A STANDSTILL IN DESIRE: SCHELLING, NIETZSCHE, DELEUZE AND THE IDEA OF ETERNAL RECURRENCE

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This essay explores the ways in which the idiosyncratic onto-theogony of Friedrich Schelling’s 1815 version of The Ages of the World anticipates Gilles Deleuze’s equally idiosyncratic interpretation of Friedrich Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal recurrence. As I argue, Schelling’s work presents a sophisticated theory of being and time, a complex account of the genesis of actuality from within a differentiated transcendent field, and a reworking of the doctrine of Ideas, all of which together project a conception of reality as eternal recurrence strikingly similar to the one Deleuze draws out of Nietzsche’s scant and elliptical writings on the subject.

Introduction

Friedrich Nietzsche considered his so-called doctrine of eternal recurrence to be of the greatest personal, philosophical and even world-historical importance—which is also why many of his readers have lamented the elliptical or abbreviated presentation of the doctrine in his extant writings. Setting aside the tragic collapse that cut short his meteoric career, it seems that even when he still had the chance to explicate the doctrine directly, Nietzsche chose rather to dance around it, as if it were too delicate a matter to put into writing. In Ecce Homo, for example, when relating the history of Thus Spoke Zarathustra, he declares the eternal recurrence to be the work’s “basic idea” or “fundamental conception,” but says little of it otherwise than that it represents “the highest formula of affirmation” and “something incomparable” in the history of thought. Indeed in Zarathustra itself, the idea is not even presented directly, but only through the conversations the eponymous protagonist engages in with his animals and with the dwarfish oaf that dogs him, the so-

called Spirit of Gravity. Like the careful readers of Plato’s dialogues, the careful readers of Zarathustra have to take into account the dramatic context of the work, and resist the temptation to ascribe the statements of the characters to their author, whose own thinking on the subject remains rather willfully obscure, and in need of careful interpretation.

Now “careful” might not be the first adjective one thinks of when reading Gilles Deleuze’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s doctrine in such texts as Nietzsche and Philosophy, Difference and Repetition, and The Logic of Sense—“wild,” “inspired,” or perhaps even “forced” and “padded,” may seem more appropriate qualifiers to some. Nevertheless Deleuze repeatedly insists on the importance of taking the dramatic context of the work into account, and declares that the failure to do so has resulted in the longstanding practice of interpreting the eternal recurrence as a cyclical hypothesis: the hypothesis that given an infinite amount of time and a finite amount of energy, the universe creates, destroys and recreates the same forms, same individuals and same situations, over and over again without end. But for Deleuze, it is not Zarathustra who proclaims this hypothesis, but rather his animals, who misunderstand their bemused and indulgent master’s teachings. Echoing Nietzsche’s own pronouncement in Beyond Good and Evil that every philosophy “also conceals a philosophy,”2 Deleuze thus asserts that Nietzsche uses the hoary cyclical hypothesis of the ancients (eternal recurrence of the same) to obscure an unprecedented conception of Being (eternal repetition of difference). And in the works cited above, Deleuze attempts to give an explicit account of this conception. In what follows, I would like to suggest that Deleuze’s reverse engineering of Nietzsche’s doctrine renders it strangely isomorphic with the dynamic ont-theogony of Friedrich Schelling’s 1815 version of The Ages of the World.3 As I hope to show, Schelling’s attempt to grapple with the nature and freedom of the divine yields a sophisticated conception of eternal recurrence avant la lettre.

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**Deleuze’s Nietzsche**

For Deleuze, Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal recurrence has two primary aspects: cosmological and ethical. With respect to the former, Deleuze further clarifies that the cosmology of eternal recurrence has itself two sides: which is to say that it yields both a theory of Being and a theory of Time.

