

## **“Same-o, Same-o”:**

### **Eternal Recurrence in *Groundhog Day***

How, if some day or night, a demon were to sneak after you into your 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 every sigh . . . must 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 over and over and you with it, a mere grain 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 did I hear anything more godlike!" If this thought were to gain possession of you, it would change you as you are, or perhaps crush you. The question in each and everything, "do you want this once more and innumerable times more?" would weigh upon your actions as the greatest stress. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation. . . .?

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

the going round

And round and round, the merely going round,  
Until merely going round is a final good,  
The way wine comes at a table in a wood.

And we enjoy like men, the way a leaf  
Above the table spins its constant spin,  
So that we look at it with pleasure, look

At it spinning its eccentric measure. Perhaps  
The man-hero is not the exceptional monster,

But he that of repetition is most master.

Wallace Stevens, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"

From the outset of *Groundhog Day* it is evident that Phil Connors (Bill Murray), a *prima-donna* local television weatherman in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is—to use the apt words of a poem quoted in the film by his producer Rita (Andie MacDowell)—“a wretch, concentered all in self,” well on his way toward the fate Sir Walter Scott predicted for his kind: “forfeit[ing] fair renown” and, “doubly dying,” both in his soul and in the world, returning “to the vile dust from whence he sprung, unwept, unhonored, and unsung.”

Though possessing a wickedly sarcastic sense of humor (his weather forecast the night before Groundhog Day predicts “warm weather, gang wars, and some very over-priced real estate” for Southern California and “very tall trees” for the Pacific Northwest), Phil Connors shows nothing but disdain for others and turns his wit upon them. He refers to Nan, the female anchor of the WPBH evening news, as “Miss Hairdo”; ridicules the way his cameraman Larry (Chris Elliot) eats, talks behind the back of the proprietress of his bed breakfast, making fun of her lack of sophistication; deflects Rita’s simple faith in groundhog folklore with his own philosophy that “people are morons”; comments on location at the Groundhog Day ceremonies that “This is one time when TV fails to capture the excitement of a large rodent predicting the weather”; and calls the people of Punxsutawney “hicks.” Full of himself, overly impressed with his own status (he refers to himself as “the talent”), ambitious (he claims that a national network is recruiting him and that he will soon be able to flee the backwater of Pittsburgh and no longer need to cover such assignments as Groundhog Day), Phil Connors is egomaniacal and, for all his wit, a genuinely detestable human being (which is why, no doubt, director Harold Ramis cast Bill Murray, the former *Saturday Night Live* original who built his fame on his over-the-top obnoxious persona, to play him). But that is before he endures the “pure winter” of Groundhog Day, before he learns to become so “well disposed . . . to [himself] and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation. . . .”

**Not surprisingly, his growing realization** that the forces of the cosmos have conspired to make him live February 2nd over and over initially produces anxiety.<sup>1</sup> He runs in panic though his opening day encounters (with the fat man on the top of the stairs and the woman serving breakfast, with the beggar and Ned Ryerson, with his reportage on the events at Gobbler's Knob) and seeks help from a medical doctor and a severely over-matched psychiatrist (he has only recently acquired his first alcoholic and is hardly equipped to deal with a disturbance in the space-time continuum).

By that evening (his third day in Punxsutawney), Phil realizes to his delight that his situation allows him to go beyond good and evil. He becomes uproaringly drunk with Bill and Gus, drives a car on the railroad tracks, defies the police, and destroys public property. "I'm not going to live by their rules anymore," he proclaims.

By the next morning,<sup>2</sup> when he awakens exhilarated by his escape from his incarceration the night before, he begins to manipulate and respond to the events of his life.<sup>3</sup> He punches out the obnoxious, "giant leech" insurance agent Ryerson. He consumes a cholesterol-lethal breakfast and announces defiantly that he will no longer need to floss. He procures information from Nancy Taylor (the name of her high school and her English teacher) and then uses it to seduce her. He memorizes the minute details of an inept armored car delivery to a bank by Herman and Felix, two absent-minded guards, and then uses his insider knowledge to steal a bag of money (with which he then buys a Mercedes). He learns (as Ned Ryerson advises) to "watch that first step" and not plunge ankle-deep into a "doozy" of a puddle. He uses repeated viewings of *Jeopardy* to learn all the questions and impress the fellow residents of his bed and breakfast.

