

THE WILL OF REDEMPTION OF TIME

NIETZSCHE, THE
BENJAMIN AND
THE POSTHUMAN


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*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable*

T.S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*, *Four Quartets*

1 PHILOSOPHY OF REVERSIBILITY

The philosophical concept of reversibility, dismissed throughout the modern tradition in favour of the myth of linear and irreversible progress seems to know an unexpected success in our technological post-modernity: from the discovery in twentieth-century physics that the fundamental laws of both quantum physics and relativity are indifferent to the direction of the passage of time, to the centrality of the concept of renewability of energies and resources. From the achievements of anti-aging medicine, to the more general tendency to recover and incorporate tradition into the present (emblematically represented by vintage fashion) reversibility has, perhaps, become the subterranean but decisive imperative of our time. It is no coincidence, therefore, that in the aftermath of the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the consequent crumbling of the great ideological narratives, the Hegelian question of the end of history has asserted itself in the European cultural debate, almost as if to demonstrate that in an age when everything tends to be reversible, the ground on which authentic historical decisions can be founded, that is the ground that has the strength to irreversibly change the course of history, is missing.

But where does the fascination with reversibility come from? Certainly, on an existential level, it comes from the possibility for every living being to subvert the natural course of evolution, starting from birth, through to growth, maturity and ageing, and finally to death.

Great poetry has long meditated on the fate of the ineluctable forward flow of time and has often contrasted its main effect, the fading of strength and beauty of youthful years, with the renewal of life in procreation: the new generation constitutes, as in the following splendid second sonnet by Shakespeare, the main source of reversibility of lifetime:

*When forty winters shall besiege thy brow
And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,
Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,
Will be a tattered weed, of small worth held.
Then being asked where all thy beauty lies—
Where all the treasure of thy lusty days—
To say within thine own deep-sunken eyes
Were an all-eating shame and thriftless praise.
How much more praise deserved thy beauty's use
If thou couldst answer «This fair child of mine
Shall sum my count and make my old excuse»,
Proving his beauty by succession thine.
This were to be new made when thou art old,
And see thy blood warm when thou feel'st it cold.¹*

The unavoidable destiny of decline that envelops the existence of individuals with sadness and melancholy has always been the strongest and most tragic symbol of the irreversibility of time. This decline is demonstrated by Oswald Spengler, in his grandiose fresco of comparative history, *The Decline of the West*,² as well as appearing in myth, depicted in the frightful voracity of Chronos, who devours his own children. Chronological and irreversible time generates life and constantly swallows it up. The reversibility of time, on the other hand, refers to another temporal conception,

1. William Shakespeare, *Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. C. Burrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), *Sonnet 2*, p.385.

2. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, ed. H. Werner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

whereby the passing of time does not annihilate what has been, but preserves (albeit in a different form) that of presence; the god Chronos, who devours his own creatures, is replaced in this conception by the god Aion, the other Greek personification of time, who symbolises (unlike Chronos) the eternity, the succession of eras, the time of life and destiny.³

But only those who are able to discern a difference in the very nature of time, and take up residence in it, can grasp its consoling aspect. Time is constitutively split, disjointed and multifold, as Shakespeare's Hamlet knows well. Our existence extends to time's various forms, but only finds stillness in the deepest dimension of temporality, the one in which we perceive the rhythmic pulsing of nature and with which we measure our time and its precious 'growing'.

This intrinsic difference of time first emerges as opposites in two fundamental conceptions: the linear and the cyclical time. For the linear conception, time passes, flows, elapses and thus possesses a progressive and irreversible course; in the cyclical (or natural) conception, on the other hand, it is represented as a wheel, and it is customary to speak of return and 'courses and recurrences'. Time encompasses both of these dimensions, even if, from time-to-time, in each historical epoch and in each individual, only one-dimension manifests itself. For Ernst Jünger, the principal dimension of cyclical time, with which the first consciousness of time arose, just as the first clock, was the solar clock. Time, as a return, belongs to one's primordial experiences and one's first contact with nature: the sun returns first, followed by all the other stars. This cycle of returns is also marked by the return of feast days, which, in ancient times, were celebrated as the day on which the gods themselves met mankind. These festivities are the emblem of cyclical time and of the regeneration and renewal of time itself.⁴

3. These two mythical figures of time are joined by a third and decisive one, that of Kairos, to which we will return.

The cyclical nature of time is, in fact, the main way in which its reversibility has always been thought of: that time flows in circles. On the one hand, these circles can lead to vanity and resignation (in the sense of biblical Ecclesiastes), on the other hand they grant a feeling of intimate comfort: that every process that unfolds in the temporal dimension does not end in nothingness. If the present time can, in its singular uniqueness, absent itself from the scene of the world, then in its flowing it guarantees the permanence and vitality of the whole, like the individual being whose short life contributes to the preservation and evolution of the species. One could even detect a kind of aesthetic pleasure in the circular reversibility of living processes, a pleasure that culminates in the paroxysmal tendency of contemporary technology to subvert the direction of the arrow of time and to allow for one to experience the results of such temporal deconstruction (even if only for playful purposes).

