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MISERABLY EVER AFTER:
FORGETTING, REPEATING AND
AFFIRMING LOVE IN *ETERNAL
SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND*



To be incapable of taking one's enemies, one's accidents, even one's misdeeds seriously for very long—that is the sign of strong, full natures in whom there is an excess of the power to form, to mold, to recuperate, and to forget.

Friedrich Nietzsche¹

Deciding to remember, and what to remember, is how we decide who we are.

Robert Pinsky²

Introduction

BOY MEETS GIRL. Boy loses memory. Boy meets girl. Put in such a tidy nutshell, the plot of Michel Gondry and Charlie Kaufmann's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* might seem fairly straightforward. But the philosophical issues raised by this intriguing story—the story of two people who try to put the past behind them by having their memories of each other erased, and only end up repeating the very relationship they were trying to put behind them—are anything but straightforward. In this paper I want to explore some of those issues, and the interrelations between them, particularly as they connect to three central themes: memory, affirmation, and repetition.

Start with repetition. From a certain point of view, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is one of the few films one can recall that leaves its main characters almost exactly where it finds them: a pair of near-strangers in the very early stages of what is likely to be a difficult, indeed tumultuous, romantic relationship. Yet this summary again risks making the situation of the lovers seem more straightforward than it actually is. After all, if at the end of the film Joel Barish and Clementine Kruczynski are in a sense strangers to each other, it is at the same time true not only that they have known each other intimately but that they know (thanks to their own brutally honest recorded comments) a great deal about each other. And if, at the start, they think it likely that their relationship will be a trying one, at the end of the film they are in a position to be very nearly certain that this is the case. And this is an important difference.

Indeed, the idea of beginning a relationship under such conditions may seem both absurd and hopeless. For surely there is a certain level of ignorance that is necessary at the start of a love affair. Perhaps the idealization of one's beloved is a necessary part of infatuation. Perhaps, too, it is necessary to pass through the infatuation stage in order to develop a commitment strong enough to weather the difficulties that will present themselves as one goes on to develop a more accurate and more realistic picture of the person to whom one is committed. One is reminded of Charlotte's claim, in *Pride and Prejudice*, that at least at the beginning of a

relationship “it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life”—a species of ignorance that is entirely unavailable to Joel and Clementine at *Eternal Sunshine’s* conclusion.³

Although their desire, in seeking out the services of Lacuna, Inc. (the company that performs the memory erasure), is to be liberated from a painful past, it might be suggested that in purging their memories of one another, Joel and Clementine are only setting themselves up for a second round of pain and despair. “If one has character,” writes Nietzsche, “one also has one’s typical experience, which occurs repeatedly.”⁴ In reliving their experience of meeting, loving, and despairing, this couple becomes living proof of George Santayana’s maxim that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”⁵—and become, at the same time, living counter-examples to Nietzsche’s dictum, “Blessed are the forgetful, for they get the better even of their blunders.”⁶ That line from Nietzsche is, of course, quoted as a line of dialogue in *Eternal Sunshine*. The quoter is Mary Svevo, a Lacuna employee who, as it turns out, is dragging her own submerged history behind her (and who will ultimately be responsible for Joel and Clementine’s finding out the truth). Mary has not made a systematic reading of Nietzsche; she only knows this quotation because, as she puts it, “[I] found it in my Bartlett’s.” Her knowledge of Nietzsche is as incomplete, in fact, as her knowledge of her own past. She is thus not aware that Nietzsche’s thinking about forgetfulness is far more complex and ambivalent than this simple quotation suggests.

My interest in Nietzsche, for the purposes of this paper, lies not only in his profound insights regarding memory and forgetfulness but also in the fact that one of the deep issues that troubled him throughout his philosophical career was the issue of affirmation. Indeed it is perhaps no exaggeration to say that the question of how to endorse, how to say yes to, the nature and value of human existence—to recognize a human life as a life worth living even in the light of all we know about its flaws and limitations—was the central philosophical question for Nietzsche. And the idea of affirmation is central to the positive conceptions he put forward, not only in response to the question of how one ought to philosophize but also in response to the question of how one ought to live:

We others, we immoralists, have, conversely, made room in our hearts for every kind of understanding, comprehending, and approving. We do not easily negate; we make it a point of honor to be affirmers.⁷

In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Joel and Clementine are faced with their own versions of the question of affirmation. How, in the wake of a failed love relationship, does one manage to move on and say yes to the possibility of love? And is it possible, at the outset of what one knows will be a doomed relationship, to nonetheless affirm the possibility of love in a way that allows one to proceed? The answers these two characters provide vary greatly throughout the course of the film. In this paper I will attempt to interpret these answers in connection with a number of Nietzschean theses about affirmation. Ultimately I want to suggest that *Eternal Sunshine* can be read as the story of two persons who learn to be “immoralists” in Nietzsche’s sense: who learn, that is, to refuse to negate, to “make it a point of honor to be affirmers.”

“To let people begin again”: The value of forgetting

You must learn some of my philosophy.—Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure.

Elizabeth Bennett, in *Pride and Prejudice*⁸

The human individual remembers many of her experiences but forgets a great many more; and what is remembered is remembered only partially, incompletely, and frequently inaccurately. It is natural to see this tendency to forget as a weakness, an unfortunate consequence of the fact that our cognitive abilities are finite. One of Nietzsche’s great insights—an insight that was picked up and greatly elaborated upon by Freud—was to suggest that we might instead view the ability to forget as a cognitive achievement, an ability that humans need to develop in order to survive and flourish. “Forgetting is no mere *vis inertiae* as the superficial imagine,” Nietzsche writes. “It is rather an active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of repression.”⁹

This view of forgetting is part and parcel of Nietzsche’s larger view of human cognition. Nietzsche saw himself as supplying a corrective, and indeed a rebuke, to the Enlightenment view that tended to place an unconditional value on knowledge, and to assume that it was always

better to come to know more. Nietzsche was among the first philosophers to take seriously the thought that *too much* knowledge could be a hindrance rather than a boon. He found—as he so often managed to do—a particularly provocative way of putting the point: in terms of what he called a *will to ignorance*:

It is not enough that you understand in what ignorance humans as well as animals live; you must also have and acquire the *will to ignorance*. You need to grasp that without this kind of ignorance life itself would be impossible, that it is a condition under which alone the living thing can preserve itself and prosper: a great, firm dome of ignorance must encompass you.¹⁰

