

## REVIEW

**Krzysztof Michalski, *The Flame of Eternity: An Interpretation of Nietzsche's Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), ISBN: 978-0-691-14346-0**

The *Flame of Eternity* is Krzysztof Michalski's provocative, passionate, and at times poetic meditation on the eternal in Nietzsche's writings. While the subject of the book is the concept of eternity, it quickly becomes clear that this concept is inextricably bound up with that of change and temporality. Change is everywhere, and thus cannot be separated from identity, consciousness, knowledge, happiness, morality, and so forth. Michalski adroitly juxtaposes Nietzsche's understanding of change with more traditional concepts, especially those which draw on Cartesian dualism. Insofar as consciousness cannot be abstracted or removed from its living conditions, its identity is best described as whatever happens to it in the course of its ongoing changes and permutations: "The assumption that things—some, at least—simply are, that they do not merely become what they are, is yet another illusion concealed within the Cartesian thesis." (33) There is nothing which exists apart from its own becoming, from its perpetual transition into something else. The claim here is much more interesting than a simple description of how we humans invariably experience the world. If taken seriously, it implies that the idea of a world or universe that undergoes change, as if the world were a changing *thing*, is itself a deeply misguided notion. Michalski argues, quite convincingly, that there is neither a beginning nor an end to becoming: "If the world that I am looking at, the world where I live, is really changing... then that passing, that change, that becoming, never began and will never end." (96) This argument, elaborated with the help of extensive quoting from Nietzsche, stipulates that it is the very experience of our changing finitude which proves the impossibility of an eternal substance or eternal truth anywhere in the world. Conversely, if there were indeed something which resisted its own becoming, which was itself the complete actualization of permanence, then it would follow that everything around it would likewise come to a standstill, would fulfill its inner teleological truth as an unchanging substance. The passage of time would be nothing more than pure illusion, for it is impossible that genuine change and genuine permanence coexist without one vanquishing the other: "If there does exist something that does not change, it is difficult to believe that anything changes, that time is real." (94) But since we all experience our own becoming directly and immediately, that is proof enough that we do not exist in a world destined for dialectical reconciliation.

Michalski draws significant conclusions from this basic starting position, including the idea that "[l]ife as we live it is the only possible measure of value." (10) There is no frame of reference, that is to say, from which we could validate values or concepts apart from the life in

which they are lived. Precisely for the reason given above—namely, that there is no substratum anywhere in the world, or outside of the world, absorbing and assimilating all of the changes occurring within it—it is for this reason that we cannot ground our actions in a metaphysical system of rationalized values. There are no limits, no boundaries, to change. Hence, neither can we speak of a totality of change, within which all change takes place: “There is no such thing as a totality that encompasses everything, a totality without remainder: the world is no such totality.” (47) In this respect, differences proliferate endlessly, but if this is so then it is impossible to subordinate those differences to a common, universal, unchanging truth. Thus, in Michalski’s interpretation of Nietzschean temporality and chance, there simply is no well-ordered cosmos to which we could apply our speculative, totalizing rationality: “Nietzsche tells us: forget about eternity, which renders time a dream. Set aside theories that persuade you to wake up, to tear off the veil of time, in order to face the world as it (ostensibly) is. These are just ruses, futile tricks.” (92) It would be comforting to fully comprehend the meaning of life, the teleology of the world, the eternal essence of things. But since we ourselves constitute a part of that infinitely changing world, since life is unequivocally bound up with death, there is no escape to a cozy, relaxed place outside of time. Although it would bring solace because death is tragic and horrifying and senseless, it would be no less mythical for all that. At the same time, however, Michalski maintains a nuanced view of systematic values and knowledge. He writes, from his own position as well as Nietzsche’s, that knowledge is only possible insofar as it borders on faith in its totalization. It is meaningless without this assumption: “Knowledge strives toward an ultimate determination, it presupposes a claim to universal and unconditional validity, as well as to the possibility of satisfying that claim, the possibility that things are as it declares them to be.” (169) If this were not the case, then we humans would have a difficult time indeed formulating our ideas in a coherent, meaningful manner. Insofar as we defend our values in the course of living them out, we must defend them and live them paradoxically: they will never form an absolute basis for understanding the world, from a heavenly perspective, but we must nevertheless assume this kind of trajectory for them, without which we inexorably sink into nihilistic despair and disorientation.

