

Secluded Nature: The Point of Schelling's Reinscription of the *Timaeus*

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The recent publication of Schelling's early Plato studies¹ serves to underline the singular decisiveness that one could indeed already have taken the Platonic dialogues to have for Schelling's thought. In addition, these very early studies, primarily (though not exclusively) of the *Timaeus*, make it possible to amplify the brief indications given in Schelling's works and, in particular, to mark certain points in those works where reinscription of the *Timaeus*, at least of certain of its discourses, is carried out. By filling out the reinscription along lines traced by the early Plato studies, one can transpose mere general indications into the textual specificity corresponding to Schelling's reinscription of the *Timaeus* in the text of modern philosophy, his reinscription of the dialogue into a text that while belonging to modern philosophy also renders it radically questionable, perhaps for the first time. In this way one can provide a certain measure of the decisiveness of the *Timaeus* for Schelling's thought.

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At what point does the reinscription occur? At what point in Schelling's work? At what point in the movement that came to be called German Idealism? Is this alleged movement furthered by the reinscription? Or does it mark a point of dispersion or even of disruption? In this case what could come to regather the movement or to replace it from this point on? What in any case could be expected to come into play at this point, if indeed German Idealism is regarded as thinking to the end all that the resources of the history of philosophy make it possible to think? Would there not be need, then, to suppose something outside, to suppose that what Schelling reinscribes from Plato's *Timaeus* lies outside the domain of these

¹ Most notably, F. W. J. Schelling, '*Timaeus*' (1794), ed. Hartmut Buchner (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1994). Further references are indicated in the text by *T* followed by page number. Additional material belonging to Schelling's early Plato studies appears as two appendices in Michael Franz, *Schellings Tübinger Platon-Studien* (Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996). Franz notes that these texts are only preliminary transcriptions and do not constitute a historical-critical edition.

resources, outside - or at least at the limit of - this history, which it is difficult to distinguish from the history of reason itself? With Schelling reason would be made to harbor an other and to endure - even to the point of self-laceration and despair - the consequences of its exposure to alterity within itself. Or, perhaps, to think those consequences, to think their consequentiality for thinking itself.

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Indications are there from the beginning, from before the beginning: for instance, in the recently published notebook dating from August 1792, two years before Schelling's first published work. Composed while Schelling was still a student in Tübingen, the notebook is entitled *Vorstellungsarten der alten Welt über Verschiedene Gegenstände gesammelt aus Homer, Plato u.a.*² At the very beginning of the text Schelling cites in Greek a passage from the *Timaeus* (68e-69a) that may be rendered as follows: "Therefore there is need to distinguish two kinds of causes, the necessary [τὸ ἀναγκαῖον] and the divine [τὸ θεῖον], and in all things to seek after the divine for the sake of gaining a life of happiness, so far as our nature [φύσις] admits thereof." Concluding the second of *Timaeus*' three discourses, this passage reiterates the one with which the second discourse opens. The opening passage, which Schelling will cite in another notebook two years later, is at least as pertinent: "For this cosmos in its origin was generated as a compound, from the combination of ἀνάγκη and νοῦς" (48a).

But what is the point of the reinscription? Why, how, where is it carried out?

The question of the *why* will compound itself almost immediately, indeed, in a way that can perhaps be described only as abysmal. For the point of the reinscription is to set the ground apart, to set apart that to which every question that asks *why* is directed. Setting ground apart cannot but render more problematic every such question of ground and, above all, the question that asks about the ground of the setting apart of ground.

But *how* is the reinscription carried out? With what kind of stylus will Schelling have rewritten the ancient text *within* the text of modern philosophy? What about the eye that will have caught a glimpse of the blank space closed off within that densely figured text? How will the hand

² Franz, *Schellings Tübinger Platon-Studien*, Appendix I (pp. 252-71).

have been deployed to wield the pen within that space - or rather, to set its point dancing so as to reinscribe as lightly as possible what was said - and not said - in the pertinent discourse of the *Timaeus*.

Where, then, is the reinscription carried out? Where in Schelling's work?