Why, exactly, did Nietzsche accept the necessity of the will to ignorance? There is no simple answer to this question. Sometimes what Nietzsche seems to have in mind is the thought that the world is *complex*: so complex that we must simplify it in order to function adequately within it. This view might be combined with a view about the finitude of human capacities. The suggestion would then be that since a human agent will never be able to complete the process of forming a comprehensive detailed picture of the world, it is a mistake to wait around until such a picture is arrived at; the result of doing so would be paralysis. Moreover, if we share Nietzsche's view that human identity is itself a kind of fiction that we project onto the world, then we will be likely to agree with him that a person who cannot *forget* that she is a fiction will be unable to participate in ordinary human life. One who "does not possess the power to forget," writes Nietzsche in his *Unfashionable Observations*, would be "damned to see becoming everywhere." Ultimately such a person:

would no longer believe in his own being, would no longer believe in himself, would see everything flow apart in turbulent particles, and would lose himself in this stream of becoming; like the true student of Heraclitus, in the end he would hardly even dare to lift a finger. All action requires forgetting[.]¹¹

A related but distinct version of the point abandons the appeal to human finitude and instead holds that a genuinely comprehensive cognitive grasp of the world is problematic, not (merely) because it is practically

inaccessible to us but because even if it were accessible, it would not be helpful. The world, that is, is so alien, so inherently resistant to being understood in human terms, and perhaps so pervasively self-contradictory that a true picture of it would not assist us in responding to it; indeed, by revealing that there is no such thing as an appropriate or adequate response, such an understanding would actually make it impossible to act. On this understanding the “will to ignorance” is necessary not because the world is too complex for us to grasp but because it is in itself meaningless. Humans can only find meaning in the world by imposing meaning upon it, and the imposing of meaning is, in part, a matter of selective cognition: we perceive (that is, incorporate into our understandings) the parts of the world that are compatible with our own conceptions of its meaning, and suppress or ignore the rest.

Finally, a further interpretation suggests that the world is not only *meaningless* but positively *bad*: if we truly grasped the desperate nature of our plight, we would be too demoralized to act. To take what is perhaps the most obvious example, one might well think that a person who cannot ever *forget* that he is mortal and therefore doomed to death and the ultimate erasure of all his accomplishments would in all likelihood be too depressed to strive to achieve anything at all. Similarly, a person who cannot forget her failures, errors and other assorted sources of shame and regret may be so overcome with them that she will find herself unable to go on with life and try anything new. “The man in whom this apparatus of repression is damaged and ceases to function properly,” Nietzsche writes, “may be compared (and more than merely compared) with a dyspeptic—he cannot ‘have done’ with anything.”¹² In *Beyond Good and Evil* he describes the process aphoristically:

“I have done that,” says my memory. “I cannot have done that,” says my pride, and remains inexorable. Eventually—memory yields.¹³

It is the third version of the case for ‘active forgetting’ that seems most pertinent to the situation of Joel and Clementine. Their problem does not seem to be that the world is *complex*, nor even that it is *meaningless*; rather, they suffer from the fact that the world—more precisely, the recent past—is *bad*. They are burdened with the psychic scars of a failed relationship in a way that causes them great pain and makes it difficult for them

to move on. Their wish, then, is to return to the ideal (or perhaps idealized) state of existence they experienced prior to the onset of the relationship.

Indeed, on the account provided by Mary Svevo, the return to such an idealized state of being is precisely the point of the procedure:

It's amazing, isn't it? Such a gift Howard is giving the world. [. . .] To let people begin again. It's beautiful. You look at a baby and it's so fresh, so clean, so free. Adults . . . they're like this mess of anger and phobias and sadness . . . hopelessness. And Howard just makes it go away.¹⁴

This gives us, then, our first Nietzschean thesis regarding affirmation:

The First Affirmation Thesis: Affirming the value of one's life, and being able to act positively and decisively in it, requires denying (and where possible, forgetting) those negative aspects that threaten to make such action impossible.

But, one might ask, why does the Lacuna procedure aim to eliminate *all* memories of a relationship? Why not erase only the negative ones? One answer is that memories are so intricately and complexly interwoven that one must purge all memories connected with a given individual or relationship if the procedure is to have any chance of success. Another quite different sort of explanation rests on the fact that in the aftermath of a love affair *all* memories, those of pleasurable experiences as well as those of unpleasant ones, are liable to provoke pain. Memories of negative experiences—feeling unhappy with one's lover, feeling jealous, being hurt by her cutting remarks—will be painful for obvious reasons. But memories of happy experiences will also hurt, for they will serve as reminders of what has been lost. Indeed, a good deal of the pain of lost love stems from the fact that our feelings about the end of love are quite similar to, and may remind us of, our feelings about our own mortality—a set of facts that our faculty of active forgetting must cover up if we are to live successfully.

The end of a love affair is invariably painful. But even while an affair is still going on, love frequently involves as much pain as pleasure. Quite often, indeed, it involves more. As one of the most intense of human

experiences, love can involve some of the most intense feelings of fear, guilt, shame, and anxiety that one will ever experience. It seems likely, then, that a willingness to love, particularly in the aftermath of a failed relationship, is largely dependent on one's capacity for active forgetting. For how many of us could bring ourselves, even permit ourselves, to love, if our romantic and utopian idealizations about love came to be replaced by accurate memories of the anxiety, despair, and outright pain that love so frequently engenders?

“The strength of a spirit”: Against forgetting

It was as if I had just awakened from a dream that had lasted for years. And suddenly I was afraid and felt a cold sweat form on my body. I was frightened by the terrible strength of man, his desire and ability to forget. I realized I was ready to forget everything, to cross out twenty years of my life. And when I understood this, I conquered myself, I knew I would not permit my memory to forget everything that I had seen. And I regained my calm and fell asleep.

Varlam Shalamov¹⁵

But perhaps this will seem too despairing. Love, for all its pain, also brings a great deal of happiness, even joy; and while one's feelings about a failed relationship in its *immediate* aftermath are often dominated by anger and regret, making it impossible to take pleasure even in the most pleasant of the memories that remain, a more benign and pleasant interpretation of that particular segment of one's history frequently comes to dominate with the passage of time. Of course, this process is itself, in large part, an instance of active forgetting. And it is significant that both Joel and Clementine make their decision to have each other *artificially* erased (engaging in what we might perhaps term “very active forgetting”) quickly and impulsively, with little deliberation, soon enough after the end of the relationship that they are still deeply hurt and aggrieved. Moreover Joel, at least, soon comes to regret his decision—not before the erasure (when the pain is still too fresh), nor after (when the pain, along with the memories, have been eliminated), but *during* the process of erasure.