Put briefly, for (Deleuze’s) Nietzsche, Being is essentially chaos, an ungrounded abyss. And yet this abyss is not undifferentiated; it is not a C.I.A. black site into which all terrorist cows are disappeared. As Deleuze writes in *The Logic of Sense*, Nietzsche discovers and explores “a world of impersonal and pre-individual singularities, a world he then called Dionysian or of the will to power, a free and unbound energy.” As “pre-individual,” these singularities of the will to power cannot be elements given to us in our experience. They are properly transcendental elements, *i.e.*, the elements that constitute the transcendental field out of which everything empirically real is generated. Deleuze thus appears to relate Nietzsche’s doctrine to Kant, or, as he would put in *Difference and Repetition*, to a “furtive and explosive moment” within Kantianism that had been ignored not only by Kant but by most if not all of the post-Kantians. Indeed according to Deleuze it is only when he discovers the eternal return that Nietzsche reaches this explosive moment. Reiterating the rather conventional distinction within Nietzsche scholarship between an early Nietzsche still under the sway of Schopenhauer’s post-Kantianism and the later Nietzsche who had freed himself from that influence, Deleuze insists that the Dionysian world of *The Birth of Tragedy* differs in kind from the Dionysian world of the eternal return. The difference between the two is the difference between two kinds of abysses—one undifferentiated and another that is fully differentiated. If there is a progress in Nietzsche’s thinking, it is therefore to be located here, in his reconceptualization of the abyss of the transcendental field, of the groundlessness or chaos of Being.

Of course, for both Nietzsche and Deleuze, Being is essentially Becoming. In other words, the transcendental field is entirely proces-

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sual: indeed it is a process without beginning or end. As Nietzsche puts in a note from 1885: “If the world had a goal, it must have been reached. If there were for it some unintended final state, this also must have been reached.” For Deleuze, Nietzsche’s presupposition of pure becoming, of the infinitude of both past and future time, raises the problem of passage: of how the past is constituted in time and of how the present passes. As Deleuze puts the problem in his early work on Nietzsche: *Nietzsche and Philosophy*:

> The passing moment could never pass if it were not already past and yet to come—at the same time as being present. If the present did not pass of its own accord, if it had to wait for a new present in order to become past, the past in general would never be constituted in time, and this particular present would not pass. We cannot wait, the moment must be simultaneously present and past, present and yet to come, in order for it to pass (and to pass for the sake of other moments). The present must coexist with itself as past and yet to come.

In Deleuze’s reading, then, the eternal return is Nietzsche’s answer to the problem of passage. In short, the eternal return is thus to be thought of as a “synthesis of time and its dimensions.” Of course, one might ask why the dimensions of time have to be synthesized at all. Are not past, present and future merely relative to one another, from a given standpoint in time? Not exactly, says Deleuze. For on the one hand, the present moment can pass only on the basis of a pre-existent “pure” or “general” past, a past which has never been present that serves as the ground of the present as such. On the other hand, there is a kind of pure future, which is not relative to the past or present, but stands on the far side of a temporal “caesura,” a fracture in the order of time, and constitutes a liberated groundlessness that swallows past and present whole. The synthesis of time and its dimensions therefore denotes a kind of progression of temporal stages, which Deleuze sees encapsulated in the dramatic structure of *Zarathustra*. As he writes in *Difference and Repetition*, the largest part of Nietzsche’s text is taken up with a certain past, defined by the momentous event in which Zarathustra discovers the eternal recurrence at a moment in which he is not ripe for it. Then

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9 Ibid.
there is the moment of the “caesura,” the moment when Zarathustra receives the “sign” and becomes capable of, or equal to, the act required of him (i.e., to perish as the teacher of the doctrine) and that thus posits the first stage as decisively past. The third moment, the moment of the future, which presumes the death of Zarathustra and which would be the moment in which the teaching of the eternal return would reach its goal in the arrival of the overman, fittingly haunts the work as something yet to come. As Deleuze explains, “We know that Nietzsche did not have time to write this projected [last] part. That is why it has been constantly supposed that the Nietzschean doctrine of eternal return was never stated but reserved for a future work: Nietzsche gave us only the past condition and the present metamorphosis, but not the unconditioned which was to have resulted as the ‘future’.” (DR, 92)

While Deleuze marshals a great deal of evidence to support his reading, much of it strikes me as “allegorical” in the same sense that, for example, we call the ancient Stoic readings of Homer “allegorical”: that is, it appears in part as a reverent attempt to preserve a personally and culturally venerated figure in danger of oblivion by squaring his works with the pre-established philosophical or ideological positions of the interpreter. At the very least, it would be exceedingly difficult to discover in Nietzsche’s extant writing a notion of a “pure” pre-existent past. Most obviously, this is a notion that Deleuze derives from Bergson. One could say that Deleuze thus projects a kind of Bergsonism backward onto Nietzsche, much in the same way that the early Nietzsche himself projected Schopenhauer’s philosophy back onto the Attic tragedians. But if Bergson is the most obvious surrogate that Deleuze employs in giving Nietzsche his monstrous offspring, we must also consider the ways in which Deleuze’s interpretation of the eternal return brings Nietzsche into close contact with Friedrich Schelling.