Perhaps almost everywhere. For what Schelling rewrites within the text of modern philosophy is a discourse on nature, on nature in its capacity to withdraw, on secluded nature. It is well-known that the question of nature is precisely what precipitated Schelling's break with Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, which reduces nature to a mere not-I posited by the I, that is, reduces it to a mere object brought forth by the transcendental imagination. That in this reduction only the merest residue remains as a kind of surd (the *Anstoss*) serves to mark for Schelling the limit, the incompleteness, of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. What is thus called for is a philosophy of nature that would complement transcendental philosophy (or - in a sense that becomes increasingly compelling - would displace it) and thus compensate for the absence of nature from transcendental philosophy.

Schelling's criticism of transcendental philosophy becomes more comprehensive and more radical in his work of 1809, *Philosophical Investigations of the Essence of Human Freedom*: "All modern European philosophy since it began with Descartes has this common defect, that nature does not exist for it and that it lacks a living ground [*dass die Naure für sie nicht vorhanden ist, und dass es ihr am lebendigen Grunde fehlt*]."³ In this work Schelling ventures to recover such a living ground, to differentiate secluded nature from the self-positing subject to which otherwise - and indeed throughout modern philosophy - it is assimilated. It is precisely in the course of this differentiating recovery of ground that Schelling comes openly - perhaps most openly - to reinscribe the *Timaeus*.

Yet the reinscription comes, not at the highest point of the investigation, but rather at its deepest point, where it is most fundamental. At this point Schelling draws the most fundamental of distinctions, setting the living ground apart from the being whose existence it would ground. The distinction is fundamental in a twofold sense: it is the foundation of all the other principal determinations to be developed in the investigation (for

³ Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände*, in *Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart and Augsburg: J. G. Cotta'scher Verlag, 1860), I/7, p. 356. Further references to the *Philosophische Untersuchungen (PU)* are given in the text according to the pagination of this edition.

example, that of the distinction between good and evil), and it effects the very setting of the fundament, setting it apart from the being whose existence it would ground. Most succinctly, it differentiates between ground and existence. Even in the case of God the distinction remains in force, forestalling any reduction of the grounding relation in God to the virtual identity entailed in the determination of God as *causa sui*. Even though the ground of God's existence is inseparable from God, it is necessary to differentiate between God insofar as he exists and the ground of his existence. In this connection Schelling refers to the ground of God's existence as "the nature in God" (PU 358), thus indicating unmistakably that even in the sphere of the divine what is at issue is the seclusion of nature. It is in this same connection that Schelling delimits nature as such, nature as ground, nature as secluded beyond the limit: "Nature in general is everything that lies beyond the absolute being of absolute identity" (PU 358). Secluded nature Schelling also calls *die anfängliche Natur*, distinguishing it - though only relatively - from ordered nature. The distinction is only relative because *die anfängliche Natur* is also the unruly (*das Regellose*) that precedes the establishment of rule, order, form and that even in ordered nature still persists as capable of breaking through again. Secluded nature is originary (*ursprünglich*) not only in the sense that it precedes order and form (creation consisting, then, in bringing the unruly to order) but also in the sense that it remains as the irreducible ground always capable of breaking through the order brought by creation. In Schelling's words: "This is the incomprehensible basis of reality in things, the irreducible remainder, that which with the greatest exertion cannot be resolved in the understanding but remains eternally in the ground" (PU 359f.). The unruly ground Schelling also calls *longing* (*Sehnsucht*) - "the longing felt by the eternal One to give birth to itself" (PU 359). He also calls it simply *darkness* (*Dunkel*), broaching with this name a discourse of birth, since "all birth is from darkness into light." That discourse continues: "Man is formed in his mother's womb, and from the darkness of non-understanding (from feeling, longing, the glorious mother of knowledge) lucid thoughts first grow" (PU 360).

It is at this point that Schelling inserts a decisive indication referring this entire development back to the *Timaeus* and broaching in effect a reinscription. The originary longing, says Schelling, is to be represented as moving "like an undulating, surging sea, similar to Plato's matter" (PU 360). In its movement, originary longing, that is, the darkness from which understanding is born, that is, the secluded ground, that is, *die anfängliche*

Natur, is similar to Plato's matter.