Why might one come to regret the decision to forget? Nietzsche himself, for all he had to say in favor of forgetting, was ultimately ambivalent on its value. He admitted, as we have seen, that forgetting was *necessary*:

in his view, we could not flourish or even, perhaps, survive without it. Yet to call something necessary is perfectly compatible with regarding it as a necessary evil. Nietzsche's insight into the positive aspects of forgetting is balanced by a recognition that points us in the opposite direction, reminding us that remembering has a value, and that if forgetting is a matter of masking the less palatable aspects of existence in order to be able to live, then a sign of the strong, the powerful, will be that they will not need to forget as much:

Something might be true while being harmful and dangerous in the highest degree. Indeed, it may be a basic characteristic of existence that those who would know it completely would perish, in which case the strength of a spirit should be measured according to how much of the "truth" one could still barely endure—or, to put it more clearly, to what degree one would require it to be thinned down, shrouded, sweetened, blunted, falsified.¹⁶

This, then, gives us a second Nietzschean thesis regarding affirmation—one whose spirit is quite contrary to that of the first:

The Second Affirmation Thesis: One ought to affirm the individual components of one's life, even when it is painful to do so. Denying reality is a sign of weakness; affirming the unpleasant aspects of the real is a sign of strength.

The thought is that remembering, for all its psychic costs—indeed, on account of its psychic costs—might best be seen as a sign of strength, a sign that one can accept, tolerate, and even master the dread realities of life, rather than admitting a kind of defeat by denying them.

The defeat in question is no trivial matter, for what is lost when memories are purged is something quite fundamental. Memories are not just valued by or important to us—for words such as 'by' and 'to' suggest a view of memories as objects separate from ourselves, to which we bear certain relationships. Rather, it is plausible to think that the relationship between me and my memories is substantially more intimate than that: not a relationship of valuing or significance, but of identity. My memories, that is, can plausibly be viewed as parts of me: my remembering (at least some of) the significant experiences of my life is an essential part of my

being the person I am.¹⁷ A bout of complete amnesia regarding such matters—one that plunged me into a state in which I was quite literally unable to remember, from the first-point of view, any of my past experiences—would almost certainly result in a very profound crisis of identity. Sacrificing one’s memories in order to escape from pain is akin to sacrificing a limb in order to escape from a trap: it is quite literally a portion of oneself that is jettisoned.

By choosing to forget, we are in effect amputating parts of ourselves. And if we forget too much, whether by accident or by choice, we will lose our sense of self, our understanding of who we are. In her story “Almost No Memory” Lydia Davis describes the situation of a person who, while her present-moment consciousness is “very sharp,” is unable to form memories of her experiences. She attempts to deal with this, in part, by taking notes on the books she reads; but this strategy only leaves her in a situation of profound uncertainty amounting to a kind of epistemological despair:

And so she knew by this that these notebooks truly had a great deal to do with her, though it was hard for her to understand, and troubled her to try to understand, just how they had to do with her, how much they were of her and how much they were outside her and not of her, as they sat there on the shelf, being what she knew but did not know, being what she had read but did not remember reading, being what she had thought but did not now think, or remember thinking, or if she remembered, then did not know whether she was thinking it now or whether she had only once thought it, or understand why she had had a thought once and then years later had the same thought, or a thought once and then never that same thought again.¹⁸

Because the character in Davis’s story cannot construct a coherent narrative to fit together the various pieces of evidence she possesses about herself—the books, notes, fragments of persisting memory, etc.—she simply cannot understand herself. These pieces of evidence come to her as if they had been created by someone else. The result is that she is, in a very real sense, isolated from herself. Nor will this isolation extend only as far as the boundaries of her own self—boundaries that, in her case, seem to be in some serious danger of dissolving. It is through our experiences of

the world that we gain access to that world; and so it is only to the extent that we are able to continue to possess those experiences by remembering them that we can regard ourselves as having access to the larger world (larger, that is, than the extraordinarily limited portion of it to which our senses provide access at any particular moment). But this larger, public world is precisely the place where we encounter people other than ourselves—a point that has been forcefully made by Harry Frankfurt:

Lies are designed to damage our grasp of reality. So they are intended, in a very real way, to make us crazy. To the extent that we believe them, our minds are occupied and governed by fictions, fantasies, and illusions that have been concocted for us by the liar. What we accept as real is a world that others cannot see, touch, or experience in any direct way. A person who believes a lie is constrained by it, accordingly, to live “in his own world”—a world that others cannot enter, and in which even the liar himself does not truly reside. Thus, the victim of the lie is, in the degree of his deprivation of the truth, shut off from the world of common experience and isolated in an illusory realm to which there is no path that others might find or follow.¹⁹

The loss of our experiential memories isolates us not only from ourselves, but from others as well. Joel’s and Clementine’s mutual friends Rob and Carrie, for instance, are placed in the difficult position of not only having to conceal their knowledge of the relationship from (post-erasure) Clementine but having to conceal their knowledge of Clementine’s decision to have him erased from (pre-erasure) Joel. They are thus forced to adopt a kind of paternalistic stance toward both of the former lovers—a stance that, as it turns out, cannot be long maintained: Rob soon breaks and reveals all to the shocked and horrified Joel. Of course it is an interesting fact that, in choosing to respond by having Clementine, in her turn, erased, Joel is deliberately choosing a course in which his friends will need to adopt an even more radically paternalistic stance toward him. But we must once again remind ourselves how clear it is that Joel’s “decision” is one of impulse, and that he has not fully thought through the consequences of his choice. The crucial point is that one’s network of beliefs is not only interior; it has a social existence as well. In choosing to delete some portion of that network, one faces the difficulty not only

of isolating a fragment of a network that, by its very nature, cannot be divided up into discrete, isolable fragments but of isolating *oneself*, as an agent with beliefs, from other agents whose willful complicity will be required if one's chosen illusion is to have any chance of being maintained.

This is disturbing not only for prudential but, more fundamentally, for moral reasons. To deliberately forget what one has done, after all, is a way of refusing to take responsibility for it. And to the extent that one's existence is located in the shared public realm, to be erased from perception—to be rendered invisible—is quite literally to be done away with; there is an undeniable hostility implicit in the act.

In Milan Kundera's novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, we find the story of Mirek, a man who, like Joel and Clementine, has had a lover whom he now regrets. In Mirek's case, the affair has been over for more than twenty years; yet he cannot escape his shame at having loved this woman, Zdena, whom he now regards as deeply inappropriate for him. Hoping to destroy the evidence of their relationship, he visits Zdena and asks to borrow the love letters he wrote to her. Sensing, perhaps, that he has no intention of ever returning them, she refuses.

