

ANTITHESIS OF AMOR FATI



Nietzsche is more explicit about resignation, which is presented as the antithesis of amor fati: 'such an experimental philosophy as I live anticipates even the possibilities of the most fundamental nihilism: but this does not mean that it must halt at a negation, a No, a will to negation. It wants to cross over to the opposite of this (...) □ my formula for this is amor fati.

For lack of space I won't develop Nietzsche's arguments against Christianity or Schopenhauer; of more interest here is the thought that one must not 'halt' at a negation. This can be understood as an allusion to his interpretation of Schopenhauer's position in the history of Western philosophy (he is supposed to have improved on the Christian world view by replacing the idea of a benevolent God with the will as doomed by its very structure to suffer endlessly).

But it may also refer to a specific feature of Nietzsche's own experience of suffering, namely the 'Russian fatalism' described in *Ecce Homo*. Russian fatalism is a response to certain situations where the courage and strength of the sufferer find themselves overwhelmed by pain and sickness: 'one cannot get rid of anything, one cannot get over anything (...), everything hurts. Men and things obtrude too closely; experiences strike one too deeply; memory becomes a festering wound'. (EH: 230) Such situations are bound to arise in the course of a long illness: suffering and powerlessness foster a greater sensitivity and vulnerability both to events and to people; one is hurt by details that the healthy do not even notice.

One's memories of happier times, far from being comforting, become obsessive reminders of what was lost. The time comes

when even the greatest courage and strength of mind must fail. In such times, the appropriate response is that of the 'Russian soldier who, finding a campaign too strenuous, finally lies down in the snow. (...) No longer to take anything, no longer to absorb anything □ to cease reacting altogether'.

Yet while this may look like a Schopenhauerian form of resignation (similar to the death by attrition sought by the ascetic), the function of such fatalism is the very opposite: 'to preserve life under the most perilous conditions by reducing the metabolism'.

Rather than being invaded and used up by negative reactions ('ressentiment, anger, pathological vulnerability, impotent lust for revenge'), it is best 'not to react at all anymore' until one finds the courage and strength to measure oneself against one's pain in a way that transfigures both the suffering and the sufferer. Although it is meant to be discarded (perhaps to be adopted yet again later) as soon as our vitality is 'rich and proud' again, Russian fatalism is thus a moving (and perhaps unexpected) acknowledgement of human finitude from Nietzsche's part. While by definition it prevents the sort of positive commitment of amor fati, it nevertheless fosters the right sort of attitude and can perhaps be seen as its precursor: 'I displayed the 'Russian fatalism' I mentioned by tenaciously clinging for years to all but intolerable situations (...). It was better than changing them, than feeling that they could be changed □ than rebelling against them'.

The third feature that may encourage the birth of amor fati is the clarity of vision sometimes fostered in us by the need not to give up when faced with protracted suffering. This is rather paradoxical as pain is often said to cloud judgment. Yet should we display the courage and strength mentioned above, then suffering may prove itself to be the 'ultimate liberator of the spirit (...) [that] forces us (...) to descend in our ultimate depths'.

In another passage, Nietzsche mentions the 'supreme sobering up through pain' that is the means of 'extricating [us] from the perilous world of fantasy' in which the healthy live. As noted by moralists, suffering often strips human relations and events of their social trappings and reveals to us what matters most to us.

'He who suffers intensely looks out at things with a terrible coldness: all those lying little charms which things are usually surrounded when the eye of the healthy regards them do not exist for him; indeed, he himself lies there before himself stripped of all colour and plumage'. (ibid) Such clarity of mind is a defence against the mendaciousness of idealism or self-pity and thus may reinforce our courage in the face of suffering (by removing the temptation to dwell on alternatives). It is also per se a way to endure pain. For those who are strong enough, pain has a 'spiritualising' effect: such individuals are able to overcome their native aversiveness to it by focusing on the increased lucidity that it may bring. Thus 'the tremendous tension imparted to the intellect by its desire to oppose and counter pain makes him see everything he now beholds in a new light; and the unspeakable stimulus (...) is often sufficiently powerful to defy all temptation to self destruction'.

Nietzsche lucidly points out that such awareness carries with it the danger of Faustian arrogance: 'our pride towers as never before: it discovers an incomparable stimulus in opposing such a tyrant as pain is, and in answer to all the insinuations it makes to us that we should bear witness against life, in becoming precisely the advocate of life in the face of this tyrant'.

Yet for him such pride is preferable to resignation or self-pity in that it fosters a positive attitude toward this life: in this, it too can be seen as a precursor of amor fati, not because it conveys the right sort of understanding of fate, like Russian fatalism, but because of the commitment to life

it denotes.

So how does one experience one's life if one has come to love fate, be it through an instantaneous, performative commitment to the eternal return or the long, difficult experience of suffering? To try to describe the experience of amor fati, one needs to focus on its main feature, the agapic bestowal of value. For Nietzsche, such bestowal is the correlate of a transfiguration of the self: 'man becomes the transfigurer of existence when he learns to transfigure himself'. (WP §821) As we have seen, suffering is instrumental to such 'learning' because (in the best of cases) it helps us to develop the qualities (courage, strength, lucidity) which will allow us to overcome its adverse effects.

The extent of the agapic transfiguration of existence is in direct proportion to the transformation of the self: 'the tragic man affirms even the harshest suffering: he is sufficiently strong, rich and capable of deifying to do so. The Christian denies even the happiest lot on earth: he is sufficiently weak, poor, disinherited to suffer from life in whatever form he meets it'. (WP, §1052) Very importantly, such affirmation is not the assertion of a propositional content □ it is perhaps best described as a commitment to living our lives in the light of our 'deifying' love. Nor does it operate by holding in front of us the prospect of a life without any disorder, irrationality or pain: this would only replicate the dichotomous structure of ascetic ideals by contrasting implicitly our currently wretched condition with a happy ever-after under the sway of amor fati.

Whatever it does, agapic transfiguration does not work by ignoring the darker, chaotic and irrational sides of human existence (which is perhaps why courage is so important in the fostering of amor fati). It does not diminish our aversiveness to pain, nor dispel the painful character of our more difficult experiences; yet through an existential

transformation that makes us stronger and 'more profound', it somehow enables us to love these experiences as fated, and this in spite of the suffering they cause us. This is not tantamount to recapturing them within the sort of eroticising, providential narrative criticised in. No justification or reasons are involved at all: we feel the pain that attaches to such experiences but find ourselves able to love them nevertheless, without holding them as objections to life. As Zarathustra says, 'we love life, not because we are used to living, but because we are used to loving' (Z: 68). Amor fati, like Angelus Silesius' rose, has no why.