What is to be understood by *Plato's matter*? Strictly speaking, nothing in Plato's text corresponds to the word *matter* (*Materie*). Plato seldom uses the word ὕλη, and, when he does, it has usually the pre-philosophical sense of building material, not the determinate philosophical sense it comes to have with Aristotle. Yet there can be little doubt but - and the early Plato studies make it abundantly clear - that Schelling is referring to what Plato - or rather, Timaeus - calls, among its many names, ὑποδοχή (receptacle) and χώρα. The identification becomes evident if reference is made to a passage from the *Timaeus* in which this kind is called the nurse (τιθήνη) of generation. Timaeus describes it as it was before the demiurgic god made the cosmos, in that time - a kind of time before time - when it held only the still unformed elements, the proto-elements that had, as he says, only a trace of themselves and that he calls also powers (δύναμις). He says: "But because of being filled with powers that are neither equal nor balanced, in no part of itself is it balanced, but sways unevenly everywhere and is shaken by these [powers] and shakes them in turn as it moves" (52d-e). The identification also puts into perspective Schelling's references to birth and the mother: for another name that Timaeus gives to the receptacle - to what is called, no doubt improperly, ὑποδοχή - is μήτηρ (mother).

Schelling's discourse on the unruly ground, on secluded nature, may thus be taken - at least in certain decisive moments - as reinscribing the Timaeian discourse on the receptacle.

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Among Schelling's early Plato studies the most notable text is his commentary on the *Timaeus*. This text is found in a notebook entitled *Über den Geist der Platonischen Philosophie* and follows a series of short texts entitled collectively *Form der Platonischen Philosophie*. The *Timaeus*-essay is a coherent, self-contained text. It divides into two parts, which are roughly equal length. The first part presents an interpretation of *Timaeus* 28a-47c - that is, of the first of Timaeus' three discourses, the one in which he describes how the god fabricated the visible cosmos by looking to the invisible, eidetic paradigm and making the visible cosmos in its image. The second part is devoted to *Timaeus* 47c-53c - that is, to the initial portion of Timaeus' second discourse where he introduces, in addition to the intelligible εἶδη and their sensible images, a third kind,

called (among its many names) ὑποδοχή. The second part of the *Timaeus*-essay includes also a discussion of the *Philebus*, especially of the forms of ἄπειρον and πέρας. Although it is not itself explicitly dated, the *Timaeus*-essay can be dated 1794, between the months of January-February and May-June. Thus it comes at the very beginning of Schelling's career and, specifically, just before his first major published work *Über die Möglichkeit einer Form der Philosophie überhaupt*. One notes that the Fichtean terminology of Schelling's first publications is conspicuously absent from the *Timaeus*-essay.⁴ This suggests already a certain reversal of the usual view: rather than coming only after his appropriation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* (and precisely as critique of Fichte), Schelling's engagement with the question of nature - even of secluded nature - actually preceded that engagement.

Three points stand out in the first part of the essay, though without at all exhausting its content.

(1) Almost at the beginning Schelling identifies a "main principle" ("*Hauptsatz*") by quoting the passage (27d-28a) in which Timaeus distinguishes between τὸ ὄν and τὸ γιγνόμενον, that is, between *being*, which is ungenerated and which is apprehended by νόησις with λόγος, and *becoming* (that which is generated), which never is and which is apprehended by δόξα with αἴσθησις. Schelling comments: "Thus here Plato himself explains that ὄν as something that is the object of pure understanding [*das Gegenstand des reinen Verstandes*]" (T 23). In turn, Schelling identifies τὸ γιγνόμενον as: "the empirical, that which has arisen through experience." Hence, one recognizes from the outset that Schelling is interpreting Plato's text by means of *Kantian concepts*: he takes *being*, hence, the Platonic ideas, as concepts of pure understanding, or, he adds, as ideas of pure reason.

