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The Flame of Eternity

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Abstract: This volume contains five critical reviews of the English edition of the late Krzysztof Michalski's *The Flame of Eternity: An Interpretation of Nietzsche's Thought*, Princeton University Press, 2012. The book has also been published in Polish, Russian, and in French. The reviews are by senior scholars, Babette Babich, Professor of Philosophy at Fordham University; Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Iceland; Lydia Voronina, US Department of State, retired; Tom Rockmore, Professor of Philosophy at Duquesne University; and James Dodd, Professor and Chair in the Philosophy Department at the New School of Social Science in New York. Also in this volume, an original novella by Herbert Mason, Professor Emeritus at Boston University, on the classic myth and medieval folktale "Seven Sleepers of Ephesus" casting new light on the development of Islamic Studies in the United States, especially studies in Sufism.

Keywords: Babich, Babette; Dodd, James; Gadamer, Hans Georg; Heidegger, Martin; Mason, Herbert; Massignon, Luis; Michalski, Krzysztof; Nietzsche, Friedrich; Olson, Alan M.; Rockmore, Tom; Schimmel, Anna-Marie; Thorgeirsdottir, Sigridur; Voronina, Lydia; being; time; eternal return; overman; will to power; embodiment; relational metaphysics; Muslim; Sufism; Islam; Hallaj; Harvard; Paris.

Owing to matters of health and other contingencies, the KJSNA panel review of Krzysztof Michalski's *Flame of Eternity* (Princeton, 2012), scheduled for the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association in Atlanta (2012) did not take place. Nevertheless, our panelists agreed, as Babette Babich¹ put it, Michalski's *Flame of Eternity* is a remarkable invitation to read Nietzsche "without guiderails," as it were. Thus all our reviewers are in agreement, for various reasons with Charles Taylor's single word "exceptional" endorsement on the book's

dustjacket cover, certainly different than Richard Schacht's early dismissal, viz., that he just doesn't understand "this kind of writing."²

Schacht's unease is provided formal precision in the observation by Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir that: Michalski's "book cannot be situated within the type of Nietzsche scholarship that consists in a dialogue with different interpretations of the relevant concepts in Nietzsche's philosophy of religion and it can, in

¹ Babette Babich is a Professor of Philosophy at Fordham University, and the Editor of "New Nietzsche Studies."

² Broadly speaking, this might refer to the difference between an "analytical" and a "continental" approach to philosophy.

this sense be considered "over the top,"³ as it were. Nevertheless, she insists, it is a work that belongs to religious interpretations of Nietzsche since the author takes issue with major Christian doctrines in an attempt to make space for God within the framework of Nietzsche's thinking, and the roots of his theory of the eternal return in ancient Greek thought and presocratic philosophy. The discourse of the flame of eternity resonates with Christian ideas of the spirit. The metaphorical language of fire is predominantly rooted in the Heraclitean legacy within Nietzsche's thought and, of course Hegel's. It is this thread that Michalski takes up and elaborates on the basis of what I call a "theory of philosophical and existential pathos with spiritual dimensions."

Thorgeirsdottir certainly is correct in identifying Michalski's book as "religious." Indeed, one cannot read very far without discerning that Michalski's book seems more a personal testament to Nietzsche than a critical study. In this sense, Krzysztof seems to be in agreement with Karl Jaspers who in his study of *The Great Philosophers* identifies Nietzsche, together with Kierkegaard, as one of the "great disturbers" in Western Intellectual history; indeed, perhaps the greatest of all disturbers! And his linkage with Kierkegaard is particularly suggestive in this instance, for my first reaction to Michalski's controlling symbol of the "Eternal" was with Kierkegaard's famous assertion regarding the "infinite qualitative difference between the temporal and the Eternal," (*Die unendlichen qualitativen Unterschiede zwischen dem Zeitlichen und dem Ewigen*). This assertion, made famous by Karl Barth, in the 1950s, as the foundation of his *Church Dogmatics*, broadens and qualifies the notion of Transcendence informing the familiar medieval postulates of Thomas and Bonaventure viz., *inter ifniti et ifniti nulla est proportio*. In other words, the ontological status of the temporal and temporality is altogether different from that of the Eternal, a point Paul Tillich was fond of making throughout his works. It is precisely for this

³ In the sense that thousands of American undergraduate students each year identify Nietzsche as their favorite philosopher without knowing that he was a classicist and not a philosopher, and that if they were intent on studying Nietzsche in Germany they would likely find him being taught in Germanistik, and not in a philosophy department.

reason that Jaspers viewed the works of both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard as being invitations not to the study of academic philosophy, but to the challenging task of "philosophizing on the grounds of possible Existenz."

I believe that Krzysztof Michalski was himself fascinated and captured by this distinction and that his book is, as Tom Rockmore suggests a "hermeneutical" approach to Nietzsche and to philosophizing rather than being as Thorgeirsdottir and Babich tend to suggest, a "literary" or as Voronina puts it a "romantic" interpretation. On the other hand, Rockmore commends Michalski for actually dealing with Nietzsche's principal ideas, thus rescuing him from the host of post-modern interpretations that populate what Rockmore identifies as the "cottage industry" of recent Nietzsche interpretations that have little or nothing to do with anything that actually concerned Nietzsche. A Heideggerian approach to Michalski's take on time" and the "eternal round" for me resonates closely to the guiding thesis of Paul Ricoeur in his magisterial study of *Time and Narrative*, namely, the contrasting but equally influential conceptions of time in Aristotle and Augustine; the former being syntactically based on narrative, where time has a beginning, a middle, and an end; whereas Augustine's conception is informed by "interruption" which opens the door, as it were, to the truths of "special revelation" and to the vast cultural legacy of biblical theism in the Occidental World.

Our sincere thanks to these senior scholars for their insightful reviews of the final book of our much-too-soon departed friend, Krzysztof Michalski (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krzysztof_Michalski).

Current editions of *The Flame of Eternity*

Polish:

Plomien wieczności: eseje o myślach Fryderyka Nietzschego, Kraków, Znak 2007.

Russian:

Plamjen wjetschnosti: Djewjat essje o mysli Fridricha Nicsche, Perew, E.C. Twjerdislowej, Moskwa, Izdatelstwo Moskovskogo Uniwjersiteta 2012.

French:

La flamme de l'éternité: essais sur la pensée de Friedrich Nietzsche, Bordeaux, Éditions ZdL, 2013.