

## THE SHAPE OF TIME

These observations are an extension of those of a friend, the late Mircea Eliade, who more than once dealt with the problem of time. Philosophers have long been interested in this problem, which obviously concerns all of us. The nature of Eliade's preoccupations obliged him, but aside from that, we sense that the subject was close to his heart and that what he called "the terror of history" was a fundamental problem for him. He spoke of it at length in *Le Sacré et le profane*, in *Le Mythe de l'éternel retour*, in *Images et symboles*. His approach was that of a moralist and philosopher, but we know that this distinguished scholar was in reality an encyclopedist.

A reading of these works is in a way indispensable; on the other hand, I believe that Eliade's works are so well known that we can quickly go over the fundamental data of the question of time in general. It is not that I do not realize the difficulties. In short, I must speak of a subject about which I know nothing. I must add in my defence that we are in the same situation. Time is a

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concept that allows no definition. It suffices to invoke St. Augustine, since he is the philosopher who gave the best account of it: “If someone asks me if I know what time is, I answer that I know; if they ask me *what* it is, I answer that I do not know.” In his turn, Pascal prudently suggested that it is useless to look for a definition, when everyone knows and understands what we are talking about. He is undoubtedly right, but it is the same reasoning as that of St. Augustine. Lalande’s *Dictionnaire Scientifique*, a sort of *Petit Larousse* of the philosophers, does however risk a definition, in good and due form. Time is a “continuous movement through which the present becomes the past.” Although I agree, I am none the less surprised. It is as though I said that time is what I read on my watch. I am persuaded that no one will contradict me for the simple reason that this truth satisfies no one.

Things being what they are, why try to give a form to something that does not have one? Here is a concept, or, according to others, an instinct, that theoretically should not have an image. How could we represent it? But it is so omnipresent in all our imaginations that we could not handle it without the understanding that attributes an image of identification to it, a code figure that allows its classification and its use. Moreover, not only does Kant give it a form: he makes it an *a priori* form, a form of forms, without which the mind would be unable to establish the fundamental categories and structures of reason. In fact, the imagination finds a solution for everything. Since it cannot define the object in itself—but what object can be defined in itself?—imagination assumes it through the expedient of the representation of space, with which time has a strange connivance, naturally invented. That has led to a double result that we all know: the straight line and the circle.

The observation of natural cycles such as the alternation of day and night, seasons and months, ages of man, vegetation, rotation of the stars, agricultural tasks, brought about, through induction, the idea of time turning on itself. We have no trouble in admitting the idea that time gives the impression of movement, a progression, a flight. Actually, we are less sensitive to the idea of this circular action, even though it was the first and is still part of our collective memory: “The ball of yarn of time slowly un-

winds” (Baudelaire). “Time,” said Schopenhauer, “is like an endlessly rotating circle. The descending arc of the circle is the past, the ascending one the future. At the top is an indivisible point that touches the tangent, and that is the present.” We find this same image in St. Augustine and in the 15th century in Jaun de Mena. On the other hand, Borges pointed out the coincidence of Schopenhauer with a Buddhist treatise of the 15th century *Le Chemin de la pureté*.

The image that makes a pair with the above is more familiar to us. Time is a continuous movement in one direction: it is progression, flight, river, fall: *Fugaces labuntur anni* (Horace); *cammin di nostra vita* (Dante); *l’année à peine a fini sa carrière* (Lamartine). The two symbolic representations seem to be opposed, but actually they combine and complete each other to describe more precisely a process that in fact is only a figuration of the abstract.

Indeed, the circle evokes the idea of a movement closed in on itself, which is not the case with time. This disadvantage has been prevented by the transformation of the circle into a spiral, which keeps the basic idea of a continuous circular movement but adds to it the image of an opening at each end, as is the case with linear time. Thus circular time does not end at the point where it began; it continues its course with a shifting that in our image is purely spatial and allows it to follow a course equal to itself but not identical. By being open at the two extremes, the circular movement adds a cyclic nature to its image which makes it more plausible.