What is perhaps most sinister about Mirek's desire to expunge the memory of a former lover for the sake of his own comfort and convenience, to create an artificial version of reality and thrust it upon others advertised as "the truth," is the way in which this initially self-concerned desire (concerned with one's own sanity, happiness, and mental hygiene) modulates so easily into a desire utterly to deny the reality of the other—the sort of desire that can be found at the heart of the political programs of our most authoritarian regimes. Indeed, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* makes explicit the comparison with authoritarianism:

The reason he wanted to remove her picture from the album of his life was not that he hadn't loved her, but that he had. By erasing her from his mind, he erased his love for her. He airbrushed her out of the picture in the same way the Party propaganda system airbrushed Clementis from the balcony where Gottwald gave his historic speech. Mirek is as much a rewriter of history as the Communist party, all political parties, all nations, all men. People are always shouting they want to create a better future. It's not true. The future is an apathetic

void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past. They are fighting for access to the laboratories where photographs are retouched and biographies and histories rewritten.²⁰

This passage evokes, even as it inverts, a famous passage from George Orwell's 1984: "Whoever controls the past controls the future. Whoever controls the present controls the past." Of course, one might hope that the amount of evidence one would need to manipulate, and to eliminate, would prove so vast and ungovernable that all such attempts at control through falsification would be doomed to failure. But this only takes us back to the troubling possibility raised by Lydia Davis's story, that the effect of absence of reliable memory, whether individual or communal, will be the undermining of our responsiveness and responsibility to the truth, to the facts, to reality, leaving us in an inherently unstable epistemological predicament in which truth and falsehood become indistinguishable. Hannah Arendt's comments, in the essay she called "Truth and Politics," remind us that the objections to the intentional alteration or erasure of memory are both prudential and moral: we risk doing damage to our communities, our integrity, and our very selves in attempting to alter our pictures of the past:

[T]he relatively closed systems of totalitarian governments and one-party dictatorships [. . .] are, of course, by far the most effective agencies in shielding ideologies and images from the impact of reality and truth. [. . .] Their trouble is that they must constantly change the falsehoods they offer as a substitute for the real story; changing circumstances require the substitution of one history book for another, the replacement of pages in the encyclopedias and reference books, the disappearance of certain names in favor of others unknown or little known before. And though this continuing instability gives no indication of what the truth might be, it is itself an indication, and a powerful one, of the lying character of all public utterances concerning the factual world . . . [T]he result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real

world—and the category of truth vs falsehood is among the mental means to this end—is being destroyed.²¹

“Replacing history by myth,” writes Pierre Vidal-Naquet in a book about Holocaust deniers, “is a procedure that would hardly be dangerous if there were an absolute criterion allowing one to distinguish at first sight between the two.” The problem, of course, is that there is no such *absolute* criterion; and, indeed, the effect of the replacement of history with myth is to undermine what progress toward a *pragmatic* distinction we have made. And, as Vidal-Naquet goes on to write, “It is the distinguishing feature of a lie to want to pass itself off as the truth.”²²

**“All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored”:
Affirmation’s holism**

How could I fail to be grateful to my whole life?

Friedrich Nietzsche²³

Mirek’s motivation, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, is to deny that he ever loved this woman whom he does not now love. The thought that he might have been wrong, or that he might simply have changed in his likes and tastes, is intolerable to him; in particular, he cannot stand to admit that he had ever loved a woman he now considers ugly, that he could have loved something he now abhors. He is moved by what Ralph Waldo Emerson described as “a reverence for our past act or word, [which we feel] because the eyes of others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past acts, and we are loath to disappoint them.”²⁴ What is unusual about Mirek is only that rather than taking the more common path of trying to make the present fit the past, Mirek’s strategy is to alter the past in order to fit the present (as he perceives or imagines it). He wants his life to have the appearance of consistency, coherence, a straight line rather than a crooked path. And he has no faith in Emerson’s claim that:

The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks. [. . .] See the line from a sufficient distance, and it straightens itself to the average tendency. Your genuine action will explain itself and will explain your other genuine actions.²⁵

Rather, Mirek wants to erase the actual actions and feelings of his past and artificially impose an order upon the history of his loves—as if the various individual moments and movements of his being would only add up to a life worth living if they could all be shown to be pointing in the same direction and to fit snugly against one another like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

Mirek's desire is related to a pair of ideas about love and its relation to life, one true, the other popular but false. The first, true idea is that what one loves reflects, and expresses, the person one is. The second, false idea is that one can only truly love a single person in the course of one's life. This idea exerts a pressure on romantics of a certain sort to deny the reality of past loves, in order to assert a singularity and unity of character over time. It should be admitted that the phenomenology of love itself pushes us, to at least some degree, in this direction: when one is truly in love one's consciousness is taken up quite entirely with the beloved, and it becomes both difficult and to some degree unpleasant to take past feelings and attachments seriously, or remember how vivid and compelling they were to us at the time. Love itself pushes us, in the midst of our experience of it, to romanticize its own nature. Nonetheless it is simply a denial of reality to think that the human person, or the world in which the person lives, is so set up as to guarantee and permit only a single genuine love attachment for each person in the course of a life.

It is hard to avoid the suspicion that Joel's decision to erase Clementine, and hers to delete him, is in part an expression of this desire for consistency, this urge to deny the reality of a past passion that might threaten one's future claims to truly love someone else. Indeed, we might well say of Joel what Kundera says of Mirek, that "The reason he wanted to remove her picture from the album of his life was not that he hadn't loved her, but that he had. By erasing her from his mind, he erased his love for her." When people speak of "moving on" after the end of a relationship, they often mean something very much like this: that the reality of one's previous passion must be downplayed, minimized, even altogether denied so that one may clear one's slate in order to make room for a new and genuine passion for someone else who is yet to come along.

But Joel's attempt to follow through in his decision is very nearly derailed. For in the midst of the procedure, Joel comes across a memory of Clementine whose sheer beauty and poignancy strike him afresh. In this memory, in which Joel and Clementine appear to be in bed under

the covers, Clementine begins by asking Joel if she is ugly; she then tells the story of an old toy:

. . . this ugly girl doll who I called Clementine. And I keep yelling at her, “You can’t be ugly! Be pretty!” It’s weird, like if I could transform her, I would magically change too . . .