4. Ernst Jünger, *Das Sanduhrbuch*, in: *Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1979).

But what do we really mean by the expression 'undoing', by which it is customary to identify the meaning of reversibility? The verb 'to undo' has a wide range of meanings in the English language: alongside the meanings of going back (to reverse) and delete, it also indicates unbuttoning, discarding, opening in the sense of unpack something. The operation of reversing conceals, in other words – and this will be decisive for my following reflections – a process of unveiling and deconstruction of the past. At the moment in which time is 'turned back' by cancelling a process that has already taken place, the past is revealed, it opens up, it manifests its hidden meaning, almost as if the operation of reversibility possessed a cognitive, but also intrusive value. We see this emphatically in the cinematographic processes of *disassembly* and *reassembly*.⁵

5. On the relationship between philosophical understanding of time and cinema see Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (London: Athlone, 1986) and Id., *The Time Image* (London: Athlone, 1989).

Reversing the course of time would mean, therefore, exploring the paths and routes of collective and individual history from an unprecedented perspective: from that of the future. This future, therefore, is always configured as an *anterior* future. It is in this sense, it seems to me, that the question of the reversibility of time is combined with the great philosophical-theological question of redemption.

Let us start from the etymology of the word. 'To redeem' originally means to redeem someone from the condition of slavery and, more generally, to free someone or something from certain constraints. The Christian tradition has conceived redemption as liberation from the bondage of sin, but also as the bestowal on man of the supernatural grace that frees him from the condition of frailty, iniquity and transience. Through the supreme atonement for man's sin that takes place in the cross, Jesus Christ frees mankind through a "regeneration from above" (John 3, 1-21) that does not simply consist of a ransom from slavery and restoration of previous freedom, but in the conferral of the new freedom as "children of God". This freedom, which is liberation from sin and death (the first consequence of sin) can be also interpreted as liberation from the irreversibility typical of the human condition: overcoming the unidirectionality of the arrow of time, whose greatest emblem and, arguably, foundation is seen in the resurrection of Christ.

2

NIETZSCHE AND THE REDEMPTION OF TIME

concepts and issues and precisely, that of redemption. In *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, we can, in fact, find numerous parallels and explicit references to the episodes and to the literary style (parables, metaphors, etc.) of the Christian Gospels.⁶ In this book we find a chapter entitled *Die Erlösung* (The Redemption). In the redemption of the past, in fact, Zarathustra identifies the realisation of man's true healing: in the transformation of the 'thus it was' into the 'thus I willed it to be' seems to consist of the greatest performance of the will to power against the spirit of revenge that considers the pain of the transience and irreversibility of time as a punishment, an idea that recurs already in the fragments of Anaximander. In fragment 9 we read: "From that whence comes the birth of things into that also goes their death according to necessity. They pay each other the price and the penalty of their injustice according to the order of time"

But, beyond this religious concept of redemption, which presupposes a supernatural horizon to reverse the arrow of time and overcome transience, I would now like to present a secular concept of redemption, the redemption by Nietzsche. The conceiver of the 'death of God', in fact (in spite of his virulent anti-Christianity) is by no means unfamiliar with the use of typically religious

In this fragment the irreversibility of time seems to coincide with a moral order that cannot be opposed, except at the risk of punishment. Pain would therefore be the consequence of the impious desire for reversibility.

If we analyse Nietzsche's passage on redemption more closely, however, we realise that the aim of the "will to power" is not to overcome the "greed of time" through the exercise of paradox "will backward". Rather, he writes: "The will cannot will backward; that it cannot break time and time's greed – that is the will's loneliest misery."⁷ Redemption is to be understood as redemption from fragmentation and disconnection of time. Redeeming the past, that is, would not mean redeeming it from its absence and consigning it to a 'eternal present' ("If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable"⁸), but to entrust it to the present in order to lead it not to salvation or wholeness, but to a kind of reconstruction and reconnection that, without justifying it, inserts the past into the eternal rhythm of becoming. The task of the redemptive and creative will ("The will is a creator"⁹) is not, therefore, that of transforming the 'thus it was' into the 'thus I wanted it to be', but of reconnecting the past with the present and, in this way, opening it up to the future. It is not, therefore, a matter of mechanical reversion of the past, but of the integration of the past into the present. More precisely, the redemption integrates the past into the dimension of the present that escapes actuality and turns to the future – Ernst Bloch called it "utopian latency". In this sense, we can understand Eliot's verses in the epigraph:

*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.*

6. On the relationship between Nietzsche's book *Thus spoke Zarathustra* and the Gospels and the parallelism between Zarathustra and Jesus see Peter Sloterdijk, *Über die Verbesserung der guten Nachricht. Nietzsches fünftes "Evangelium"* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2011).

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra. A Book for All and None* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.111.

8. Thomas Stern Eliot, *Burnt Norton*, in: *Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019).

9. Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, p.112.

What lies behind the desire for reversibility is the rejection of the disconnect between the past with other temporal dimensions: "The now and the past on earth – alas, my friends – that is what is most unbearable to me. And I would not know how to live if I were not also a seer of that which must come."¹⁰ Redemption must, therefore, build a bridge from the past, through the present and into the future.

In this sense, the following statements by Zarathustra are decisive: "I walk among human beings as among the fragments of the future; that future that I see. And all my creating and striving amounts to this, that I create and piece together into one, what is now fragment and riddle and grisly accident."¹¹ Redemption is, therefore, for Zarathustra, essentially redemption from accident, from the horrid randomness of that which is unrelated, which has no temporal depth because it is not the soil in which the future germinates.

The creative will can only find redemption from horrendous randomness because it builds bridges among past, present and future; in this sense, the reconstruction of what is broken, the reunion of the fragments to which men are reduced through the processes of decadency, leads to the affirmative formula *par excellence*, which is the eternal return, the supreme seal of the polemical contradictions of existence. The "perfection" of the world consists in this connection of contradictions whereby "midnight is also noon, pain is also a joy, a curse is also a blessing, night is also a sun"¹². The sacred saying "yes to life" is an affirmation of this connection of contraries: "Have you ever said, 'Yes,' to one joy? Oh my friends, then you also said, 'Yes,' to *all* pain. All things are enchained, entwined, enamored"¹³. Saying "yes" to a moment, to a unique and singular event, means sinking into the eternity of return and, thus, *loving the world*: "... if you ever wanted one time two times, if you ever said 'I like you, happiness! Whoosh! Moment!' then you wanted *everything* back! – Everything anew, everything eternal, everything enchained, entwined, enamoured, oh thus you *loved* the world..."¹⁴

10. Ibid., p.110.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., p.263.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

3 BENJAMIN AND THE MESSIANIC SPLINTERS

In the immense moment of the return, the irreversible flow of time is radically subverted and overcome in the name of an experience (*Erfahrung*) that brings the memory of the past into play in a manner very similar to Proust's "involuntary memory". It is no coincidence that in his text *Berlin Childhood*¹⁵, which is dedicated to Proust,

Walter Benjamin, thematises this mode of relating to the past and includes in it oblivion. Using Proust's work, Benjamin overturns the ordinary (typically adult) perspectives related to relationships with the past and the age of childhood. The task that Proust sets himself in his monumental *Recherche du temps perdu*, and that Benjamin philosophically pursues, is to "render an account of childhood". Or, we might say, to render reversible that time which for adulthood is now lost in the mists of oblivion. Childhood is the emblem of 'lost time' and thus through a new experience of childhood may succeed the attempt to make time itself reversible. Childhood is interpreted by Benjamin as that place where the adult feels they have been, but to which they cannot return, because they have forgotten the way. Despite their uncanny familiarity with it, the adult almost never manages to draw a map of their childhood. The inability to orient themselves in the oblivion of childhood by following the coordinates of adulthood is the fundamental cause of their disorientation. Whereas the experience of consciousness can be reproduced at any time, the authentic experience (*Erfahrung*) is preserved only in unconscious fragments whose deciphering key the subject has lost, like scattered negatives accumulated in a drawer. The time of childhood, unlike the chronological and irreversible time of adulthood, is time marked by the living rhythm of discoveries and secrets that surface from the depths of the unconscious, which make the instants of that remote time alive and present again. As in Proust's *Recherche*, with each opening of a mysterious box, a distant and fascinating secret emerges. It is precisely the fragments of childhood, remnants of a subjective 'prehistory', that present the adult with that 'time before the time' in which reversibility flashes back.