(2) Schelling cites and briefly discusses *Timaeus* 30c-d: in this passage Timaeus characterizes the cosmos as a living being (ζῶον) and asks about the paradigm in the image of which the demiurgos made it. He then identifies the paradigm as the νοητὸν ζῶον, the living being apprehended by νόησις. Schelling proceeds then to the point that is to be stressed: "The key to the explanation of the entire Platonic philosophy is the remark that everywhere he carries the subjective over to the objective [*überträgt* can also mean here: transfers, transposes, translates]. From this arose for Plato the principle (present, however, long before him) that the visible world is nothing but an image of the invisible" (T 31). Close attention to this

⁴ See Buchner's Editorischer Bericht in T 3-21.

passage and its context makes it clear that the pertinent carrying over of the subjective to the objective is not at all a matter of subjectivation, as though the subject cast something upon pre-existent objects or viewed them only through its own subjective lens. Rather, what is at issue here - and what allows Schelling to make the connection with the Platonic principle - is *objectivation*. The passage is addressed to the way in which what is subjectively given to our empirical receptivity gets constituted as something objective, as something that is no longer merely relative to our sensibility. For Plato this objectivation takes place through the referral of the visible to the invisible; it occurs precisely insofar as the visible (the subjective) comes to be taken as an image - as a mere image: *Nachbild* - of the invisible (the objective). Yet the Kantian terms in which Schelling casts this referral are evident: even to characterize it in terms of the opposition subjective/objective is already to broach a Kantian formulation. The connection becomes still more manifest when Schelling goes on to write: "Insofar as the whole of nature as it appears to us is not only a product of our empirical receptivity but properly a work of our power of representation [*Vorstellungsvermögen*], to this extent the represented world belongs to a higher power than mere sensibility and nature is presented as a type of higher world, which expresses the pure laws of this world" (T 31). Regarding the principle that the visible is an image of the invisible, Schelling adds: "But no philosophy would ever arrive at this principle if it [viz., the principle] did not have its philosophical ground in us" (T 31). In other words, the referral from visible to invisible is to be found already operative in the subject, in the relation between sensibility and understanding - indeed not only operative but *grounded* in the subject, in the relation between its receptivity and its powers of representation. Only because the principle is in us can philosophy ever have discovered it.

(3) Schelling again confirms the Kantian parameters of his interpretation when he writes that Plato "must therefore have assumed ideas . . . only insofar as they are dependent, directly or indirectly, on the pure form of understanding" (T 32). Does this mean, then, that the Platonic ideas are simply identified with the pure concepts of the human understanding? One cannot but wonder how such an identification could ever be reconciled with the *Timaeus*, much less derived from it. In fact, Schelling's interpretation stops short of posing such an identification. Instead, Schelling regards ideas as, first of all, concepts in the *divine* understanding: "In general in the entire investigation of the Platonic theory of ideas, one must keep it always in mind that Plato speaks of them always

as ideas of a divine understanding, which would become possible in human understanding only through an intellectual communion of man with the origin of all beings [*nur durch intellektuelle Gemeinschaft des Menschen mit dem Ursprunge aller Wesen*]” (T 37). The sense of correspondence with the *Timaeus* itself is readily apparent: in the account given by Timaeus in the dialogue, it is the god who has the eidetic paradigm in view and who fashions the cosmos in accord with it. On the other hand, this shift does not entail for Schelling that the ideas are to be taken as *existing* in a higher world. The referral of ideas back to the understanding (even if divine) is what is decisive, and it is the decisiveness of this referral that allows Schelling to forestall all that would arise if recourse were had to simply positing the existence of the ideas. Schelling is explicit about the difficulties that would arise, that is, about the reduction of sense that could not, then, be evaded: “As soon as the concept of existence is applied to something supersensible, whether to an idea or to objects insofar as they exist outside their idea, it loses all physical significance [*Bedeutung*] and retains merely logical significance. . . . The concept of existence, applied to the idea of God, is an abyss for human reason [*ein Abgrund für die menschliche Vernunft*]” (T 44).

In the second part of the *Timaeus*-essay there are again three points to be stressed. These points are not exhaustive and, in particular, do not touch on Schelling’s extended discussion of the *Philebus*, an apparent digression, aimed, it seems, at recovering a Platonic language in which to express the Kantian categories, or rather in which the categories were already, in the Platonic text, profoundly expressed.