**Eternal Recurrence in Schelling’s Ages of the World (1815)**

Christopher Groves has written on Deleuze’s reception of Schelling, arguing that Deleuze distinguishes between “two tendencies” in Schelling’s thought: a minor, forward-looking tendency in which Schelling anticipates Bergson’s superior empiricism and Deleuze’s own philosophy of difference and an official, retrograde tendency that, in its attempt to subordinate difference to identity, bears the
marks of both the old essentialist metaphysics and the conventional
transcendental philosophy of Schelling's day. While there is much
to commend in Groves' reading, it may be that Deleuze's reception
of Schelling is less clear-cut than he represents it, and that Schelling
may be more than a mere stepping-stone and historical footnote on
the road to the crowned anarchy of difference in itself. The middle
Schelling of The Ages of the World seems always to be hanging
around the margins of Deleuze's interpretation of eternal recurrence,
and perhaps this is because Deleuze saw in that work a model of
eternal recurrence (and its component concepts of Being and Time)
that rivals the one he imputes to Nietzsche.

Reading middle Schelling in general and the 1815 version of Ages
of the World in particular, it does not seem too far-fetched to grasp
Schelling's work as an answer to the same problem that Deleuze
claims beset Nietzsche: i.e., the problem of passage. As Judith Nor-
man suggests in her comparative reading of Schelling and Nietzsche
in The New Schelling, Schelling's solution to the problem was like-
wise through a philosophy of the will. Will is "primordial being" and
of course in the 1815 version of Ages, it is clear that for Schelling
the will can only be thought of in terms of certain pertinent differ-
ences: first, in terms of the difference between the necessity and the
freedom of this will, and secondly, in terms of the difference between
the powers or potencies of this will considered in its necessity.

Of course, for both Schelling and Deleuze, the "problem of pas-
sage" (the problem of empirical time) is synonymous with the prob-
lem of how the primordial being actualizes itself (the passage into
actuality). In short, Schelling's account is a genetic one: it addresses
the problem of how actuality is generated out of the pre-existent
transcendental field of the potencies.

In Deleuzian terms, the contractile, expansive and unifying poten-
cies are the singularities of primordial being or divine will. And
Deleuze indeed finds much to praise in Schelling's theory. As he
writes, it is through his consideration of the potencies that Schelling
"brings difference out of the night of the Identical, and with finer,
more varied and more terrifying flashes of lightning than those of
contradiction: with progressivity." (DR, 191) However, in his eager-
ness to distinguish Schelling from Hegel, Deleuze fails to mention
Schelling's insistence that progressivity depends upon contradiction.

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10 Christopher Groves, "Ecstasy of Reason, Crisis of Reason: Schelling and
“Only the contradiction,” as Schelling writes, “is absolutely not allowed not to act and is alone what drives, nay, what coerces, action. Therefore, without the contradiction, there would be no movement, no life, and no progress. There would only be eternal stoppage, a deathly slumber of all of the forces.” (A, 12) If Schelling can only think of the difference between the potencies in terms of contradiction, it is because each of them “should and must be that which has being,” and thus they can only reciprocally exclude one another from the locus of being. Hence they enter into that unrelenting rotary motion that defines the primordial state—a “standstill in desire.” (A, 21)

The conception of the potencies’ rotary motion, through which Schelling introduces time into the transcendental field, constitutes the first form of eternal recurrence in his presentation. The eternally recurring pulsation of these preindividual singularities “goes through the entirety of visible nature,” which is thus an “allegory” of their “perpetually advancing and retreating movement” (A, 21): “The whole spatially extended cosmos is nothing but the swelling heart of the Godhead.” (A, 94) But if visible nature or the extended cosmos is an allegory—signifying something “other” than merely itself—it cannot merely be an allegory of the potencies’ rotary motion. For if the potencies each have an equal claim to being, then the speed of their rotation around or through the locus of being must be infinite. No actualization of anything corporeal or spiritual could ever persist within their annular drive: “life could never come to an actual existence” (A, 22); “nature would soon get into a reverse motion and thereby break down.” (A, 35) In short, the “Other” that the allegory of visible nature indirectly nominates must be twofold: not only the “negative” otherness of the pulsating potencies, but also a “positive” otherness that would lend support and durability to the actualization of natural and spiritual life. This superior “Other” is the Godhead in its “eternal freedom to be,” posited “outside and above” the series of potencies in the transcendental event Schelling refers to as the “cision.” (A, 23)