After toying with these minor occupations, he embarks on a more major, but no less self-centered, project: seducing Rita. We see him join her in a bar and order a

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<sup>1</sup> In rough outline, Phil Connors' response to his Groundhog Day captivity appears to follow Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' theory of the "five stages" the dying pass through. Like a dying man or woman, Connors denies, gets angry, bargains, becomes depressed, and finally accepts his fate—an acceptance which brings with it his release from his imprisonment in time.

<sup>2</sup> Only the first three incarnations of Groundhog Day are identifiable and distinguishable. By the third day, director Harold Ramis has begun, in pursuit of narrative efficiency, to elide many of the events, sometimes skipping, in a cut, an entire 24 hour period, making it eventually impossible to tell just how many Groundhog Days have actually passed.

<sup>3</sup> Apparently only Phil is able to remember the events of the day before. No else in Punxsutawney experiences eternal recurrence. Consequently, only Phil is able to make use of what he learns in each trial-run of Groundhog Day.

drink. When Rita orders her own (Sweet Vermouth on the rocks with a twist), the narrative then cuts twenty four hours ahead to the next Groundhog Day, when Phil also orders her favorite drink, as if he had miraculously discerned it. In similar fashion, he uses one-day-at-a-time to incrementally learn all about Rita—her desire to toast to world peace, her dream of living in the mountains at high altitude, her passion for French poetry (her college major), her love for Rocky Road ice cream. Almost persuaded that her initial impression of him as hateful and cruel was mistaken, nearly won over by his wit and sophistication, she finally, at day's end, sees through him, realizing that he has mysteriously learned all there is to know about her only to win her over. Repulsed by his false-step declaration that he loves her when in fact he knows nothing about her, she dismisses him: "I could never love anyone like you because you can't love anyone but your self." "That's not true," Phil replies, showing the first self-insight he has exhibited in the movie. "I don't even *like* myself."

"Sincerity's the main thing," movie mogul Samuel Goldwyn once confessed, "and once you learn to fake that, everything else is easy." Eternal recurrence enables Phil Connors to momentarily feign sincerity, enables him to pretend he cares about Rita's deepest values and beliefs, enables him to almost pass for a decent human being. (Faking it, after all, is Phil Connors daily work. When we first meet him, he performs before a blank blue wall, acting out his involvement with a projected United States weather map which he can see only on a monitor.)

Rita's ability to see through him returns Phil to square one. In a reprise of a scene in which they had built a snowman and engaged in a snowball fight with some Punxsutawney teenagers, his effusive, excessive "sincerity" ("I love children! Let's have lots of children!") becomes forced—transparently a ruse. Sincerity as an art born of eternal recurrence must not exhibit "a palpable design upon us" (as Keats once called it); it cannot be conscious. Following the second snowball fight, we see, in a montage sequence, the end result of several more attempts to manipulate Rita: a sequence of slaps to the face of Phil Connors.

Rejected by Rita, plagued by the realization that he must now live his life "once more and innumerable times more;" with "nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and every sigh . . . ," conscious that "the eternal hourglass of existence [will be] turned over and over and [him] with it, a mere grain of dust," Phil turns suicidal, experimenting with different ways of killing himself: driving a car over a cliff, electrocuting himself with a toaster in the bathtub, getting

run over by a truck, jumping off a building. In one episode he seeks to kill the groundhog, too, convinced that, as the season's totem animal, "He's got to be stopped," or "this winter will never end." All these attempts fail, of course. Each morning, Phil Connors finds himself back in bed, awakened at 600 am by Sonny and Cher singing "I Got You Babe." At the nadir of Groundhog Day, he offers Rita the grimmest of weather forecasts, predicting that it will "be cold and gray, and it's going to last you for the rest of your life."

But, like any mythic being who has journeyed into Hades, Phil returns from his descent into the underworld with a new understanding. "I am a God," he announces in the Tip Top Cafe to Rita, "not *the* God," but just "*a* god." Anxious to dispel Rita's disbelief, he demonstrates his omniscience, telling her all he knows—all he has learned through the endless repetitions of Groundhog Day—about Doris, Bill, and Gus; all he knows about dropped trays and closet homosexuality and uncertain marriage plans; all he knows about her. "You like boats," he has discerned, "but not the ocean."

