It is a learned commonplace that the Renaissance humanists, inspired by poets, by the Stoics, by Cicero, by Polybius and other classical historians, and by *Ecclesiastes* 1:9, revived, or at least toyed with, the notion of a cyclical or repetitive time. The theme may speak variously: to our occasional uncanny sense of déjà vu; to the more familiar sense as we grow older that we have seen much if not all of it before (the consequence of our stock of memories increasing); to our historical sense of connectedness to the past, of being subject to its consequences; or to the philosophical supposition, deriving surely from our perceptions, true or false, of repetitions of various kinds, that time manifests patterns and configurations. For Ficino the most pregnant and familiar verses on the notion of repeated time were undoubtedly those of Virgil’s fourth eclogue prophesying the greatness of the mysterious child, ‘noble increment of Jove’, and with him the rebirth of the golden age:

Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas,
magnus ab integro saeclorum nascitur ordo.
iam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna;
iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto.¹

Traditionally taken as a pagan prophecy of the coming of Christ, like Isaiah’s famous verses in ch. 11:1–9, the eclogue also contains one of the most memorable formulations of the doctrine of eternal recurrence: ‘With a new Tiphys at the helm, a second Argo will set out . . . even wars will repeat themselves, and the mighty Achilles be

despatched to Troy once more.’ Behind Virgil, however, loomed the
great myths of time in Plato, surely Pythagorean in origin, and often
ironically set apart from or juxtaposed with the philosophical con-
cerns of their respective dialogues. One such myth Ficino found in
the *Timaeus*, where time is described as the moving image of eter-
nity (37b) and where the markers of time are the sun, moon and
stars in their eternal dance (40c). He encountered another such myth
in the *Statesman*, 268e–274b, where Plato presents us with a complex
picture, not of repetition but of alternating times. The time of Saturn,
the golden providential time when the motion of the heavens is from
west to east, is succeeded by that of Jove, the fallen fatal time when
the heavens move from east to west. Since the course of time is thus
reversed, old men—and more generally the old world—return to
their youth and pass from hoary age to babbling infancy. On
the basis of passages in Proclus,² Ficino arrestingly argues that Jove is
the cause of both the reversals in the myth and not just of the revers-
al that has produced the present fatal age. When the Saturnian
‘shepherds’ of time are born again, then ‘the ends of the ages’ will
dawn with them, the *dies novissimi*. And yet these shepherds will come
and transform the Jovian world—guide idyll into epic and epic into
idyll—only at Jove’s command. This command will coincide with
Jove’s decision to begin the cosmic cavalcade, in the *Phaedrus’s*
myth of the charioteer, back towards Saturnian contemplation: to release,
if you will, Saturn from his captivity within the active Jovian soul.
For Jove, not Saturn, holds the key to the inauguration of the golden
age: from him comes the divine decision to reverse the disorder of
an iron time, to spin the rotation of the world towards the east.³
For Jove, as an Orphic fragment declares, is the first, the last, the

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² Proclus, *Théologie platonicienne*, V.6–7 and 25, ed. and tr. by H. D. Saffrey and
³ See Ficino’s epitome, *Opera omnia*, 2 vols, continuously paginated, Basel, 1576;
repr. Turin, 1959 etc., pp. 1294–96; see also the analysis in my *Nuptial Arithmetic:
Marsilio Ficino’s Commentary on the Fatal Number in Book VIII of Plato’s ‘Republic’*, Berkeley
etc., 1994, pp. 126–29. A comment in his *In Sophistam*, summa 22 (Opera omnia,
p. 1287), glossing the *Sophist*, 242c4, suggests that Ficino associated the theory of
alternating cycles with Empedocles. This notion awaits investigation. In his *Platonic
Theology*, IV.2 (Ficino, *Platonic Theology, Volume I, Books I–IV*, English translation by
M. J. B. Allen with J. Warden, Latin text edited by J. Hankins with W. Bowen,
Cambridge, Mass., 2001, pp. 302–05), Ficino identifies these cycles with the Platonic
Great Year, which he supposed to be 36,000 solar years.