(1) Schelling begins by making the transition that Plato’s text makes and itself marks, the transition to the second of Timaeus’ discourses: “Now Plato proceeds to the necessity . . . that was effective in the coming-to-be of the world” (T 50). Schelling identifies the main principle that comes thus into play, citing - in Greek, as always - the passage with which Timaeus’ second discourse in effect begins: “For this cosmos in its origin was generated as a compound, from the combination of ἀνάγκη [in Schelling’s translation: *Notwendigkeit*] and νοῦς” (*Timaeus* 48a, cited in T 50). Granted that the role of νοῦς in generating the cosmos has been investigated in Timaeus’ first discourse (and in Schelling’s commentary on it in the first part of the *Timaeus*-essay), it is to ἀνάγκη that the new discourse turns. More precisely, ἀνάγκη is what Timaeus’ first discourse proves to have passed over, that to which, having previously gotten ahead of itself, the discourse must now return.

(2) Once the return to the beginning is explicitly marked, Timaeus speaks of ἀνάγκη as the third kind. What his second discourse ventures from the outset is to introduce the third kind alongside the other two kinds previously distinguished, the eidetic paradigm and the image, which, Schelling notes, presupposes the third kind. That portion of Timaeus' second discourse on which Schelling comments is in effect engaged in working out this presupposition, in explicating its sense and its force. Schelling quotes the passage in which Timaeus calls the third kind "the receptacle [ὑποδοχή], as it were, the nurse, of all generation" (*Timaeus* 49a, cited in *T* 53). But what Schelling himself especially calls it - indeed in this very context - is *enduring substance*, a substance (*Substanz*) that enduringly (*beharrlich*) underlies all change of appearances. It is like the gold that Timaeus mentions, which can be moulded into every possible shape but is not itself identical with any of the forms it can receive. But since it is receptive of *all* forms, since it is "the substratum of all the various forms" (*T* 54), it can have no determinate form whatsoever. It has no original form of its own, that is, it is *itself* formless and unchanging. While it is capable of taking on any and every form, none of the forms that come to inhere in it are proper to it; none belong to it *as such*. This nonbelonging of form to the third kind is indicative, in turn, of its utter distinctness from the intelligible originals, the eidetic paradigms, to which all forms finally refer. In Schelling's words, "Thus the substance itself (which has existed unalterably from eternity, δι' ἀναγκης)⁵ was the substratum of all the various forms that arose through imitation of the original, pure, intelligible forms" (*T* 54). Yet, as itself formless, this substratum (the receptacle of all becoming) must also be itself invisible: "Insofar as it is the final empirical substratum of all the forms that are brought forth through the creation of the world, [it] cannot become visible, because nothing but these forms (imitations, images, of the pure forms of the understanding) can become visible to us" (*T* 56-58). Schelling appropriately cites in this context one of the most decisive passages from this portion of the *Timaeus*: "But if we call it an invisible εἶδος, formless, all-receiving, and, in a most perplexing way, partaking of the intelligible and most difficult to catch, we will not be speaking falsely" (*Timaeus* 51a-b).

(3) Schelling calls the receptacle not only the enduring substance or substratum but also *matter* (*Materie*), confirming with this appellation that "Plato's matter," as he will call it in 1809 when he likens originary longing

⁵ In Schelling's citations from the Greek text all accent marks are lacking.

to it, is none other than the receptacle introduced in Timaeus' second discourse. Such matter is not something that one could ever come across as such in the visible world; it is in this sense not a material substance at all. Rather, this "nature [φύσις] that receives all bodies" (*Timaeus* 50b) is a matter prior to all generation of things, a pregenetic nature that makes possible the genesis of the visible world, a proto-matter "before the generation of the world [οὐρανός]" (*Timaeus* 48b).⁶ In this connection Schelling insists - no less than does Timaeus - on the difference between the all-receptive matter and the elements that come to appear in it; this difference is what precludes regarding the world as simply composed of air, earth, fire, and water. Yet the difference is not utter separation, not even utter distinctness: the invisible, all-receiving matter, which never appears as itself, can come to appear (even though not *as itself*) only by way of the appearing of an element held by it, as when, for instance, it appears as fiery. Schelling says of matter: it appears to us "only under a form that is not its form" (*T* 58).