Like his other memories of Clementine, this one (which ends with Joel reassuring Clementine that she is indeed pretty, and with an atypically vulnerable Clementine tearfully pleading, “Don’t ever leave me. . .”) is connected with pain. Yet this does not prevent Joel from recognizing its value and wanting to keep it. Realizing that this memory too will be deleted along with all the others, Joel begins to protest, to yell at Lacuna’s team of memory-erasers from within his own mind as if he could be heard. Of course, it may be that he is confused: perhaps he does not realize, or has forgotten, that he cannot keep one memory while discarding the rest. Indeed, this seems to be precisely what he asks for: “Just let me keep this one.” But this desire, of course, cannot be satisfied: memories are so intricately and pervasively interrelated that one cannot isolate a single one and preserve it while jettisoning the rest. Indeed, one must wonder how much of its meaning and beauty a single memory that has been wrenched from its context and now exists in absolute isolation could manage to embody. Would such a memory not persist simply as a puzzling and quite possibly disturbing fragment, disconnected from all that might help to make sense of it? At best, perhaps (and perhaps this is what Joel hopes for) it would appear as a scene that one had not in fact experienced in waking life but had imagined or dreamed. But would this really capture the value that the memory, ensconced in its context, bears for Joel? Just how much genuine emotional resonance could a mere dream fragment bear?

If the individual moments in our lives are meaningful and valuable to us precisely because of their connections with other moments in our lives, then the thought that one could hang on to a single beautiful moment while jettisoning the painful context that surrounds it is deeply misguided. Indeed, reflection on the impossibility of this state of affairs may lead us to a view of human life something like one that Nietzsche from time to time expressed:

Have you ever said Yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you have said Yes too to all woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said “You please me happiness! Abide, moment!” then you wanted all back. All anew, all eternally, all entangled, ensnared, enamored . . . ²⁶

On Nietzsche’s conception, the links between various events (and thus, between various memories) are not only conceptual but *causal*. His view of the deterministic nature of the universe involved the assertion that each particular moment causally implies all others: given a particular event E, and the history H that preceded and led to E, he would assert that *only* H could have led to E; thus, in valuing E we are forced to place a value on H as well:

If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all existence. For nothing is self-sufficient, neither in us ourselves nor in things; and if our soul has trembled with happiness and sounded like a harpstring just once, all eternity was needed to produce this one event—and in this single moment of affirmation all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified, and affirmed.²⁷

This gives us, then, our third Nietzschean affirmation thesis:

The Third Affirmation Thesis: There are certain moments in a life that ought to be wholeheartedly affirmed. But to do this, it is necessary to affirm everything in one’s life.

For our purposes we can put aside the various worries that quite naturally arise regarding the strong determinism that may seem to underlie this thought. Nietzsche’s view, admittedly, involves a metaphysical conception not all will share. But this need not trouble us, for all that is really needed to motivate a version of the Third Affirmation Thesis is the idea that the meaning of a moment depends on its context in one’s life—that the lovely moment Joel remembers experiencing with Clementine, for example, is not something that could have occurred between two strangers who lacked the particular shared history that unites these two individuals. We need not, that is, hold that the valued event is *causally* dependent on its history, in a way that implies a single possible course

of history; it is enough to hold that the event's *meaning* is not entirely independent of its historical context. This standpoint avoids the controversial metaphysical aspects of Nietzsche's view while still allowing us to endorse the core Nietzschean point that the true affirmer will not be the person who affirms *selectively*, endorsing some moments of her life while wishing others were different, but rather the person who affirms her life as an *entirety*.

Joel's first impulse, then—to save the memory in question, and only this particular memory—shows him to have an understanding of affirmation that is, according to the Third Affirmation Thesis, flawed. But he soon enough comes to realize that what is really at stake is not just the existence of a particular isolated and, as it happens, especially beautiful memory, but the entire existence, for him, of the person that is Clementine, a person who has been the object of his passionate love. And it is at this point that Joel begins to attempt to undermine and outwit the procedure. His goal, then, which begins as the preservation of one particularly lovely and valuable memory of Clementine, soon becomes that of saving *any* memory of Clementine, so that she is not entirely lost to him. Indeed, the strategy he soon hits upon is that of inserting Clementine into a memory in which she does not properly belong—the sort of place where the Lacuna team is least likely to look for her.

In accepting the value of his memories of Clementine, and attempting to save them, Joel is rejecting the romantic view of Mirek: he is pledging himself to acknowledge and take responsibility for an episode in his life that may, from the perspective of his overall life, be considered aberrant, awkward, and in many respects regrettable. Unlike Mirek, who cannot bring himself to admit that he has loved a person who was, by his current standards, imperfect, Joel's recognition that the relationship contained at least one moment of genuine beauty compels him to refrain from denying its reality. In the end, Joel comes to agree with Nietzsche that one cannot affirm such a moment in and of itself without also affirming, at least to a considerable degree, the painful and imperfect sequence of events that forms its broader context. The effect of the Third Affirmation Thesis, at least in such cases, seems to be to discourage us from being the sort of disappointed idealist that condemns the entire world for failing to live up to our utopian standards, and to remind us that a human life can contain moments that are capable of justifying a considerable degree of imperfection.

“A tremendous moment”: Affirmation and eternal recurrence

The renunciation of past and future is the first of all renunciations.

Simone Weil²⁸

Does this mean that Joel must deny having any negative feeling or regret regarding Clementine? Nietzsche, it at least sometimes appears, would suggest so:

My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it—all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary—but love it.²⁹

But does Joel really need to commit himself to a view that is quite this extreme? As I have suggested, many people will probably reject the rigid determinism that, for Nietzsche, underlies the Third Affirmation Thesis. And insofar as the matter is taken to concern not a metaphysical claim about determinism but rather the question of the attitudes we ought to take toward our lives, the essential question, surely, is not whether our attitudes must be *uniformly positive*; it is, rather, whether our attitudes over time must all be *consistent with one another*. In other words, what matters is whether the knowledge of how something began, or of how it will turn out, must necessarily determine our evaluation of that thing in the present moment. If our attitudes must be consistent then affirmation will in many cases be impossible. Facts about the shameful histories that cleared the way for present triumph, for instance, may poison the achievement, thus making it impossible to wholeheartedly endorse it:

“It was”—that is the name of the will’s gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy. Powerless against what has been done, he is an angry spectator of all that is past. The will cannot will backwards; and that he cannot break time and time’s covetousness, that is the will’s loneliest melancholy.³⁰

Moreover, events in the present will be just as open to being poisoned, sullied, or otherwise undermined by events that lie in the future.