On the other hand, continuous movement as represented by the straight line is too long a course for the imagination. Ordinarily, it is presented to the mind in segments; the ensemble being too vast, we “see” time better through historical, geological or astronomical periods. This sectioning into periods, a natural need, has in practice diminished the importance of time by means of a substitute, chronology. This means that just as circular time assumed a beginning and an end, linear time has made its own division through cycles. It is in this way that history has introduced into the consideration of infinite time, which we naturally could not deal with, a series of fractures and stases, a subject to which we will return. These small corrections of the image are more im-

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portant than they seem: to our linear image of time they have added the idea of direction, the symbol of finality. It is obvious that time is not an end in itself: if we want to give it one this is exclusively due to man's reasoning. And if man ever makes a mistake, the error is explained by the touching need to understand time in order to make it his own and the hopeless dream of using it wisely.

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India and Brahmanism are the best examples of the total and exclusive application of the circular or cyclic models. Here I will give only the most characteristic traits that are closest to the history of the imagination. What attracts our attention first of all is the mathematical rigor of a construction of the universe which has no other basis than the image of the circle and the idea of an infinite and finite repetition. Probably inspired by the natural year and the cyclical return of the seasons, Hindu imagination proceeded by extrapolation, by using large numbers and geometric progression. A complete cycle, or *mahâyuga*, is composed of short cycles or *yugas* of unequal length, and its duration is 4,320,000 of our years. A thousand *mahâyugas* constitute a great cycle, or *kalpa*. Two *kalpas* make a day in the life of Brahma. If my reckoning is right, Brahma is right, Brahma is supposed to live a number of years expressed by 110,596 followed by eleven zeros. That means that the gods themselves are not immortal. However long Brahma's life might seem it is only a simple episode in an endless spiral.

This plethora of numbers is a good demonstration of the nullity of the individual. Not to exaggerate, the duration we attribute to the blink of an eye is too long, compared with the time that is given to it. To that must be added other details still less encouraging. In the relentless march of time the entire universe is engaged on the downward path toward decrepitude, like the seasons, vegetation or the ages of man. The progression of universal ruin is repeated in each of the cycles, short or long. All the cycles obey similar structures: creation-degradation-restitution. The fourth *yuga* is that of decomposing. It may be that we are already at that point since, according to a text quoted by Mircea Eliade, "It is recognized by the fact that during this period only

property confers a social status, wealth becomes the only source of quality, passion and sensuality are the only ties between married couples, falseness and lies the only condition for success in life, sexuality the only means of pleasure.” Since each existence is a repetition of the same laws, each reincarnation is a fall, and each life is a deterioration. Thus it would be difficult to consider life as a gift of the gods.

Greek philosophers did not think differently. Anaxagoras knew that the cosmos, born of a primordial whirlpool, is led by the mind on paths where rotation is the common law. Plato knew that the movement of the stars is cyclic, and Aristotle also knew it, defining time as the “number of stars”. Plato came to the conclusion that, reality being the reflection of the eternal idea, the cycles of history repeat those of the stars and, in its turn, individual life repeats the cycles of history. Following these calculations, a historical cycle has a duration of 40,000 years. As in Hindu thought, which he must have known indirectly, Plato’s cycles are composed of three phases: an age of gold, a decrepitude characterized by aging and disorder and finally a renovation or regeneration. On the level of human societies, this corresponds to a series of socio-political phases that do not exactly coincide with the preceding ones. These begin with the predominance of the aristocracy, followed by oligarchy, then by democracy and finally by despotism. This evolution must be understood as a progressive corruption, up to a certain point similar to that spoken of by Heraclitus, of a transmutation of elements through a degradation that changes fire into air and air into water.

This cyclical conception of time has been successful. There have been doubts and capricious calculations on the duration of the cycles which would only be of anecdotal interest. Those who would like to know more may refer to Marguerite Loeffler’s work, *Le Cercle, un symbole* (1947) and also to Georges Poulet, *La Métamorphose du cercle* (1962), as well as the study published in *Diogenes* itself by Roger Caillois, “Circular Time, Rectilinear Time” (*Diogenes*, 1963, No. 42).

It might be more interesting to examine here what the imagination perceives in these symbols which are, in Dilthey’s words, “closed horizons”. The stoics tell us, through Marcus Aurelius, “The rational soul wanders around the world... and contemplates

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infinite time, considering the periodic destructions and renovations of the world. It tells itself that our successors will see nothing new and that our ancestors saw nothing more interesting than what we ourselves have seen. We may say that a forty-year-old man of average intelligence has seen all the past and the future.” That is categorical, but it is nonetheless better than what Lucilio Vanini promised us in 1616: “Achilles will return to Troy”; or Thomas Browne, in 1643, “Plato will again explain his doctrine in his school.” These are pessimists whose hatred of life did not allow them to see anything other than pure, cold repetitions in these rebirths.