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Kring's commentary appended to Schelling's *Timaeus*-essay offers several significant indications of just how thoroughly Schelling's interpretation of the *Timaeus* and especially of the discourse on the receptacle remains in play in the series of writings on the philosophy of nature that Schelling produced during the late 1790s.⁷ One of the most striking of these indications is that given regarding that work in which by its very title Schelling refers back to the *Timaeus*. Though indeed *Von der Weltseele* (1798) devotes much of its attention to contemporary investigations of nature, with only scant allusions to the world-soul (or other themes) of Plato's *Timaeus*, there are passages that are quite remarkable in this regard. For example, in the Preface Schelling discusses the conception of an originary *Naturprinzip*, which would be prior to the distinction between organic and inorganic; this *Naturprinzip*, which can be called the world-soul, would indeed precede all natural appearances in the sense of being the activity and productivity underlying these appearances. Schelling writes that it "can be nothing determinate or particular. For this very

⁶ See the commentary appended to the text of Schelling's *Timaeus*-essay: Hermann Krings, 'Genesis und Materie - Zur Bedeutung der 'Timaeus'-Handschrift für Schellings Naturphilosophie', esp. pp. 131-35.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127, pp. 143-45.

reason,” he continues, “language has no proper designation for it; and the most ancient philosophy [*die älteste Philosophie*] (to which, after it has completed its cycle, our philosophy gradually turns back) has handed it down to us only in poetic representations.”⁸ Krings insists that what Schelling calls here “the most ancient philosophy” is none other than Plato’s; even if this identification remains perhaps less than certain, there is much to suggest that the poetic representation mentioned is the εἰκὼς λόγος of the *Timaeus* and that this nature that is neither determinate nor particular is the receptacle. Another passage near the end of the work serves to reinforce this suggestion. The language of the passage is virtually that of the *Timaeus*, indeed of the second discourse, of that very portion of it to which the second part of Schelling’s *Timaeus*-essay is devoted: “For this reason, this principle, although receptive of all forms, is itself originally formless (ἄμορφον) and never presentable [*darstellbar*] as determinate matter.”⁹

However, with the inception of Schelling’s philosophy of identity (as announced in the 1801 work *Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie*) there is manifestly a shift in the stance taken toward the *Timaeus*. Krings suggests that the shift is such as to distance Schelling’s thought decisively from the *Timaeus*,¹⁰ indeed so decisively as to preclude any expectation of reinscription. Schelling’s statement in the Introduction to *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur* would, then, be definitive. Referring to the opposition between spirit and matter, Schelling writes: “The greatest thinkers of antiquity did not dare go beyond this opposition. Plato still set matter in opposition to God.”¹¹ But the very sense of the philosophy of identity involves its going beyond this opposition: “Nature is to be visible spirit, spirit invisible nature.” Thus, the philosophy of identity would establish “the absolute identity of the spirit within us and the nature outside us.”¹²

The question is whether the move beyond the opposition simply terminates in absolute identity or whether it reopens the opposition within and yet beyond absolute identity, posing a nature that “lies beyond the absolute being of absolute identity” (*PU* 358), a secluded nature that is both in God yet also the ground of God’s existence. Prior to the 1809

⁸ Schelling, *Von der Weltseele*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, I/2, p. 347.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 621.

¹⁰ Krings, ‘Genesis und Materie’, pp. 145-48.

