfillment of a final historical plan or ordained destiny. If the end of time, so conceived, whether in the Kingdom of Heaven beyond time or the Kingdom of Ends in historical time, is placed in the future, it becomes a future for which we can prepare and await in the present. As Michalski wryly remarks: “I can sleep well – assuming, of course, that I have prepared well” (Michalski 2011: 64). We can rest assured in the promised presence of a penultimate meaning to the time of our lives. The achievement of time in eternity, on this picture, would either take the form of a religious transcendence of time in an eternal order or the secular progression of history as structured by a final order of things. In either form, the revelation of eternity promises stability and finality.

Michalski proposes an alternative reading of the Apocalypse. Rather than interpret the end of time as a future that we can face and prepare for, Michalski takes the Biblical statement “the time is near” as marking the stigmata of the present. The Apocalypse is now. In each moment, there is an instant of eternity concealed,

waiting for its dramatic disclosure and launching, or overflowing, of “the radically new.” As Michalski writes: “The Apocalypse is happening all the time; Christ arrives at every moment of our lives and, by this token, tears each of us out of the world as we find it, out of the world as we know it, and calls us into the new one” (Michalski 2011: 64). The awakening of the Apocalypse is the awakening of time to the possibility of a new beginning, yet this revelation catches us off-guard and unprepared. It is the address that we must not sleep, namely, not surrender ourselves to the unthinking acceptance of our temporal existence.

These two contrasting conceptions of the Apocalypse are not, however, understood as two alternative “conceptual interpretations, one true, the other false.” In a manner reminiscent of Kołakowski’s essay “In Praise of Inconsequence,” a basic motif running through Michalski’s thinking is the contention that human life must thrive and survive in inconsequence. In contrast to the soldier who remains steadfast and unswervingly content to wage war until no enemy is left standing, or the neighbor who denounces the neighbor as a matter of unswerving duty, inconsequence emerges by contrast from the acute consciousness of the necessary contradictions and unresolvable tensions of the world. As Kołakowski argues, there are values that exclude and contradict each other, and yet do not thereby cease to be significant values. Inconsequence, on this thinking, is the refusal of accepting a certain value as valid for all time among a plurality of values which mutually contradict each other, while still insisting on the meaningfulness of values. This virtue of inconsequence is apparent in Michalski’s repeated insistence on the irresolvable tensions that determine and animate human life. These two views of the Apocalypse are incompatible but not, in Michalski’s estimation, in need of a decision either way, once and for all. This perpetual tension (as with the dwarf and Zarathustra) reflects “two sides of the human condition.”

Michalski’s reading of Zarathustra as Dionysus reborn, as Christ resurrected, receives additional amplitude with a contrast between Socrates and Jesus in their respective attitudes towards death. In the celebrated account of the death of Socrates in the *Phaedo*, Plato’s urging that the philosophical life is a preparation for death encourages an attitude of composure (but not complacency). Michalski reads Socrates’s dismissal of any fear of death as dependent upon an attitude towards the world predicated on the assumption of “the true order of life.” When Socrates admonishes not to fear death, we are bolstered in this attitude through the claim that there is a fixed order to the world. As Michalski comments:

For *Phaedo*’s Socrates, the truly important things in life are *ideas*: the eternal order of the world, the understanding of which leads to unperturbed peace and serenity in the face of death. The dying Socrates wanted to give us concepts that would provide peace, concepts that will soothe our anxiety in the face of death. The Gospel of Matthew, as I understand it, is the complete opposite: it testifies to the incurable

presence of the Unknown in every moment of my life, a presence that rips apart every human certainty (...) and disturbs all peace, all serenity (Michalski 2011: 89).

As with the contrasting visions of the Apocalypse, with these two contrasting visions of death, one is not true at the expense of the other. The opposition here in question is not between truth and falsehood. Nor is the opposition dialectical. Rather, we are witnessing a *tension* that “constitutes the only possible meaning of human life.” The cry of Jesus on the Cross is here; every moment is undermined by the instant of this cry meant to awaken us to the fragility of the world and everything that we take to be solid and significant. This tension can be said to be asymmetrical: it is not a tension between two views, each of which is equal in standing or claim. Instead, this tension, as Michalski elucidates:

Does not mean a struggle between two orders, between two tendencies, two principles, one thing with another. Eternity – the kind of *change* that Jesus heralds in this interpretation – does not, in fact, open a separate sphere of meanings. It is rather the impossibility of stabilizing, the impossibility of enclosing any meaning within the context of human life (Michalski 2011: 207).