Just the same, it is true that the imagination inevitably perceives circular time as a prison. Hegel affirms that not only individuals but societies themselves living under the influence of closed structures are impermeable to history. In any case, they are impermeable to the new myths invented and conveyed by history. This is why the ancient thinkers expected nothing good from the future, which is only a last resource. *Quid sit futurum cras fuge quaerere* is not only a quip or evasion of Horace: everything that came after the Golden Age was necessarily an endless decline. All Hellenistic thought is conscious of having the ideal behind it and fatality in front of it. Benedetto Croce demonstrated that Sallust, Titus Livius and Tacitus viewed the future with bitterness, as a blind and inexorable process having the odor of decomposition.

We must add that in this debacle of future perspectives the deceptive spark of a minute hope shines, due to the idea of a compensating metempsychosis. This is one of those “errors we need” signaled by Fontenelle—because it is obvious that the remedy is worse than the illness. Nietzsche had begun by mocking the cyclic rhythms of history and false hope that Pythagoras propagated, up until his famous revelation of 1881, which caused him to find again or invent the law of the eternal return. If he did not invent the myth, he at least gave it a name which it has retained. Furthermore, he established the rule of conduct that will reward us in this spiral paradise: we must “live as we would wish to live the next time and thus for all eternity”. In his turn, Borges mocked this fine stroke of inspiration. He accused Nietzsche of having brought out of oblivion “the intolerable Greek hypothesis of eter-



nal repetition, making this nightmare of intelligence an occasion for rejoicing”.

This joy can only be bitter. Nietzsche had descendants, one of whom was Spengler, and we all know that Spengler was not an optimist. A second life, reincarnation, has no attraction in a future doomed to decrepitude. Besides, eternity itself is certainly not a reward: the concept goes beyond our understanding and consequently cannot be the object of any dream or desire. Here it might be useful to recall the last, moving message of Benedetto Croce in 1951: “However sad and melancholy death may seem, I am too much of a philosopher not to see clearly that the most terrible would be that man could never die, caged up in the prison that is life, to continually repeat the same rhythm of living.” We are reminded of the attitude of another celebrated Italian, Galileo, who affirmed that “he who wants to live forever deserves to be transformed into a rock”.

The idea of the eternal return is fortunately only a product of the imagination, the fruit of another fantasy that proposes a circular image of time. This latter image is, as we now say, recurrent, and it has been successful in literature. “Eternity is not straight ahead, straight ahead; it is carrousel, carrousel” (Thomas Mann). Sartre says in *Huis clos*, “We chase each other, like horses on a merry-go-round”.

The image continues to exert pressure on the mind and thought in general. On the one hand, it leads to the pessimistic conception of a narrow world, closed in on itself and although undergoing periodic repairs, always more tired and miserable. The illusion is like that of a public fountain that offers sparkling jets of water, always the same, using the same water over and over. On the other hand, the idea of numerous existences interests literary creations, for which it is a perfectly valid source of inspiration and effective from the poetic point of view.

We cannot make an analysis here of this literary theme. However, a few examples would be of some use if only because Bachelard did not give a *Poétique du temps* making a pair with the *Poétique de l'espace* (we should add that the subject preoccupied him, since he is the author of a *Dialectique de la durée*, conceived on a different level.)

Many poets make metempsychosis a profession of faith. Ger-

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ard de Nerval speaks of the “series of all my former existences” in *Les Filles du feu*; Lamartine considers with joyful anticipation the idea

*que ce souffle de vie exhalé sans retour,  
dans des êtres sans fin circule tour à tour;  
que, sans pouvoir jamais se joindre ou se connaître,  
de ce Moi qui n'est plus d'autres Moi vont renaître.*

[that this breath of life exhaled without return  
endlessly circulates in beings  
that can never unite or know each other  
from this Self that is no longer other Selves will be born.]