The knowledge that our lives end with the annihilation of death would make it impossible, it might be claimed, for us to affirm their value in the present. Indeed, this claim has been put forward by such Christian thinkers as William Lane Craig with some enthusiasm:

If each individual person passes out of existence when he dies, then what ultimate meaning can be given to his life? Does it really matter whether he ever existed at all? [. . .] Mankind is a doomed race in a dying universe. Because the human race will eventually cease to exist, it makes no ultimate difference whether it ever did exist. Mankind is thus no more significant than a swarm of mosquitoes or a barnyard of pigs, for their end is all the same. [. . .] Because our lives are ultimately meaningless, the activities we fill our lives with are also meaningless. The long hours spent in study at the university, our jobs, our interests, our friendships—all these are, in the final analysis, utterly meaningless. This is the horror of modern man: because he ends in nothing, he is nothing.³¹

Much of the opposition and downright hostility that Nietzsche felt toward religion, and, in particular, Christianity, can be traced to just this thought. It was the idea that our current life should be devalued with respect to a future life in a different realm—so that the present can have value only if such a future is promised, and, in light of such a promise, the present ought to be sacrificed for the sake of that future—that Nietzsche found not only misguided but offensive. Why, Nietzsche would ask Craig, would the fact of what will happen *later* erase the value of what is happening *now*? Indeed, why think that later facts even influence the value of the present? The “future” orientation that is such a deep element of the Christian religion features in many Christian-influenced secular contexts as well—for instance, in utilitarianism and other consequentialist moralities that emphasize the *effects* of one’s choice over the nature of the present action in and of itself:

The most general formula on which every religion and morality is founded is: “Do this and that, refrain from this and that—then you will be happy! Otherwise . . .” Every morality, every religion, is this imperative; I call it the great original sin of reason, the *immortal unreason*. In my mouth, this formula is changed into its opposite—first

example of my “revaluation of all values”: a well-turned-out human being, a “happy one,” must perform certain actions and shrinks instinctively from other actions; he carries the order, which he represents physiologically, into his relations with other human beings and things. In a formula: his virtue is the effect of his happiness.³²

This gives us our fourth and final Nietzschean thesis regarding affirmation:

The Fourth Affirmation Thesis: Affirming the value of one’s life is a matter of affirming (enough of) the particulars that make up one’s life. To affirm a particular one need not deny all that seems inconsistent with it, nor need one affirm everything that is connected with it. One need affirm only the particular in the present while giving up the demand for consistency over time. One must accept that something that has shameful or evil roots, or that will end in annihilation, failure, or pain, can nevertheless be fully and wholeheartedly endorsed as good in the present moment.

I said at the outset of the paper that *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* can be viewed as the story of two people who learn to be “immoralists” in the Nietzschean sense. It is now possible to say a bit more concretely just what this means. The Nietzschean affirmer is an “immoralist,” in part, because she affirms the value of the present moment without thinking about its future consequences; she wholeheartedly embraces present triumphs and pleasures without evaluating them against a broader framework that would ask such questions as: What will this lead to? What is the ultimate significance of this act for one’s own life, for the broader community, or for the history of humanity? If a utopian is one who sees the present moment merely as a means to a more perfect future, then Nietzsche’s thought, insofar as it rejects the validity of such future-oriented evaluative perspectives, is in this respect deeply anti-utopian. In his view, the overcoming of *ressentiment* is largely dependent on our learning to be affirmers of this sort; for so long as we insist on imposing a broader, more comprehensive framework of evaluation on our individual actions (rather than viewing them as spontaneous expressions of our characters) we will be unable to avoid clinging to our unacceptable and regrettable pasts, and desiring to take revenge against them. Nor will

we be able to free ourselves from the fear and despair that are naturally engendered by the knowledge that, ultimately, all of our cares, plans and goals are doomed to oblivion.

The demands of such a view of affirmation are difficult to meet. Throughout the film Joel and Clementine must frequently remind each other of the importance of valuing the present moment, and of refusing to allow past-directed regrets or future-directed fears to undermine this valuing; just as they must constantly remind each other that integrity, on such a conception, demands the honest acknowledgment of present thoughts and feelings, and the refusal to deny or reject those parts of oneself—one's thoughts, one's loves, one's momentary urges and attractions—that seem not to fit without friction into the sort of artificially smooth and coherent self-describing narrative we are constantly tempted to construct and project for ourselves. The shooting script of *Eternal Sunshine* contains a scene in which Clementine says the following of herself:

My goal, Joel, is to just let it flow through me? Do you know what I mean? It's like, there's all these emotions and ideas and they come quick and they change and they leave and they come back in a different form and I think we're all taught we should be consistent. Y'know? You love someone—that's it. Forever. You choose to do something with your life—that's it, that's what you do. It's a sign of maturity to stick with that and see things through. And my feeling is that's how you die, because you stop listening to what is true, and what is true is constantly changing.³³

This is Clementine at her most Emersonian (and, on the reading I am now suggesting, her most Nietzschean). We might compare the famous passage from Emerson's "Self-Reliance":

But why should you keep your head over your shoulder? Why drag about this monstrous corpse of your memory, lest you contradict somewhat you have stated in this or that public place? Suppose you should contradict yourself; what then? It seems to be a rule of wisdom never to rely on your memory alone, scarcely even in acts of pure memory, but to bring the past for judgment into the thousand-eyed present, and live ever in a new day [. . .] A foolish consistency is the

hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think to-day in words as hard as cannon-balls, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day.³⁴

There is indeed something Emersonian in Clementine's character, in particular, a resistance to planning her actions in advance and to worrying about the consequences that will follow from them. She is described both by herself and by others as "impulsive" (to which Joel replies "It's what I love about you"); she tells Joel "I can't tell from one moment to the next what I'm going to like"; and she (or rather, Joel's interior projection of her) interrupts Joel's fretting about how to prevent his memories from being erased to say "Sweetie, calm down. Enjoy the scenery!" She is also quick to point out Joel's frequent failures to live in the moment, such as his inability to keep from worrying about getting caught when breaking into the house on the beach, or about falling through the ice on the frozen-over Charles River.

Some of her other actions, however, will cause viewers to wonder how deep Clementine's Emersonianism really goes. Most significantly, her impulsive decision to have Joel erased seems less an indication of genuine free-spiritedness than the result of her desire to escape pain and gain revenge; it would seem to be evidence that she is *not* free-spirited but is (rather like Mirek) trapped by the past, dominated by resentment, unable to let things go. (Similarly, her frequent decisions to change her hair color seem to indicate a conscious and artificial desire to *appear* free and spontaneous. As she herself admits—admittedly with an admirable degree of self-awareness—"I apply my personality in a paste.") And in the moments just before the completion of Joel's process of memory annihilation, it is he who must comfort Clementine by reminding her that, while they have only a little time left, there is all the difference in the world between a little time and no time:

CLEMENTINE: This is it, Joel. It's gonna be gone soon.