Nihilism is a recurring motif in *The Flame of Eternity*. Michalski explores several of its overlapping dimensions, from the psychological to the epistemic, and ultimately contends that it is unavoidable. But at the same time there are better and worse ways of approaching the problem. As early as the preface, he writes that we cannot overcome nihilism once and for all, but that each moment of life provides us with an opportunity to break free from the constraints of continuity. (ix) These constraints are inevitable insofar as a pragmatic outlook relies upon a certain epistemic orientation, as already mentioned, but it is always possible to reinvent them in accordance with new values and new systems of truth. This concrete possibility therefore points to a crucial distinction within nihilism: there is the sickness of life associated with all of our attempts to control what is uncontrollable; and there is the sickness of life that rejects the tension intrinsic to the first form of sickness. The first type affirms the possibility of a liberating revaluation of values, whereas the second does not: “Thus while the project of traditional values, or nihilism, is a negation of our life as it is, the *revaluation of all values* is not an affirmation of life as it is. Life finds no values, no order independent of it, to which it could correspond or not; it creates its own values.” (10) Since there is no justification for values out-

side of life, the attempt to reconsolidate them from an all-encompassing, ideal perspective constitutes a form of nihilism sick with itself, sick with the never-ending tensions of life that plague every human being. But these tensions, which have their source in a nihilistic tendency, can serve as the catalyst for Nietzschean self-overcoming, that is to say, the creation of new standards and new morals. There is no liberation without sickness, without nihilism, for the fundamental reason that self-overcoming is the overcoming of sickness and nihilism. In contrast to the last man, who seeks a reasonable, peaceful way of life, the overman risks everything, all of his life and all of his values, because life *is* this overflowing and overcoming—it is conflict, war, perpetual change, and the overcoming of itself whether we resist it or embrace it: “To love life then means, as Zarathustra tells us, to be prepared to cast off every form, every situation, in which I may find myself. Not to cling to life as I know it, tightly, at all costs, trying merely to cleanse it of everything that is uncomfortable, painful, dark, and unexpected.” (161)

Michalski’s reading of self-overcoming and the affirmation of life cannot be separated from his analysis of Nietzsche’s eternal return of the same. He distinguishes it, in light of Zarathustra’s interactions with the dwarf in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, from the mere repetition of a moment in time which takes place in a delimited fashion. Time does not proceed according to a series of units or segments, nor is it something we perceive externally as if it were a spectacle. That was the dwarf’s mistake. In that case time disappears as the future, as well as the past, is abstracted from my experience of the present. There is a unity of time that can be affirmed in its ceaseless becoming, whereby the past and the future determine different aspects of every moment in its totality, in its unity of passing and becoming. (185) Because everything is unlimited change, we experience it directly and immediately in its perpetual becoming, without being able to subordinate it to our ideals of mechanistic temporality. Because the moment is therefore open to change, open to the unity of past and future, Michalski makes the case that this experience of time includes, as a fundamental aspect, the experience of eternity: “Understood in this way, eternity is not the opposite of time but its aspect, its necessary dimension. Its horizon. Necessary, because without it time—the difference between past and future, and thus accordingly of passing and becoming—would be impossible.” (186) Time would be impossible without the eternal aspect of becoming since the past, present, and future would be perceived as abstract, intellectual categories. They would belong to the realm of spectacle. And this frame of reference is the same one Michalski ascribes to the last man, since it is the last man who treats life as either a piece of entertainment, i.e., a spectacle or a simulacrum, or as a mode of abstract knowledge, something objective that he analyzes.

We might then ask, in a critical fashion, whether the distinction between the last man and the overman is viable. It is the last man, as Michalski argues, who rejects the primordial ambivalence of life, who rejects the inevitably tragic aspects of temporality: “It is precisely this other, dark side of human life—life as a constant effort to move out beyond every form it has attained, life as ceaseless and unlimited risk—it is precisely this fundamental nature of human life that the ideal of the *last man* tries to conceal, cover up, and negate.” (161) This seems like a plausible characterization, and it is certainly in keeping with Nietzsche’s distinction between the last man and the overman. But how is it conceivable that the last man represses unlimited risk or the becoming of life? These are broad terms, and thus it is difficult to know what

Michalski has in mind when he speaks of affirming change, negating life, or covering up the darkness within ourselves. How do we do any of this when life has already been defined as limitless risk and becoming? Once we acknowledge that the mystery of life, its darkness and its illness, is infinitely boundless, it is difficult to claim that one version of values—that of the last man—represses or negates this boundlessness more than another. Michalski is persuasive in his descriptions of darkness and recklessness in relation to life's excess, to the way in which life perpetually overflows itself, but the eternal aspect of this overflowing suggests that our distinctions between the last man and the overman are highly problematic. If we were able to measure and compare these distinctions in relation to infinite, perpetual becoming, whether quantitatively or qualitatively, there would be no difficulty. But to the extent that we are unable to affirm the eternal aspect of our lives to a greater or lesser degree than others, it may be equally impossible to categorize different kinds of willing as more or less open to the tragedy of time so eloquently described in Michalski's *Flame of Eternity*.

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