Theophile Gautier also believes in this, and he imagines that

*de là naissent des sympathies  
aux impérieuses douceurs  
par qui les âmes averties  
partout se reconnaissent sœurs.*

[from that sympathies are born  
with imperious sweetness  
through which awakened souls  
everywhere recognize each other as sisters.]

The German romanticists treat the subject in a different way. Hölderlin finds in anamnesis the explanation of relationships corresponding to former lives:

*Diotima, edles Leben,  
Schwester heilig mich verwandt!  
Eh ich dir die Hand gegeben  
hab ich ferne dich gekannt.*

[Diotima, noble life, my sister, holy ties before I  
took your hand I knew you far from here.]

Stefan Zweig drew attention to the strange resemblance of these verses to those in which Goethe declares to Charlotte von Stein that

In former times you were my sister and my wife.



From a certain point of view all poets form one sole family. We will not be surprised to observe that Paul Eluard realizes that after conglomerate reincarnations

*je suis mère et mon enfant  
dans chaque point de l'éternel.*

[I am my mother and my child  
at each point of eternity.]

Others, like Baudelaire in *La Vie antérieure*, discover that they are what they have always been:

*J'ai longtemps habité sous de vastes portiques...  
C'est là que j'ai vécu dans les voluptés calmes,  
au milieu de l'amour des vagues, des splendeurs  
et des esclaves nus, tout imprégnés d'odeurs,  
qui me rafraîchissaient le front avec des palmes  
et dont l'unique soin était d'approfondir  
le secret douloureux qui me faisait languir.*

[I lived for a long time under vast porticos...  
That is where I lived in calm voluptuousness  
in the middle of love for the waves,  
splendors and naked slaves, all perfumed,  
who cooled my forehead with palms and  
whose only concern was to discover  
the sorrowful secret that made me languish.]

For poets, whose art consists in filling the voids of the imagination, metempsychosis is complicated by metamorphoses that anamnesis allows to be rediscovered. Victor Hugo offers us a fine Pythagorean scale of transmutations when he claims to have been

*une haute montagne emplissant l'horizon;  
puis, âme encore aveugle et brisant ma prison,  
je montai d'un degré dans l'échelle des êtres;  
je fus un chêne et j'eus des autels et des prêtres  
et je jetai des bruits étranges dans les airs;  
puis je fus un lion rêvant dans les déserts,  
parlant à la nuit sombre avec sa voix grondante.  
Maintenant je suis homme et je m'appelle Dante.*

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[a high mountain filling the horizon;  
Then, a still blind soul breaking out of my prison,  
I climbed a degree in the scale of beings.  
I was an oak and I had altars and priests  
and I poured forth strange sounds into the air;  
then I was a lion dreaming in the desert,  
speaking to the dark night with his growling voice  
Now I am a man, and my name is Dante.]

Ruben Dario, a Pythagorean poet *par excellence* no doubt found inspiration in Hugo for a similar poem:

*Yo fui coral primero,  
después hermosa piedra;  
después fui de los bosques  
verde y colgante hiedra;  
después yo fui manzana,  
lirio de la campiña,  
labio de la niña,  
una alondra cantando en la mañana;  
y ahora soy un alma  
que canta.*

[First I was coral  
then a beautiful stone  
then I was green trailing ivy in the forest  
then I was an apple  
a lily in the fields  
a girl's lips  
a lark singing in the dawn  
and now I am a soul that sings.]

Amiel defined this attitude, or perhaps aptitude, of which he dreamed, as a faculty of reinvolvement. This is the gift of being able to remount the current of life or lives in order to be able to talk about them: not only one's own present life but also ontogenesis and phylogenesis; to feel oneself as oneself but also as one's ancestor, animal and protozoa, to free oneself from contingencies so far as to penetrate the mists of one's own creation. Amiel does not claim to know how to do this: he speaks of it as a desired evasion and a "supreme privilege of the intelligence". The evasion and the dream of all the poets and probably of all

of us. I will only mention here what is obtained by paramnesia, which is the illusion of *déjà vu*. We know that the primary objective of René Daumal and the group of the *Grand Jeu*, for whom “eternity is voluntary paramnesia” is to revive, provoke and retain the vivid manifestations of the imagination magnetized by memory. They carry the dreamer beyond time and space, perpetuating raptures that are only reconstituted flashes.