It is hard for me not to see in Schelling’s concept of the cision, which he also refers to as the “divergence” of the potencies from one another (A, 28), a model from which Deleuze derives his notion of the caesura. For if Deleuze’s caesura indicates a progression of temporal stages that purifies and divides the past from the present and the future, Schelling’s cision indicates something very similar, since it is with the cision that the relationship between the potencies ceases to be one of reciprocal exclusion and contradiction and be-
comes one of a progression up to the quiescent will of divine freedom, a progression from absolute speed to absolute stillness.

Progressivity implies temporality, but here the progression that follows from the cision also implies the creation of distinct temporalities. As Schelling writes, the “succession of potencies comports itself as a succession of times.” (A, 82) We may read this statement in at least two ways. Firstly, Schelling’s statement suggests that the cision results in the positing of the rotary movement as the eternal past, a past which “was the past from the primordial beginning and since all eternity.” (A, 39) Secondly, it suggests that each of the potencies, now liberated from their conflict and affirming one another in their disjunctive synthesis, generates a form or block of time distinct from the others, which can be characterized in its totality in relation to the others: the temporal block of the contractile potency thus comports itself as past, that of the expansive potency as present, and that of the unifying potency as future. Thus we can speak of the different forms of time proper to the world of nature, the spirit world and the world-soul.

It is important to note at this point that the cision is an event that takes place before the actualization of any of these “worlds” or planes of reality. With the concept of the cision, Schelling thus lends the transcendental field (i.e., eternity itself) a history, prior to “Creation” properly speaking. If the simple and vicious rotary motion of the potencies fall on one side of the cision—the side posited as eternally past, though still retaining a relative degree of being—then what falls on the other side? According to Schelling, what follows the cision, but precedes the actualization of God and Creation, is a kind of explosion of singularities at each level of the divine nature or in each stratum of the transcendental field:

But the cision of forces can never become a complete cision because the limit should be spared and the first negation and restriction should be retained. But because a certain unity always remains, a view of the unity dawns in the cision, a view that can become manifest to what is higher (to the $A^3$) because of its kinship to it. This unity appears as a circumscribed, delimited, and, so to speak, spiritual, image of a creature. (A, 58)

These “spiritual images”—Schelling also refers to them as “archetypes,” “divine ideas,” the “many children of [nature’s] desire,” and the “innermost thoughts of God”—are posited in the mutual divergence of the potencies that follow the event of the cision. (A, 58–66) They constitute all the things “that someday should become actual in nature and then everything that someday should become actual in
the spirit world.” (A, 66) Essentially potentialities, these images neither “pass away...nor do they abide”; rather, the generation of each image takes place in a moment that itself “abides eternally because each successive moment holds onto or encompasses the preceding moment.” (A, 67) In short, the moment proper to each posited image becomes entangled with every other, and this entanglement of moments constitutes the totalities or blocks of time proper to nature and the spirit world.

Schelling asserts that his conception of these spiritual images restores the original “vital” meaning of the antique doctrine of ideas, of which Plato himself is said to be only an interpreter. (A, 66) Distancing himself from the rationalistic interpretation of ideas that has persisted from Plato to Hegel, Schelling insists that ideas are neither “physical substances,” nor “empty genera,” nor “finished and available forms, existing without movement and so to speak, static”; rather, they are powers “eternally becoming and in incessant movement and generation.” (A, 67)

Is it significant that Deleuze refers to the potencies as the “most important aspect of Schelling’s philosophy” in his own extended reinterpretation of the doctrine of ideas in the fourth chapter of _Difference and Repetition_? (DR, 190) It is difficult to say for certain since Deleuze does not explicitly acknowledge Schelling’s own attempt to revitalize the doctrine. Nevertheless, the similarities are striking. For insofar as he insists that ideas are potentialities that arise in the wake of the event of the cision and constitute the transcendental substrata of corporeal and spiritual actualities, Schelling anticipates Deleuze’s own attempt to place ideas “on the side of events, affections, or accidents rather than on that of theorematic essences.” (DR, 188)