¹¹ Schelling, *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, I/2, p. 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

work on freedom, one finds, to be sure, a surprisingly critical tone: in *Philosophie und Religion* (1804) Schelling contrasts the concepts of the *Timaeus* with “the elevated moral spirit of the more genuine Platonic works such as the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*.”¹³ Indeed, he goes so far as to entertain serious doubts whether Plato is even the author of the *Timaeus*.¹⁴

But in the 1809 work on freedom this critical tone is muted and the earlier doubts replaced by mere reservations and hopes that the darkness surrounding this part of Platonic doctrine will soon be dispelled.¹⁵ Schelling identifies the doctrine to which he is referring: it is “the interpretation of Platonic matter according to which it is a being [*Wesen*] originally resisting God and therefore in itself evil.” Then, over against such a mere dualism of good and evil, Schelling refers to another “sense in which it could be said of the irrational principle that it resists the understanding, or unity and order, without therefore assuming it to be an *evil* principle” (*PU* 374). His mention of “previous considerations” confirms that the reference is to the distinction between ground and existence, which Schelling in fact goes on to recall in its bearing on God: “But God himself requires a ground in order that he can be; however, it is not outside him, but within him. And God has a *nature* within himself, which, though belonging to him, still is different from him” (*PU* 375). Schelling poses even the prospect of another interpretation of Plato: “In this manner, too, we might well explain the Platonic saying that evil comes *from the old nature*. For all evil strives to return to chaos, i.e., to that state in which the initial center [*das anfängliche Centrum*] was not yet subordinated to light; it is an uprising of the centers of yet unintelligent longing [*der noch verstandlosen Sehnsucht*]” (*PU* 374). Such an interpretation would align the Timaeian distinction between $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ and $\acute{\alpha}\nu\acute{\alpha}\gamma\kappa\eta$, not with a mere dualism of good and evil, but with the distinction

¹³ Schelling, *Philosophie und Religion*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, I/6, p. 36.

¹⁴ Krings notes that the authenticity of the *Timaeus* was not contested by the philosophy of the time. He concludes that Schelling’s doubts about Plato’s authorship of the dialogue were based on philosophical rather than philological grounds, specifically, on his doubts whether such dualism as can be found in the *Timaeus* could have been taught by Plato (Krings, ‘Genesis und Materie’, p. 149).

¹⁵ Remarking that as long as this is not accomplished “a definite judgment [...] is indeed impossible”, Schelling goes on in a footnote to express his hope that “the quick-minded Böckh” will soon produce the needed elucidation (*PU* 374). Krings mentions a note that Böckh added to his text in a collected edition of 1866: in the note Böckh says that Schelling “took back his doubt” about the authenticity of the *Timaeus* (Krings, ‘Genesis und Materie’, p. 150).

between God himself and the nature that is within God yet different from him. It would also align this entire discussion with the earlier one that likens originary longing (moving “like an undulating, surging sea”) to “Plato’s matter” (*PU* 360).

Thus situated beyond the simple dualistic interpretation of the *Timaeus*, Schelling’s work on freedom would indeed reinscribe the Timaeian distinction between νοῦς and ἀνάγκη, reinscribe it as the fundamental distinction between existence and ground.¹⁶ And yet, at what Schelling designates as “the highest point of the entire investigation” (*PU* 406), there emerges the question of a “beyond” even of this distinction. But if there is to be a move even beyond the distinction between existence and ground, even beyond the difference separating absolute identity from the nature that lies beyond the absolute being of absolute identity, then everything will depend on the sense and intent of this move. The question is whether the move simply dissolves the opposition into an antecedent unity or whether it is a move toward thinking this opposition more rigorously.

Schelling is explicit about the consequence of not thinking the opposition in a way that situates it beyond mere dualism: “But this system, if it actually is thought to be the doctrine of two absolutely different and mutually independent principles is but a system of the self-laceration and despair of reason” (*PU* 354). It is the prospect of this consequence that drives thinking on beyond the mere duality of ground and existence, that drives thinking on to what would be antecedent to the opposition: “There must be a *Wesen* before all ground and before all existence, thus before any duality at all; how can we call this anything but the original ground [*Urgrund*], or rather the unground [*Ungrund*] ?” Schelling insists, however, that this unground is not the identity of the opposites, not absolute identity, but rather absolute indifference (*die absolute Indifferenz*). One passage, hardly adequate to convey the complexity of this context, will nonetheless suffice to indicate its direction: “Instead of annulling the differentiation, as was supposed, the unground much rather posits and confirms it” (*PU* 407). Thus, the move beyond the opposition of