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The other figuration of time is the straight line, symbol of continuous movement. Kant explains the reasons for the instinctive choice of this symbol. Concepts without matter, that is, those that have not been preceded by perception, are void. However, all thought is thought of something else; time not being a thing, thought on time is a blind concept that the imagination is obliged to materialize. As an example of the materialization of blind concepts, Kant proposes the common representation of time by a straight line.

In the absolute, the straight line itself is not an image; it is rather a concept destined to the storehouse of abstract ideas. As an image it has neither thickness, nor beginning, nor end, nor direction, nor finality. Basically, it is therefore as abstract as the immaterial and blind concept it symbolizes. On the other hand, the image it offers of time is ambiguous: according to all thinkers, but principally Bergson and Heidegger, the idea of time is at the same time the idea of eternity and duration, permanence and change. The linear image of time takes no notice of these distinctions and offers itself to the imagination without instructions for use. It is perhaps the only image that allows the intelligence to cross the forbidden threshold of the absolute, but just barely, due to a focusing as different as it is dangerous.

The literary image of time we have received is a mixture of the Biblical conception, based on the idea of progress toward a distant, shining point, and Greek thought, which used the two possible forms of time. The problems we have inherited at the same time as this Judaeo-Christian conception concern what has already been mentioned as lacking in the definition of the straight line. We must say at once that these problems have not yet been

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solved, but solutions are not lacking in European thought.

In concordance with the Judaeo-Christian tradition, time has a beginning. It existed in God as a power before the Creation, and according to St. Augustine, it did not begin to count until creation began. Therefore, that is the zero point of chronology for Jews as well as for Christians. Modern science has not modified this schema: it has only calculated new beginnings taking into account another Creator. In any case, this problem is different from ours. We will speak here only of the imaginations that have permitted a useful or usable interpretation of the symbol of time, at the same time as the formation of a *Weltanschauung* and philosophy of history.

Just as time has a beginning, it also has an end. Naturally, it is difficult to say what that end will be. St. Augustine, advocate of the Christian alternative, sees an ascension on the road of humanity toward salvation or on the contrary a fall which will make it founder in sin. In both cases, there will be an end of the world, orchestrated by the Last Judgment. Here we have a suggestion that is not just concerned with the end of time, since it also implies the idea of a direction and finality of history. The straight line is only a segment that ends in God, as it began.

This return to the point of departure strangely resembles the image of the decrepitude and progressive ruin of creation. This idea is especially implicit in the descending direction of time, which is the fall into sin. It seems even more harsh and desperate than in the cyclic conception: the final catastrophe is definitive and annuls any illusion directed toward possible regenerations. It is of course compensated by the possibility of an ascension that would be a redemption, a *scala coeli* with all its bright promises, but it is a wager of the type "who loses, wins". The movement of that time is not one of the upward flight of an arrow. It is rather that of a rocket that gains in height what it loses in weight. The weight that it loses is all the materialism of life, with all the promise of earth.

To this first alteration of the linear form are added others. The straight line or the segment that goes from the creation of the world to its end has undergone at least two historical fractures. On the one hand, the imaginary direction of our chronology was changed by the coming of the God-man who brought the crea-

tion of the new man. For us, and for European tradition in general, the zero point of chronology is the birth of Christ. This change is a historical fact, and we may hold as adventitious a real circumstance that does not concern the history of the imagination. It happens however that the linear form attributed to time was profoundly altered. The year zero, this "noontime of all the ages" as Palencia, an obscure author of the Spanish 15th century calls it, seems to mark the frontier of two cycles: one that backs away from us, illegitimate and counting backwards, as though Antiquity had all at once turned its back on us, as if all the Ancients belonged to a different universe, sorrowfully moving away from our destiny, condemned to public obloquy or perhaps simply drowned in the cosmic catastrophes of all the ends of cycles. The other cycle begins or thinks it begins as a regeneration or straightening up, in accordance with the predictions of the philosophy of cycles. In our imaginations, the Ancient came out of history by the wrong door: we call as witness all the great figures Dante met in the Underworld because they were collectively excluded from grace.