JOEL: I know.

CLEMENTINE: What do we do?

JOEL: Enjoy it.³⁵

Like many moments in *Eternal Sunshine*, this one is, in its way, repeated. At the film's climax, Clementine, shattered by the revelation that she and Joel have already been lovers (and worse, that they have already fallen out of love), attempts to abandon him and flees into the hall. Her decision is highly rational: having heard recordings of themselves describing their reasons for disliking, indeed, *detesting* each other, it has become perfectly clear that any attempt at a romantic relationship is almost certainly doomed to failure. Any relationship that is attempted would now have to take place not only in the light of the devastating comments he has made about her character but also—and this might well be even harder for her to bear—in the light of the deeply cruel things *she* has said about him.

Joel, of course, is in the same situation. Yet he follows Clementine out into the hall and calls to her to wait:

CLEMENTINE: What, Joel? What do you want?

JOEL: I don't know. (Pause.) Just wait. Just wait for a while.

CLEMENTINE: Okay.

JOEL: Really?

CLEMENTINE: I'm not a concept, Joel. I'm just a fucked-up girl who is looking for my own peace of mind. I'm not perfect.

JOEL: I can't think of anything I don't like about you right now.

CLEMENTINE: But you will. You will think of things. And I'll get bored with you and feel trapped because that's what happens with me.

JOEL: Okay.

(Pause.)

CLEMENTINE: Okay.

These final “okays,” which are the last words spoken in the film, are hesitant, uncertain, and somewhat tremulous—but in light of all that faces the lovers they strike a courageous, even thrilling note of affirmation and endorsement. Indeed, the entire episode may well be viewed as a re-enactment of one of Nietzsche's most famous thought experiments, what he called the “eternal recurrence”:

What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and

every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!”

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.” If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?” would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to *crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate confirmation and seal?³⁶

As with the determinism connected with the Third Affirmation Thesis, our main concern is not the metaphysics but the attitude toward life that is here expressed. Indeed, in this passage Nietzsche seems not at all interested in the question of whether history *really* repeats in an infinite cycle. His concern, rather, is what attitude we would be able to take toward existence if it *did*, and what this attitude tells us about our attitudes about ourselves and the lives we live. The appearance of the demon is presented as a test, and it is only a certain very rare sort of person who could, in light of the shocking news of the eternal recurrence, respond to this news with joy. It is only in the midst of the “tremendous moment” of which Nietzsche speaks that one achieves true affirmation.

But in addition to the challenge, there is also a liberating aspect to the thought of eternal recurrence. The Fourth Affirmation Thesis expresses the idea that properly valuing the present moment is incompatible with living in a manner that is predominantly oriented toward the future—living, for instance, in the Christian manner of sacrificing one’s strength and happiness now in the hope of a later reward. The eternal recurrence, with its cyclical view of history, undermines such linear conceptions. If history is an endlessly repeating loop, then we need not sacrifice the present for the sake of the future. On this conception, *each moment is its own future*. By conceiving time as a repeating cycle rather than an endlessly

forward-moving present moment, the distinction between past, present, and future—and any hierarchy of values grounded in that distinction—is annihilated.

Thus the climax of the film—Joel and Clementine standing in the hall, choosing their fate—can be read as a dramatization of just the sort of “tremendous moment” that the truly free spirit will achieve in the face of the demon’s challenge. Joel and Clementine’s task is to help each other learn to become so well disposed to themselves, and to life, as “to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate confirmation and seal.” Their task, that is, is to confront without illusion the true nature of their relationship—that the initial infatuation that unites the two is doomed to give way to disappointment, resentment, and even hostility—and to find the strength not to despair in the face of these facts.

In this connection it is interesting to recall what Lacuna’s head, Howard Mierzwiak, says to Joel as he urges him to opt for the memory erasure procedure. “This is a personal and profound decision to make,” he tells Joel, “but might I suggest that you at least consider the potential pitfalls of a psyche forever spinning its wheels.”³⁷ “Forever spinning its wheels” is an image that might itself remind us of the eternal recurrence. Howard’s promise is that Joel will be *released* from the nightmare of eternal recurrence—the endless recurrence of the same memories, pains and regrets. Ironically, though, all the procedure actually does is release Joel into a different kind of cycle of recurrence, one in which he will not only figuratively but *literally* relive the agonies (and, alongside them, the ecstasies) of meeting, falling in love with, and suffering alongside Clementine. In order to overcome, and to master, the tragedy of his fate, Joel must extirpate his longing to be released from it and instead find a way to embrace it, wholeheartedly and with full knowledge and acceptance of its darker aspects.

Conclusion: “The Very Mark of Eros”

If thou must love me, let it be for naught
Except for love’s sake only . . .

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*³⁸

It is important to understand that Nietzsche does not mean to entirely deny the validity of the viewpoint of the future. He would not think that

the present perspective ought to be objectively privileged over the future any more than the future perspective should be objectively privileged over the past. (It is the latter, in his view, that happens in Christianity, and in the utilitarian and other ethical views that have arisen in Christianity's wake.) Rather, Nietzsche would deny the idea that any perspective ought to be *objectively* privileged at all. There are, he would insist, only subjective perspectives. Since we always live in the present, the perspective of the present is all that ever really matters. Of course, what is now future will at one point be present; and at that point in time we may have to evaluate our actions and plans very differently than we do now. But the fact that such evaluations will someday be valid does not imply that they are *now* valid.

There is a deep connection here, which I can only suggest and do not have the space to explore, with some of Nietzsche's fundamental ideas about the nature of philosophy. The idea that there exists a privileged "objective" perspective naturally encourages the thought that what is desirable in philosophy is a *comprehensive* view: a complete and systematic theory that will explain and accommodate all of the universe's phenomena, and that can be grasped in a single moment of immense insight. Nietzsche, by contrast, was a deeply and pervasively anti-systematic philosopher.³⁹ He was interested in the integrity of each philosophical insight as it presented itself to him, and was little troubled by the fact that a certain insight, which struck him *now* as a valid and illuminating view into the nature of existence, might not be capable of being reconciled with *other* insights that had also struck him, on various occasions, as valid and illuminating. (His thought was, in this as in many other respects, genuinely Emersonian.) Indeed, this phenomenon is apparent in the four Nietzschean affirmation theses I have identified in this paper. The four do not add up to anything like a system; on the contrary, to a considerable degree they tend to oppose and even undermine one another. Yet each represents, I think, a genuine insight, and thus offers the possibility of a kind of response to the challenge of affirmation.