¹⁶ The following passage also attests, if more obliquely, to the reinscription: “As concerns the plurality of possible worlds, infinite possibility certainly seems to be offered by matter [*Stoff*], which is in itself unruly [*ein an sich Regelloses*] (such as the original movement of the ground in our explanation), that is still unformed but receptive to all forms” (*PU* 398). The passage is to be read against the background of Schelling’s identification, in the *Timaeus*-essay, of the receptacle with matter, though in this passage he uses *Stoff* rather than *Materie*. Note also that the question of a plurality of worlds is explicitly taken up in the *Timaeus* (31a-b).

ground and existence is not such as to dissolve the opposition into an antecedent unity. The move beyond to absolute indifference does not, then, dissolve the opposition opened up in the *Timaeus* between νοῦς and ἀνάγκη, the opposition that Schelling reinscribes as that of existence and ground. Rather, the move is an initiative toward thinking this opposition in a way that forestalls its recoiling destructively on that thinking, its recoiling in such a way as to produce the self-laceration and despair of reason.

* * *

There are several points that are striking with respect to Schelling's *Timaeus*-essay, some because of their directive presence, others because of their absence. Four may be singled out.

First, there is Schelling's remarkable effort to avoid a simple ontic interpretation of the Platonic ideas, an interpretation that would take the ideas to exist in an alleged higher world. Even though today one would resist the assimilation to Kantian concepts, it is important - and perhaps instructive - to note that the referral of the ideas to the understanding (as constituting conditions of possibility) is precisely what allows Schelling to avoid an ontic interpretation.

Second, there is Schelling's recognition of the radical dimension - or better, the pre-cosmic, pre-genetic dimension - opened up through *Timaeus*' discourse on the receptacle. This dimension proves indeed so radical, in Schelling's reinscription of it, as to threaten reason as such with self-laceration and despair and thus to require of it a perhaps entirely unprecedented initiative.

Yet, third, it is striking that in his remarks on what is called, among its many names, *receptacle* (ὑποδοχή) Schelling insistently reinscribes its name as *substance*, *substratum*, and especially *matter*. On the other hand, there is only the slightest mention of another of its names, a name that in recent discussions one would perhaps venture to call - even if improperly - its proper name. To be sure, Schelling does cite a passage in which, counting the three kinds, *Timaeus* calls the third kind by the name χώρα. But Schelling's sole pertinent comment serves in effect to forestall the disruptiveness that this name might otherwise exercise on the reinscription. The comment in fact refers to other, related words such as τόπος and ἔδρα, and only indirectly to χώρα: "These explanations are too definite for one to be able to understand what is involved in them as *space* [Raum], as,

so far as I know, most interpreters have done” (*T* 74). Thus, Schelling does not even come to the point of asking how, in thinking the third kind, one is *to think together* the two otherwise disparate senses expressed, on the one hand, by such words as *substance*, *substratum*, and *matter* and, on the other hand, by various designations related to *space*. Even less does he set about undoing, for instance, Calcidius’ rendering of *χώρα* as *locus*, in the direction of translating *χώρα* back into Plato’s Greek.

Finally, it is extraordinarily striking that the very thinker who declared art the organon of philosophy and who regarded poetry as that from which philosophy arose and to which finally it would return could, even in this very early text, have paid such scant attention to the artistry and poetry of the *Timaeus*. No attention is given to the dramatic and dialogical form of the text nor to the reflections that the discourse exercises upon itself, as in the determination of its character as εἰκὼς λόγος. Indeed, Schelling’s commentary skips entirely over the opening scene, the discourse by Socrates on the πόλις, and the story that Critias tells about ancient Athens, thus omitting the entire political discourse by which Timaeus’ cosmology is framed. One can only wonder how Schelling’s interpretation of the dialogue - and his later reinscription of it - might have been transformed, had he taken to heart what only a few years later would be declared by Schleiermacher, that in the Platonic dialogues “if anywhere, form and content are inseparable and every proposition is to be rightly understood only in its place and in the connections and delimitations that Plato has assigned to it.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Friedrich Schleiermacher, ‘Einleitung’, in *Das Platonbild: Zehn Beiträge zum Platonverständnis*, ed. Konrad Gaiser (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1969), p. 10.