The second fracture cannot be dated with the same precision. It was introduced into the collective consciousness by the religion of progress. This innovation emerged as key idea and alternative to actual religions, beginning with the 18th century. It would be easy to find isolated antecedents for it, but progress in itself does not interest us here. It suffices to recall that it is through religion that receded and imagination that became bolder that hope for change was re-established which, progressively assuring and satisfying material needs, would suppress all transcendence of history and fully justify an existence limited to its tangible aspects. It was a process that slowly became defined and was naturally irreconcilable with the Augustinian position.

All that is undoubtedly superficial: these are subjects that should not be passed over lightly. It proves however that linear time admits the fusion or confusion with the image of cyclic spaces. This is one more proof of the liberty that the linear image leaves to the mind. In this alliance, the linear image gains the consistency it lacked. The re-use of the symbol of short cycles allowed the appearance of brief recurrences comparable to stases, moments of solidification (imaginary) of time, on which it becomes possi-

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ble to retrospectively cast a synchronic eye. This opening gives a soul or a motor to movement, which is the only nearly pertinent definition of time, and is at the same time a transcendent justification and final signification of history.

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As regards history, a fracture located right in the middle of the 18th century could seem a preposterous idea, since it seems to snap its fingers at the great forward leap of the Renaissance. It is not an oversight, but it could well be a mistake. Only, what we are examining is the formation and deterioration of an image of the collective subconscious, and in that case the image is one of the numerous consequences of the Renaissance. But the innovation had to exert pressure for a long time on the collective subconscious before it achieved that astonishing secularization of the idea of finality in History. It was in the 18th century that the religion of progress was definitively installed. Two centuries to replace altars with numbers and fear of the future with its prospect. It was only a short delay.

In terms of the history of religions, the Renaissance is a *renovatio*, the regeneration of an institutional myth, a return to Rome such as it was *in illo tempore*. The religious implications of its name of Renaissance have been pointed out by Panofski and Franco Simone. What we cannot in any case doubt is the attachment to the past of its conceptions.

It is this epoch that reinstated in force all the obsolete elements of a tenacious but worn-out interpretation: authority and actuality of the myth then authority of the defenders of the myth and, in time, authority in general; imitation of the models; actualization and cult of the dead, if we understand by that archaeology, ruins, texts, philology, Ciceronian Latin, the architecture of Vitruvius and the medicine of Hippocrates. The reverential fear of Antiquity is touching and in a way childish: one would say the young bride who wears her grandmother's wedding gown to the altar to bring her luck. All Renaissance men knew and repeated in chorus that they were standing on the shoulders of the Ancients. They strode toward the future, but they walked backwards so as not to lose sight of their ancestors, who were their guides:

*simulante anteretroque perspiciens* (Petrarch); *praepostere vivit humanum Genus* (Galateo). Their conception of history was cyclic: "Here is the circle within which all republics turn" (Machiavelli); "The world has always been the same and everything that is or will be has already existed and the same things will happen again" (Guicciardini). This welding with the past does not admit the image of a fracture. It is not a change; it is a return to the past.

Furthermore, new myths of a cyclic nature were born and spread during the Renaissance. The myth known as *mutatio Imperii* first testified to by Otto de Freisingen (13th century) foresaw a transferring of the power and seat of the universal empire conforming to the apparent movement of the sun, going from the Persians to the Greeks and afterward to the Romans. Campanella took up this schema, prophesying that the "Roman Church will emigrate to the New World by way of Spain, Peru and then Japan, going around the world from the West to the East," finally stopping in Jerusalem. Essentially it is the same cyclic process of history that will later be adopted by Vico with his *corsi e recorsi*; Cantemir in his *Historia incrementorum et decrementorum Aulae Ottomanicae*; Montesquieu in *Grandeur et décadence des Romains*. We must admit that cycles are resistant. In addition, they are still fashionable. Borges had an uneasy and applied curiosity about them; René Guénon in *Le Règne de la quantité et les signes du temps* arrived at the conclusion that the linear symbol is only makeshift and "oversimplification" and that the "real representation of time is that which is furnished by the traditional conception of cycles".

The idea of progress is implicit in the image that at present represents for us linear time. It is associated with the idea of going forward, which has not forgotten the ascending sense of Christian hope, the eyes fixed, if not on promising tomorrows at least on the promise of a better future. It is not for nothing that the march forward is synonymous with progression. That is where the second fracture is located. To the pessimistic conception of cycles has succeeded a comforting and stimulating image making progress the *raison d'être* of history and its implicit and inherent definition. The ascending of the *scala coeli* has become a *scala mundi*. Time does not end in God but in a point as ill-



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defined as He is, which imagination instinctively locates beyond the realization of all our desires. The change seems irreversible, and the consequences are incalculable.

