

## Lecture Fifteen: Deleuze and the Eternal Return

### Introduction

Last week, we looked at the metaphysical structure of the third synthesis of time. Today, I want to look at how this synthesis is related to two other topics by Deleuze: the structure of drama, and the eternal return. Deleuze takes up Rosenberg's suggestion in 'Character Change and Drama' that we can distinguish between two forms of organisation of a character. What Rosenberg calls 'identity', which derives from law, and what he calls 'personality', which is a unifying principle that 'can only be felt' (Rosenberg, 135). This leads to a distinction between classical drama, which focuses on the acts of the characters, and (some) modern drama, which instead relies on a substratum to action which makes it possible. In this regard, *Hamlet* is iconic, as it is a drama where, at least prior to Hamlet's voyage to England, the time of the play is defined by the absence of action (Hamlet's hesitation). We can compare this approach to drama to the three syntheses in the following manner: in the case of classical drama and active synthesis, time is simply the manner in which a deeper structure is played out – movement for Plato, and the law governing action for classical drama. *Hamlet*, and as we shall see, *Zarathustra*, follow a different structure, where action takes time to unfold. In this case, action is ontologically, and theatrically secondary to the structure of temporality itself. I therefore want to structure today's lecture as follows. First, I want to talk about how Rosenberg presents the different kinds of drama. Second, I want to show how we can apply this account of drama to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and arrive at the first doctrine of the Eternal Return present in *Difference and Repetition*. Finally, I want to talk a little about the esoteric doctrine of the Eternal Return, and its relationship to intensive difference.

### Rosenberg on Drama

How does Rosenberg conceive of drama? Well, at the beginning of last term, we talked a little about the relationship between Hegel and Kierkegaard on drama. What was central to Hegel's understanding of a play such as *Antigone* was the nature of the ethical. Here, the conflict occurred between the rights of the family, represented by Antigone's desire to bury her brother, Polyneices, and the rights of the state, represented by King Creon's desire to punish Polyneices as a traitor. While both characters are in fact also governed by the principle of the other (Antigone is the daughter of a king, and Creon is a father and husband), they choose to act solely according to one determining principle. Difference is thus turned into opposition, and the dissolution of this one-sidedness can only be achieved by the tragic death of Antigone, and Creon's loss of his wife and son. In the case of dramas such as this, Rosenberg notes that what is being offered is something like a legal conception of the individual. When we look at the law, Rosenberg notes,

[T]he concepts of morality or social law, applying exclusively to human beings and ignoring possible analogies with other living creatures, tend to define the individual not as an entity enduring in time but by what he has done in particular instances. A given sequence of acts provokes a judgement, and this judgement is an inseparable part of the recognition of the individual. (Rosenberg, 136)

Much as we found with Hume, therefore, Rosenberg provides a conception of drama, which he is implicitly critical of, where the rational, human aspects of personality are played up to the expense of recognising that man is also a biological and psychological entity. Now when we look at the legal conception of the person, it isn't the case that the unity of the individual can be given in terms of their acts themselves. Rather, when someone comes before a judge, what the judge sees is not a unity governed by personality, but rather a series of acts which are unified by the last act's relationship to the law. So, as Rosenberg notes, the actual acts of a murderer are in large part no different from the acts of anyone else, and are only made criminal by the fact that they precede the murder itself: 'entering an automobile, stepping on the gas, obeying the traffic lights.' (138) In this sense, when we look at a criminal act, it is the law that provides a framework for the analysis of action, and which imposes a structure of artifice that unifies the conduct of the perpetrator. In the case of the law, Rosenberg elicits two reasons for supporting the artificiality of this mode of analysis. First, there is the fact that in determining the guilt or innocence of the perpetrator of a crime, the judge explicitly sets to one side the personality of the individual in order to base their judgement purely on the identity of the actions. Second, we can note that if it is suddenly discovered that the alleged perpetrator did not commit the crime, then the entire identity of them before the law disintegrates. The actions of 'stepping on the gas' and 'obeying the traffic lights' now take on an entirely innocent aspect. In this sense, the law operates according to an active synthesis, as it provides the active principle uniting indifferent determinations.