Benjamin's idea of the redemption of time, however, is not only limited to the experience of childhood, but develops above all in the sense of a messianic interpretation of the relationship between past, present and future. For Benjamin, experiencing the present means having a cariological experience of that which interrupts and disrupts chronological continuity. He names it with the fertile term *Jetztzeit*, time-now. Benjamin establishes "a conception of the present as now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time (*in welcher Splitter der messianischen Zeit eingesprengt sind*)".¹⁶ This is evidently a secularised messianism that Benjamin takes from Ernst Bloch's work, from which he similarly takes the concept of *Eingedenken* – a very intense and participatory form of remembrance, consistent with the biblical imperative *zakhor* (remember!) and quite distinct from the official and neutral concept of commemoration (*Andenken*). In this unique form of remembrance, it is not simply a matter of re-actualising a single event from the past, but of experiencing it in the perspective of its intrinsic future possibility. Only the *Eingedenken* can disclose the messianic dimension of the future. In accordance with the prohibition imposed on the Jews to divine the future, the present, in which it is no longer possible to derive auspices for the future, becomes, in the biblical tradition taken up by Benjamin in his *Thesis on the Concept of History*, the place of access to messianic redemption: "Every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter."¹⁷

Eingedenken thus indicates the awakening from the intensity of the past in order to access the waking world of the present through reference to the future. It is therefore a paradox: 'remembering the future' does not consider the future as a simple causal consequence of the present, but as the unrevealed content of the past, pressing into the present. To experience the past through *Eingedenken* means to recover a past and make it reversible to the extent that all traces of redemption and salvation are concealed. That is, to make the seeds of the future germinate and to subvert the course of history in order to satisfy the requirements of the justice of the past.

Redemption, then, in this perspective means making apparently irreversible processes reversible, such as that of the spread of evil in the world, biological degradation and more generally of the growth of entropy. And yet such reversibility does not mean, like the reconstruction of the fragments of the sefirot¹⁸ or, as in the Christian tradition, the second return of the Messiah in the form of a sacrificed and resurrected lamb. It does not mean the mere return to the previous state: vases which are broken and then repaired are not the same as those intact before the biblical creation. Even Jesus, the lamb, resurrected in the liberated Jerusalem still bears the marks of the passion.¹⁹

The fragile form of redemption of the reversibility of the past, with which Benjamin associates the idea of a "weak messianic power"²⁰ that is delivered to each generation, is configured, instead, as a creative power in that (as we have seen by Nietzsche) it connects and harmonises, illuminates and liberates energies and latent emancipatory requirements that history has kept secret or, worse, has repressed in favour of dynamics of subjugation. Reversibility redeems the past, opening it up to the future and to history, but without erasing the signs of decadence and transience, without covering the wounds of evil, rather, by showing the call for justice that emanates from these still open wounds.

16. Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, in: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4 (1938-1940), ed. H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003), p.397.

17. *Ibid.*

18. In the tradition of the Jewish Kabbalah the 10 *sefirot*, represented by vases, indicate the *emanations* through which *Ein Sof* (The Infinite) reveals itself and continuously creates both the physical realm and the chain of higher metaphysical realms.

19. See Acts 5.

20. Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, p.390.

4

POSTHUMANISTIC CHALLENGE

The post-humanistic tendency to achieve a liberation from the entropic forces of decline and the curse of irreversibility can only lead to a concentrated universe. In this universe, the myth of eternal youth (associated with maximum performance) dominates and is realised in the form of enhancement in one's psycho-physical capacities.²¹

Like the *Puer Aeternus*, the theorised post-human,²² does not recognise the necessity of the pain of irreversibility in which only he can experience the depth of living. Therefore, his technically increasingly refined attempts to free himself from the biological processes leads to a simple removal of them. The Holy Grail, the philosophical stone, the anti-ageing genetic engineering techniques all share, albeit using different tools, the same attempt to remove the effects of the passage of time and ageing, confining them, like Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, in a purely literary image.

The myth of eternal youth, moreover, is coupled in the hyper-humanistic perspective with that of purity. The body is rendered diaphanous within the technological armour. It is an embryonic body: the site of the individual's pleasure and virtuality, of their protean capacity for hybridisation with technology; a fluid body that can assume different forms and tend towards an amniotic state. There is a central yearning to freeze the age in which the psycho-physical system is capable of greater performance and maximum ductility. Thus, the idealisation of youth is followed by the desire for an eternal adolescence, with all the devastating consequences in the social and psychological sphere, and finally by the aspiration to live in an indefinite infantile state. Technology is called upon to operate a continuous process of eradication of the signs of advancing age and to maintain the individual within a prototypical framework, that is, a performative code – breast size, hip size, eye colour, etc. – that has become a reference for mainstream culture.