For Michalski, this impossibility of closure is another way to express Pascal’s declaration that “Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world, we must not sleep during that time” (Pascal 1991: 273). This impossibility of closure only becomes *tragic* when burdened by the spirit of seriousness and gravity, when, in other words, this impossibility becomes unbearable and self-defeating rather than self-affirming.

Setting aside a thorough assessment of the merits or inadequacies of Michalski’s admittedly brief evocation of Plato’s *Phaedo*, the contrast with the message of Christ is instructive for Michalski’s view of a philosophical consolation in non-consolation and inconsequence. On Michalski’s reckoning, the final words of Christ on the Cross – “Father, why have you forsaken me?” – express anxiety, not serenity, before death. This lament is not, however, sign of an anxiety in the face of death as the possibility of one’s impossibility. In this confrontation with death, there is a confrontation with “the unthinkable” and “mystery,” not (on Michalski’s reading), as with Socrates’ death, a stable order of meaning. Whereas the vision of Apocalypse reveals the instability of the world and the principle of inconsequence – and hence, in this manner, verges on breeding skepticism – the acceptance of death reveals the proximity of mystery. This presence of death does not delineate a horizon awaiting me in the future. Death is now. It is here, in every moment, as the trembling announcement that ruptures life from within. This nothingness of death is not destruction, but “foreignness,” “transcendence,” and “incompatibility.” In a gesture against Heidegger, the immanence of death within me, as that



uncanny sense of not being entirely myself, does not uncover a more authentic sense of self, in terms of which my existence becomes whole with itself, at one with itself as a distinct singularity.

Death touches me with what Michalski calls “the fire of nothingness,” or, as he hesitantly raises in the form of a question without any stated need for answer or response, “the fire of God?” (Michalski 2011: 83). The possibility of an apocalypse of hope and instance of my death lurks within every moment as the flame of eternity within me: how many times might I die in life and to life before I am truly dead? As Michalski writes: “It may be that only in life so conceived – life that cannot be consolidated into a totality, fractured life, marked with the irremediable fissure of eternity – perhaps only in such a life one may find a place for God.” The qualification “perhaps” marks a note of hesitancy, or gamble, that is all the more compelling given its truthfulness.

The unrest within us, this momentary breathlessness, catches us off-guard and exposes within us a fracture. From this fracture we might break from the world and all that we have been in order to become anew and other, but we might just as much, from the fear of it, allow ourselves to be taken back by the world and its fixed order of meaning. For the fear of it we might want to insist in our being what we have been. The unrest within us is the unrest that keeps us disjointed with and from ourselves as well as the world, and the wonder here at being is the wounding of my being from within: not the wonder of why or who I am, but the pain that I cannot entirely support the subject that I am. This spacing within the self produced by the instant of eternity, as disjoining time from its seamless continuity, opens a space that is not vertical in alignment; it does not trace a path of escape or retreat. This space – or, better, this interval within – occurs in the fractional instant of the blinking of an eye, and, within this hairline fracture within time, this anarchic wink, there is an opening just wide enough to lend a space for the angular presence of God. This sideways disruption of God’s presence within the frozen sea does not announce a Kingdom of God. There is no Kingdom above and there are no Temples below. As Michalski writes: “God’s presence in human life is not (...) something like a set order that determines” the truth or falsity of the world. This real presence of God within does not provide a fixed orientation; one cannot live according to God nor live *in* God, even as God, in this spacing, touches us.

God’s presence burns within as the rapture of eternity. In Michalski’s words:

After all, the continuity of instants constitutes my life as I know it, everything that I, Krzysztof Michalski, am, everything that I hold dear, my memories, my biography. Breaking this continuity, tearing me out of the context in which I have become who I am, causes pain. This pain is identical, then, with life; it is a wound and a fire that cannot be healed so long as I am alive (Michalski 2011: 121).

Much as the fracture within, as the space within me that finds no place, is proper to me without admitting of a proper place, it cannot be assimilated through an act of baptism or made my possession through a proper name. This momentary breathlessness within the sadness of time marks a placeholder for a name yet to be spoken; in this infinitely small space, there abides a thousand names, of which Zarathustra, Christ, or Michalski are but a few of the many.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This paper presents a condensed version of my discussion of Michalski's Nietzsche interpretation in de Warren 2018.

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