Now, obviously in the case of the law, the problem is of determining whether the structures of the law apply to the actions or not (whether the person is guilty or innocent). In the case of 'old drama,' we do not have the difficulty of determining whether acts properly accord with the structure of the law. Rather, characters in 'old drama' are constituted to be in accordance with their fate from the outset:

The dramatists definition of the character was not an arbitrary superimposition that exchanged the emotional, intellectual, and mechanical characteristics of a biological and social organism for some one deed that concerned the court; it constituted instead the entire reality of a character, avoiding the ruinous abstraction of the law by determining in advance that his emotions, his thoughts and his gestures should correspond with and earn in every respect the fate prepared for him. (Rosenberg, 139)

In this sense, therefore, we can see Rosenberg's conception of classical drama as being something like the Leibnizian notion of time that we looked at last week. Here, the phenomenal manifestations of characters in classical drama are merely manifestations of an underlying law, or an underlying judgement: the fate of the character. Hence, 'psychology can establish the plausibility of Macbeth's or Lear's behaviour, but for the sufficiency of his motivation, we must not refer to a possible Macbeth or Lear "in real life" but to the laws of the Shakespearean universe.' (140)

How does this differ with Hamlet? Deleuze notes that Hamlet's claim that 'time is out of joint' can be read as an essentially philosophical claim, and we looked at what this claim might entail last week. Here we can see that *Hamlet* was not a purely arbitrary choice on the part of Deleuze. In fact, we can see in the structure of the play itself an intimation of the reversal of the roles of time and succession/action/movement.

The first half of *Hamlet* sees Hamlet himself not as an identity in the legal sense, or in the dramatic senses which I have just outlined. As Rosenberg points out, the drama prior to Hamlet's return from England concerns his inability to act:

I do not know  
Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do;'  
Sith I have cause and will and strength and means  
To do't. (*Hamlet*, iv. iv)

Now, as this quote makes clear, Hamlet is very much aware of what he should do, but he is simply not able to do it. To this extent, we have an odd dramatic structure, since, if characters are understood in terms of the relations of acts to the judgement of the law, then Hamlet's various speeches, and use of speech in the first half of the play, are simply irrelevant to the structure of his role. As Deleuze writes, 'Hamlet is the first hero who truly needed time in order to act, whereas earlier heroes were subject to time as the consequence or an original movement (Aeschylus) or aberrant action (Sophocles).' (Essays Critical and Clinical, 28) Rosenberg's interpretation is precisely this, that Hamlet exists as a person, rather than an identity, and hence exists outside of the role that the play assigns him. The task of taking on the role of avenging his father is simply too big for him. The sea voyage is therefore necessary to the structure of *Hamlet*, as it represents the break whereby Hamlet becomes equal to the task allotted to him. What does this involve? Deleuze talks about the first half of Hamlet in terms of the '*a priori* past'. In this sense, Hamlet exists in the past in relation to the event (he is yet to become equal to his action). Now, here the two notions of the past and of inaction should remind us of Bergson's theory of the pure past. Hamlet, in the first half of the play, exists in a state of relation to a past that is disconnected from the present. In this sense, there is a failure to relate the past to action, which is mirrored by the failure to identify himself with the actual structure of the law. As Deleuze puts it, in his discussion of Hamlet and Oedipus, 'they are in the past and live themselves as such so long as they experience the act as too big for them.' (DR 112) The second time, the action, is the moment of the present, where the self becomes capable of acting. This is where the emergence of our representation of the self emerges as a parallel to the self of habit ('the projection of an ideal self in the image of the act' [DR 112]). But, however, it is only against the future that these two moments can be related. It is only the future that allows the self of the past to be brought into a 'secret coherence'. This secret coherence is the coherence exhibited by the Eternal Return.

### **Zarathustra as Drama**

If we turn to Zarathustra, we can see that there are clearly parallels between the structure of *Hamlet* and *Zarathustra*. Both involve their central characters moving from a state where they are not equal to their action to the act itself. The bulk of Zarathustra is therefore governed by Zarathustra's inability to think the eternal return ('O Zarathustra, your fruits are ripe, but you are not ripe for your fruits.' 169). This first part of Zarathustra is bound up with the question of the past. *Of Redemption* is central in this respect, in that it explores two different relationships to the past. As Zarathustra says 'this alone is *revenge* itself: the will's antipathy towards time and time's "it was".'

(162) Now this conception of time, with its 'dreadful chance' is the past of representation – the line of time that we looked at in the last few weeks. Such a form of time involves the fragmentation, and negations that we find in, for instance, the Aristotelian view of the world (it is the time of 'fragments of men and limbs of men' [160]). In this framework, temporality itself is seen as the ground for resentment, man is not the ground for his own actions (he cannot will backwards), and so he is in this sense alienated from what he is by the structure of temporality. In this, we can perhaps see the structure of the paralogisms that we looked at last week – the inability of man to find the ground of his own activity through recourse to a determinable identity. The spirit of revenge is therefore engendered by the passing of time, and its incommensurability with the will. Nietzsche offers two solutions to this problem. The first is the annihilation of the will (the Schopenhauerian solution), the second is the redemption of time. The Eternal return is thus that which offers us the possibility of a more appropriate relation to temporality. It functions on the one level as an ethical principle, which Deleuze formulates in a way which parallels that of Kant ('what ever you will, will it in such a way that you also will its eternal return.' [NP 68]). It is also that which ties the account of temporality given in chapter two to the metaphysical account of univocity which was presented in chapter one, as 'the eternal return is neither qualitative nor extensive, but intensive, purely intensive. In other words, it is said of difference.' (DR 303)