The hyperhuman is an exaltation of the exhibited body, cleansed of all impurities and rendered performative in a perspective like the bodily adoration typical of the Renaissance, which we see emblematically expressed in Botticelli's *The Spring*. In the hyperhuman, however, we can no longer speak of a free body but only of a forced, doped, controlled and technologically manipulated one. The focus is not really on the body, but on the expectations that subjects have of the body. The body is, therefore, conquered in the name of a technological eternalisation: for the *puer aeternus* reversibility becomes, in the end, indifference and abulia. This process of technological conquest over the body culminates in the cyborg concept.²³

Symptomatic of this perspective is also the centrality of invasive cosmetic processes. In all their disparate articulations, from strong make-up, to practices of permanent body modification such as tattoos and scarification, they declare affirmation of technologically developed subjectivity on the arrow of time.

Distinguishing itself from post-humanism (and in particular from the Italian post-humanism of Roberto Marchesini²⁴) is the transhumanist perspective. In transhumanism the body is perceived as a bearer of constraints that inevitably contrast with the will and with the potential of the self. The body becomes an insufferable prison (in the Platonic manner) that condemns subjects to the irreversibility of the arrow of time, to suffering, to senescence, to vulnerability and finally to death. According to the transhumanist creed, one must not resign to this existential condition, but must strive to overcome it.

21. Nick Bostrom, *In defense of Posthuman Dignity*, in: *Bioethics*, Vol.19, No.3, pp.202-214; Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010).

22. According to James Hillman the *puer aeternus* constitutes one of the archetypes of our psyche: James Hillman, *Senex and Puer* (New York: Spring Publications, 2005).

23. Donna Haraway, *Simians, cyborg and women: the re-invention of nature* (London: Free Association, 1991).

24. Roberto Marchesini, *Post-human. Verso nuovi modelli di esistenza* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2009).

Redesigning the morphological functional architecture of the body concretely means: slowing down ageing processes to the point of suspending them altogether; implementing perceptual accesses through new sensory interfaces; providing new operational tools; increasing a system's memory; perfecting certain cognitive functions or adding new ones and increasing performativity. The body is thus reduced, in a paradoxical return to Descartes, to a very refined form of body-machine at the service of its subjects. Human subjectivity, however, is no longer part of the body and does not represent it; the body is like a machine, which must be perfected and redesigned continuously while waiting for the moment when it will be possible to abandon it definitively. *Mind-uploading* constitutes the most symbolic ideal of this desire: to reach a post-organic condition of absolute indifference with respect to the arrow of time. Here, we find a tendency towards a new disembodied angelic state: mind-uploading is a speculative process of whole brain emulation in which a brain scan is used to completely simulate the mental state of the individual on a digital computer.

5

REDEMPTION AND RESISTANCE

Overcoming the finiteness and transience of the human, which the posthumanistic perspectives aspire to, deny ontological, moral and aesthetic legitimacy to the processes of deterioration and, more generally, to the irreversibility of time. The posthumanistic conception of time also erases the very possibility of redemption, the meaning of which resides primarily in

resistance against the irreversible and in the strenuous witnessing of such resistance against pain, decline and death. To indicate this profoundly ethical resistance, in his 1934 text on Kafka Benjamin uses the figure of a rider resisting against the storm that is blowing from oblivion: "It is a tempest that blows from forgetting, and study is a cavalry attack against it."²⁵ The resistance of which the 'knight' of research (*Studium*) and remembrance (*Eingedenken*) is capable takes place metaphorically around the "gate of justice" (*Pforte der Gerechtigkeit*). This indicates the ethical and political, almost messianic weight of *Eingedenken*, which are only able to redeem the past time to the extent that it brings out dormant claims and expectations of the past that continue to disquiet the present. The *Eingedenken* establishes, therefore, that the only way to access the reversibility of the past, its only possible 'salvation' is eminently ethical, because it is the gift of reactivating the spark of hope in the past.

25. Walter Benjamin, *Franz Kafka*, in: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2/2 (1931-1934), ed. M. Bullock, H. Eiland and G. Smith (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), p.814.

26. Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, p.392.

This image of strenuous resistance against the dynamics of progress and the irreversibility of life and world is masterfully taken up by Benjamin in the ninth thesis *On the concept of History*. Here, referring to a painting by Paul Klee, he describes the angel of history, or perhaps, we could ultimately say, the angel of the reversibility of history:

*"There is a picture by Klee called Angelus Novus. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm."*²⁶