It is the Fourth Affirmation Thesis that I find the most profound, the most insightful, and also the most troubling. As I have said, it suggests a view of life that is difficult to fully and consistently embody; yet there is, one might insist, a great value in our striving to do so. It may be, too, that love is the human phenomenon that most encourages such strivings.

For love—the love, at any rate, that is connected with passion and eros—demands to be experienced as fully present in the immediate moment; it mocks and rejects past and future claims and commitments that would narrow or impinge on its domain; and indeed, to a certain extent it makes it difficult for us even to perceive such competing claims.

Ironically, the most eloquent statement I know of the link between erotic love and the sort of affirmation we have in mind is found not in Nietzsche but in the writings of the Christian philosopher C. S. Lewis:

Eros does not aim at happiness. We may think he does, but when he is brought to the test it proves otherwise. Everyone knows that it is useless to try to separate lovers by proving to them that their marriage will be an unhappy one. This is not only because they will disbelieve you. They usually will, no doubt. But even if they believed, they would not be dissuaded. For it is the very mark of Eros that when he is in us we had rather share unhappiness with the Beloved than be happy on any other terms. Even if the two lovers are mature and experienced people who know that broken hearts heal in the end and can clearly foresee that, if they once steeled themselves to go through the present agony of parting, they would almost certainly be happier ten years hence than marriage is at all likely to make them—even then, they would not part. To Eros all these calculations are irrelevant—just as the coolly brutal judgment of Lucretius is irrelevant to Venus. Even when it becomes clear beyond all evasion that marriage with the Beloved cannot lead to happiness—when it cannot even profess to offer any other life than that of tending an incurable invalid, of hopeless poverty, of exile, or of disgrace—Eros never hesitates to say, “Better this than parting. Better to be miserable with her than happy without her. Let our hearts break provided they break together.” If the voice within us does not say this, it is not the voice of Eros.⁴⁰

Let our hearts break provided they break together. What better statement of Joel and Clementine’s ultimate aspiration could we desire? Indeed, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is surely one of the most romantic movies ever made. Other movies cheapen love by regarding it as nothing more than the gateway to pleasure and success. Sunnier and more optimistic by nature, but less confident in the value of passion, they insist on justifying

love in terms of something other than itself. The happy couple, united (typically in marriage) in the film's finale, revels in the anticipation of the blissful and prosperous future they have been promised. And so one cannot help but wonder: do these two *really* love each other, or are they merely in love with their own anticipated joy? Whereas one cannot doubt that Joel and Clementine are true lovers. Knowing how badly things will turn out—that they will live not happily, but miserably, ever after—they nonetheless pledge themselves to each other. It is, indeed, “the very mark of Eros” whose stamp we are witnessing.

In the film's final exchange, behind Clementine's voice, speaking its single, hesitant yet celebratory “Okay,” there seems to me to be a second, very nearly audible voice. That voice is also Clementine's: perhaps we would hear it if the film chose to take us into the largely unknown territory of her head. And that we cannot hear it does not matter, for we can see it in Clementine's face, in the ecstatic and finally comprehending smile that breaks across her features as Joel responds with his own calm and accepting “Okay” to the litany of sufferings and despairs that are in store for them. *You are a god*, this voice tells Joel. *And never have I heard anything more divine.*⁴¹

Notes

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, in Nietzsche 1992, p. 475 (first essay, section 10).
- 2 Pinsky 1999, pp. 60–70; p. 70.
- 3 Austen 1991, p. 21.
- 4 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 70, in Nietzsche 1992, p. 270.
- 5 Santayana 1924, p. 284.
- 6 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 217. The Kaufmann translation (Nietzsche 1992, p. 336) reads differently: “Blessed are the forgetful: for they get over their stupidities, too.”
- 7 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in Nietzsche 1954, p. 491.
- 8 Austen 1991, p. 376.
- 9 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, second essay, section 1, in Nietzsche 1992, p. 493.
- 10 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, section 609, cited in Nehamas 1995, p. 69.
- 11 Nietzsche 1995, p. 89.
- 12 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in Nietzsche 1992, pp. 493–4 (second essay, section 1).
- 13 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 68, in Nietzsche 1992, p. 270.
- 14 Kaufman 2004, p. 58.

- 15 Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, cited in Gray 2003, pp. 100–1.
- 16 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 39, in Nietzsche 1992, p. 239.
- 17 Philosophical theories making memory the basis of personal identity go back at least to John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke 1975).
- 18 Davis 1997, p. 136.
- 19 Frankfurt 2006, pp. 78–9.
- 20 Kundera 1982, p. 22.
- 21 Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in Arendt 1977, pp. 256–7.
- 22 Vidal-Naquet 1992, pp. 50–1.
- 23 Nietzsche, from the epigraph to *Ecce Homo*, in Nietzsche 1992, p. 677.
- 24 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in Emerson 1891, p. 64.
- 25 Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in Emerson 1891, p. 66.
- 26 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in Nietzsche 1954, p. 435.
- 27 *The Will to Power*, section 1032, quoted in Nehamas 1995, p. 232.
- 28 Simone Weil, in Westphal and Levinson 1993, p. 221.
- 29 Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in Nietzsche 1992, p. 714.
- 30 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, second part, in Nietzsche 1954, p. 251.
- 31 Craig 2000, p. 42.
- 32 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in Nietzsche 1954, p. 493.
- 33 Kaufmann 2004, pp. 19–20.
- 34 Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in Emerson 1891, pp. 64–5.
- 35 The poignancy of the moment is only increased when we recall that this is the *imagined* Clementine. Joel's time with the *real* Clementine has already run out: she has forgotten him. Moreover, while in the film this exchange ends with Joel saying "Enjoy it," in the shooting script (Kaufman 2004, p. 101) Joel adds two more words: "Say goodbye."
- 36 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, section 341; quoted in Nehamas 2001, p. 125.
- 37 Kaufman 2004, p. 34.
- 38 Browning 1992.
- 39 Though this claim is of course complicated by some of his remarks regarding the "will to power."
- 40 Lewis, pp. 106–7.
- 41 Much of this paper was written at the Stanford Humanities Center while I was on sabbatical from California State University, Chico. I am grateful to both institutions for their support.

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