Deleuze claims that the second part of Zarathustra is concerned with the transformation of Zarathustra, as he finally becomes adequate to the thought of the eternal return. In the last part of *Zarathustra*, Zarathustra finally throws off his 'pity for the higher man' (335) and truly embraces the form of temporality explicit in the eternal return. The final stage, Deleuze claims, is unwritten, and would have dealt with the death of Zarathustra. On this point, I spoke with Keith Ansell Pearson over the weekend, and he told me that the current state of Nietzsche research sees Zarathustra's death as actually occurring in part three of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, (c.f. Paul S. Loeb, *The Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, CUP). Deleuze describes this final time as 'time by excess' (DR 113), where the subject is once again dissolved. In essence, we can read the eternal return in this formulation purely in terms of the first two syntheses. We act by incorporating the pure past into the present (we repeat), but this generates something truly novel, the future as new. In other words, it is on the basis of the return of the past that the future is constituted as being in excess of the present. While we can give the eternal return a tripartite structure in terms of the act, as incorporating the past into the present in order to relate to the future, 'such an exposition remains purely introductory.' (DR 113) In fact, Deleuze presents a second interpretation of the eternal return, this time in terms of an 'esoteric truth' that 'concerns – and can concern – only the third time or the series.' (DR 113)

### **The Eternal Return**

So, what is the structure of the Eternal Return? Well, in the *Gay Science*, Nietzsche presents it in the following concise form:

What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest 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' ... 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 have I heard anything more divine.' (GS §341)

Now the key question, I think, is, what is it that returns? In *Zarathustra*, at several moments, two different forms of return are presented. In *Of the Vision and the Riddle*, Zarathustra struggles with the spirit of gravity (the Dwarf). The dwarf appears to know the truth of the eternal return, that 'Everything straight lies...all truth is crooked, time is itself a circle' (178). Likewise, in *the Convalescent*, the animals tell Zarathustra that 'everything breaks, everything is joined anew; the same house of existence builds itself forever. Everything departs, everything meets again; the ring of existence is true to itself forever.' (234) In both these cases, Zarathustra dismisses these readings of the eternal return (the dwarf takes it too lightly, the animals make a hurdy-gurdy song of it).

This first reading essentially sees time as circular. Deleuze equates this model with a historical (and physical) mode of repetition. For example, he sees this as exemplified in the thesis of Giambattista Vico that the history of man progresses between three different ages: the age of the gods, the age of heroes, and the age of man, where we have a movement from a culture based on imagination to a culture based on reason. Vico's conception is circular, however, with the age of man suffering a *recurso* to the age of the gods. In this sense, history is a process of eternal repetition. The present repeats a prior cycle, and the future is already determined in terms of the past. Now, we saw last term when we looked at Kierkegaard's *Repetition* that Deleuze does not think that repetition in terms of actuality is possible (there is only resemblance). In this respect, Deleuze writes that 'historians sometimes look for empirical correspondences between the present and the past, but however rich it may be, this network of historical correspondences involves repetition by analogy or similitude.' (DR 113) If the eternal return was operating in these terms, then what we would have is an affirmation of judgement. We would have a redemption of the will within time, rather than a redemption of time itself. Such a redemption in essence reaffirms the representational account of the past and present, rather than overturning it. What the eternal return has to give us instead is a transfiguration of the form of time itself.

So what is it that is repeated? Well, I think the answer can be given by looking at the *Genealogy of Morality*. Here, Nietzsche presents a contrast between two basic attitudes towards the world, that of the lamb and the bird of prey:

There is nothing strange about the fact that lambs bear a grudge towards large birds of prey: but that is no reason to blame the large birds of prey for carrying off the little lambs. And if the lambs say to each other, 'These birds of prey are evil; and whoever is least like a bird of prey and most like its opposite, a lamb, – is good, isn't he?', then there is no reason to raise objections to this setting-up of an ideal beyond the fact that the birds of prey will view it somewhat derisively, and will perhaps say: 'We don't bear any grudge at all towards these good lambs, in fact we love them, nothing is tastier than a tender lamb.' – It is just as absurd to ask strength not to express itself as strength, not to be a desire to overthrow, crush, become master, to be a thirst for enemies, resistance and triumphs, as it is to ask weakness to express itself as strength. A quantum of force is just such a quantum of drive, will, action, in fact it is nothing but this driving, willing and acting, and only the seduction of language (and the fundamental errors of reason petrified within it), which construes and misconstrues

all actions as conditional upon an agency, a 'subject', can make it appear otherwise... no wonder, then, if the entrenched, secretly smouldering emotions of revenge and hatred put this belief to their own use and, in fact, do not defend any belief more passionately than that the strong are free to be weak, and the birds of prey are free to be lambs: – in this way, they gain the right to make the birds of prey responsible for being birds of prey. (GM Sec. 13)

Nietzsche here is presenting an argument which combines moral and ontological aspects. The natural state of affairs is that of the bird of prey, who exercises his strength naturally, and sees itself as good. The lamb, however, sees the bird of prey as evil, and therefore sees itself as good. The symmetry between these two positions is misleading, however, each rests on fundamentally different ways of seeing the world. For the bird of prey, its action is simply an expression of its strength, or, in more Nietzschean terms, we might say that the bird of prey itself is an expression of strength: "It is just as absurd to ask strength not to express itself as strength, ..., as it is to ask weakness to express itself as strength." The lamb's reaction is both a moral reaction, and one that is made possible by an illusion fostered by grammar: it posits a subject who is responsible for exercising its strength. We can illustrate this grammatical illusion using Nietzsche's example of lightning. When we say that 'lightning strikes', we are forced by the structure of language to posit a distinction between a subject ('lightning') and an act ('striking') on the other. Now we might recognise in this case that in fact there is nothing other to the lightning than its striking itself – there is not a hidden subject behind the act – but language opens up a way of thinking of the world in terms of agents and actions. Now that the lamb understands the bird of prey as an agent acting, he can posit the (illusory possibility) of the agent withholding this action. Thus, the bird of prey, once it is seen as a subject, becomes culpable for what it does.

If we return last term's discussion of univocity, we left off with Deleuze's account of Spinoza as providing a univocal ontology in terms of a single substance that expresses itself in finite things as modes. Despite the fact that Spinoza succeeds in generating a univocal ontology, Deleuze claims that for Spinoza, 'substance must be said itself *of* the modes and only *of* the modes. Such a condition can be satisfied only at the price of a more general categorical reversal according to which being is said of becoming, identity of that which is different, the one of the multiple, etc.' (DR 50) Although we have a new concept of difference with the move from oppositional difference to intensive difference, this concept of difference still has to be understood in terms of identity, as intensive difference is still a characteristic of being. Deleuze's point is that the relation of difference to being is still structured like the terms of a judgement. Difference is said *of* being, and so we still understand being as if it were a subject, even if we know that in reality it is singular rather than one. The eternal return is what overcomes this conception, by giving us a conception of a substance that is a becoming rather than a being.

Instead, what returns is going to be the nomadic distribution. Deleuze's analysis of Spinoza saw being as the ground for the modes. Replacing being with becoming means that for Deleuze, taking up the eternal return, the ground for modes is going to be a field of becoming, and so it is the intensive, nomadic distribution which returns. "Only the extreme, the excessive, returns; that which passes into something else and becomes identical...Eternal return or returning expresses the common being of all these metamorphoses, ..., of all the realised degrees of power." (DR 51) The priority of difference does not, therefore preclude the existence of identities, but asserts that what

returns is not these identities themselves, but something prior to identity, which Deleuze characterises as difference. The eternal return appears as a test – whether we can bear the heaviest burden of the demon’s truth. What is this a test for? The lamb and the bird of prey both operate according to different distributions; the former according to the sedentary distribution, the latter according to the nomadic distribution. In this case, deciding between them is straightforward, but it may be difficult to see whether something is governed by a sedentary or nomadic distribution. The eternal return allows us to differentiate those two classes. Only that which is pure affirmation, or which is not separated from what it can do, can truly will the repetition of everything that makes it what it is. Those who cannot affirm this do not have their ground in the affirmative field of differences, but are instead, like the lamb, grounded in the sedentary distribution. The eternal return therefore allows us to differentiate “the superior form of everything that ‘is’” (DR 51) from those beings that are really not (as the sedentary distribution does not have an adequate origin). As he puts it in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, “The eternal return teaches us that becoming-reactive [the existence of the lamb, for instance] has no being.” (NP 72) The eternal return therefore allows us to select which entities can be traced back to intensive difference and which cannot. In doing so, it allows us to characterise that set of entities which genuinely are, and are not merely secondary effects, as the lamb’s attitude is a secondary effect of the bird of prey’s.