As the events, affections or accidents of which he speaks are those pertaining to the transcendental field, Deleuze not only introduces, in Schellingian fashion, temporality into the transcendental—in _The Logic of Sense_ he calls this temporality “Aion”—he likewise claims ideas “correspond” genetically to physical and spiritual actualities: “There are Ideas which correspond to mathematical relations and realities, others which correspond to physical and spiritual actualities: “There are Ideas which correspond to mathematical relations and realities, others which correspond to physical laws and facts. There are others which, according to their order, correspond to organisms, psychic structures, languages and societies: these correspondences without resemblance are of a structural-genetic nature.” (DR, 183–84) Certainly in asserting that corporeal and other actualities do not in any way resemble the transcendental ideas they incarnate, Deleuze advances his project of freeing difference from its long subjection to “the requirements of representation.” (DR, 262) But
does this not precisely mark the insurmountable difference between his reinterpretation of ideas and Schelling’s? Is it not indeed with respect to ideas that the “retrograde” tendency of Schelling’s thought manifests most clearly?

Claiming that God beheld in the ideas which emerged after the cision “the entire future history, the great image of the world and all of the events in nature and in the realm of spirits,” Schelling certainly seems to capture reality within the doubly specular structure of representation. (A, 80) However, the events of which Schelling speaks are not actual ones; rather they are the ideal events that constitute the respective transcendental fields of nature and spirit. Deleuze himself states that “the object of the Idea carries with it the ideal of a complete and infinite determination” (DR, 169), defining events as “ideational singularities which communicate in one and the same Event.”

12 And when Schelling states that the archetypes generated through the cision should become actual, rather than that they will become actual (A, 66), he seems to posit a difference in kind between these singularities in their complete determination and the corporeal and spiritual entities which ultimately do come to be in the worlds of nature and spirit.

But why for Schelling would an entity in its actuality always fail to resemble the archetype it incarnates? Why must it always be “allegorical”? Recalling the above-mentioned duality of the “otherness” with which every actuality is comprised, it would seem that natural or spiritual entities can never fully incarnate their archetypes—can never escape becoming and arrive at being—because actualization entails being pulled in two different directions at once. That is to say, actualization occurs in the opening between two different times or two different and incompossible worlds: the absolute past of the self-lacerating rotary ground and the absolute future of the world of spirit. Between the absolute speed of the former and the absolute stillness of the latter, corporeal and spiritual actualities emerge in their relative speeds and slownesses, their partial forms and partial histories. Hence Schelling posits a kind of wild nonsynchrony to actuality, which makes of every process of actualization the allegorical recurrence of the entirety of Being. As he writes:

The Godhead counts and gauges in this clockwork [of natural time]—not its own eternity (for this is always whole, consummate, indivisible beyond all time and no more eternal in the succession of all times than in the moment), but rather just the mo-

12 Deleuze, Logic of Sense, 53.
ments of the constant repetition of its eternity.... For eternity must not be thought as those moments of time *taken together*, but rather as coexisting with each single moment so that eternity again sees only its (whole, immeasurable) self in each single one. (A 79–80)

**Conclusion**

In *The Ages of the World* (1815), Schelling presents nature as a kind of “chaosmos,”¹³ a visible allegory and repetition of the primordial being’s eternal freedom to be. This account resonates with Deleuze’s own inspired interpretation of the eternal return in ways not fully and not yet entirely elaborated. But Deleuze’s Bergsonian reading of Nietzsche’s doctrine downplays one aspect that Schelling’s account brings into sharp focus: the powerful affective dimension to the relationship between the present and the pure past, or between the present and the pure future. “Everything that becomes can only become in discontent,” Schelling says. (A, 91) If our ethical task is “spiritual production” (A, 71), the piecemeal positing of the singularities that dwell within us, it is a task that is everywhere obstructed and denied by the natural and historical forces that negate and dissolve us. No wonder we’re so discontented. The philosopher who attempted multiple drafts of a work surely knew something about this discontent. Yet he also knew that the only ethical stance is to “accept this cision” (A, 23) that eternally recurs in every moment and that testifies to our existence in the mode of a becoming that “moves in [two] directions at once.”¹⁴ For only through accepting that one is always and already given over to the cision can “the light of knowledge” rise. (A, xxxvii)

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