As a result of his Near-Death Experiences he returns with a new love for his fellow human beings, especially for the citizens of Punxsutawney he had earlier ridiculed. He helps some elderly ladies change a flat tire (every day). He catches a boy who falls out of a tree (every day). He performs the Heimlich maneuver on the master of ceremonies of the Groundhog Day festivities (every day). He becomes the necessary angel of an old street person he had previous ignored, using the powers of eternal recurrence this time not for personal gain, not to gain insider information about a desired woman, but to reverse an unnecessary death. And he becomes an artist: he learns— in one day!—to play the piano. In one day, he masters ice sculpture.

At "the end of a very long day," at the gala Groundhog Day party, Phil Connors puts it all together. Rita looks on amazed as a much-loved Phil Connors, no longer a "wretch, concentered all in self," anything but "unwept, unhonored, and unsung," is praised by each of the beneficiaries of his eternally recurrent largess. She listens impressed by his wonderful improvisations on the piano, and when he is put up for bid in a bachelor auction, she offers every penny she has to buy him. As payback, he sculpts her face in ice in a likeness that brings her nearly to tears. The secret of his art? He has memorized her countenance as he learned to "crave nothing more fervently than [its] ultimate eternal confirmation." "I'm happy now," he explains, "because I love you." And this time he means it.

During the course of *Groundhog Day*, Phil Connors delivers a series of on-camera reports on the Groundhog Day festivities. These vary from the straight to the sarcastic. After his unsuccessful suicides, Phil Connors changes his tone, delivering with real feeling and real sincerity the following poetic report (“You touched me man!” Larry responds):

When Chekhov saw the long winter, he saw a winter bleak and dark and bereft of hope. Yet we know that winter is just another step in the cycle of life. But standing here among the people of Punxsutawney and basking in the warmth of their hearths and hearts, I couldn’t imagine a better fate than a long and lustrous winter.

The poet Rilke thought that if we fail to grow as human beings, if we fail to have a perfect spring, it is because we avoid the difficulties of a “pure winter.” A “pure winter” enables us to store up growth for those great leaps into the unknown which are a prerequisite to true growth.<sup>4</sup> *Groundhog Day* is about Phil Connors’ pure winter—his “long and lustrous winter” in Punxsutawney.

**In his *Book of Imaginary Beings*, Borges** describes, as part of his strange menagerie of creatures, an individual known to the Old testament Hebraic tradition as a “Lamed Wufnik.” The Lamed Wufniks, Borges explains, were “thirty-six righteous men whose mission is to justify the world before God.” “The secret pillars of the universe,” without whom God “would annihilate the whole of mankind,” Lamed Wufniks cannot, or dare not, realize their true nature, however. If one should do so, immediate annihilation would result. Their vocation requires them to be unconscious of exactly what they are. Hannah Arendt has observed in *The Human Condition* that for the Western psyche “it is manifest that the moment a good work becomes known and public, it loses its specific character of goodness. . . .” So all our endeavors must face up to almost perplexing dilemma: “Goodness can exist only when it is not perceived, not even by its author; whoever sees himself performing a good work is no longer good. . . . Therefore: “Let not thy left hand know what they right hand doeth.”

Prior to embarking on his pursuit of Rita, Phil Connors asks her to describe for him her “perfect guy.” She lists the distinctive characteristics—that he’s too humble

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<sup>4</sup> See Geoffrey H. Hartman’s *The Unmediated Vision: An Interpretation of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke, and Valéry* (70-96).

to know he's perfect; that he's kind and gentle, and funny, romantic, and courageous, and not afraid to cry; that he has a great body but doesn't look in the mirror all the time; that he plays an instrument; that he'll change poop diapers—and the “so vain” Phil immediately claims to be the spitting image of her ideal: “I'm really close on this one” he insists. He knows, of course, that he is not, and he uses every subterfuge to acquire the necessary knowledge to fake sincerely being her consummate male.

Predictably, he fails. Lamed Wufniks must not know they are Lamed Wufniks, and it is not until Phil Connors, “he that of repetition is most master,” reverses the psychoanalytic paradigm and makes the conscious unconscious—not until all that he has learned, through eternal recurrence, to imagine himself to be has become second nature—that he can in fact be it. At film's end he is ready to settle down in Punxsutawney—“Let's live here,” he suggests to Rita after their first night together, on the day *after* Groundhog Day—in a town where he is a hero, part of a community which cannot live without him.

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