The new image contradicts and invalidates the Augustinian conception of time, but it does not deny the providentialism of history. It only relieves God of that responsibility by confiding the destiny of man to men. The stigma of abjection that marked the human race because of original sin and to which the Renaissance dialectically opposed the sense of the dignity of the individual, became (or should become) conscience of greatness and responsibility. The reasoning that forms the basis of this immense and grandiose edifice no doubt sins by excess of confidence in men. For them, the oppression of time is changed into a liberty void of content. The ancient ghosts have not disappeared: terror of the future has given way to fear of the present.

From the point of view of the secularization of history, the example of Hegel has allowed the construction of a new philosophy of history, based on a transcendence that is more accessible than God. Rousseau had already drawn attention to the inner nudity of the ego. Freed from its divine or mythical attachments, history, understood only as the history of man, influences literature and literature history. As was foreseeable, the writer became more and more the historian of himself. The past two centuries are eminently lyrical, and we are more inclined to confess ourselves, since we no longer go to confession. We should not forget that, as Hegel pointed out, "what we are, we also are historically"; in our subliminal memory we carry the archetypes of our ancestral memory. The dialectic of life and time, as we understand it, is tainted by another dialectic, much more tenacious, between Self and the Other.

Our new image has achieved another difficult exploit in annexing the future. It is now commonplace and domesticated. Scholars, bankers, authors, treat it as a faithful dog. Before, we did not venture into the exploration of the future, unless we were a magus or writer of fantasy. Now, the future is on the computer. Literature has made it the space of utopia; we are now submerged in a literature of anticipation that strangely and cruelly resembles our present.

It is also true that the future we are speaking of is behind the

door. We no longer think about the infinite and dark gulf that frightened the Ancients as well as the Christians. We have reduced it to congruent dimensions, and we rarely think beyond ourselves. It is partly because of this bias that time is diversified. Historical thought, like philosophical thought, has abandoned the great cycles to the advantage of sector-based research: the great systems are the business of astronomers. As for philosophy, it has succeeded in introducing a qualitative difference between time and duration (Bergson) or time and temporality (Heidegger), which only aggravates the dialectic of being and non-being. We are far from having cured our dread.

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The connection of the shape of time with its content of angst is obvious. Heidegger makes his temporality a synonym for worry. For Mircea Eliade the lineal design of time is the symbol of the “nostalgia for eternity”. Actually, the fear of the infinite or more exactly the finite infinity of the individual is as old as humanity. We cannot but change our terror; circular time being the symbol of a perpetual prison, the straight line is solitude and non-being.

The phantoms produced in the collective imagination by the idea of an end of time have varied over the ages, but the terror of History remains the same. “The end of the world is near, turn your thoughts toward God!” was even in the third century the exhortation of St. Cyprian. Montaigne’s “I escape myself every day and get away from myself” becomes with Pascal “We never live, but we hope to live”. And Calvin, “I see myself draining away. Not a moment passes that I do not see myself at the point of being engulfed”. For once Bossuet agrees with him: “We are always a moment away from nothingness”.

The anguish of modern man is more subtle, less well defined, but it does not differ in nature. Besides, this is not a product of modern thought: on the contrary, it would be more exact to say that modern philosophy, literature and thought in general are the result of angst. I think that Joubert guessed the first cause, that as always depends on the same dialectic: “Ideas of eternity and space have something of the divine which the idea of pure duration and extent do not have”. The first cause is thus the twilight

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of the gods and the death of the great god Pan, which could only be received with screams of terror. Or with that indifference of the Stoics, which extinguishes desires before life and in which, says Baudelaire,

*l'ennui, fruit de la morne incuriosité,  
prend les propositions de l'immortalité.*

[Boredom, the fruit of a dreary lack of curiosity,  
assumes the proposals of immortality.]

In this universal terror of history, the primitives believed they had found a remedy in myths that reassure and rites that bring them to the surface. For us, oriental spiritualism has the drawback of being satisfied with pure contemplation, according to Mario Meunier. "Only the West," he says, "has been able to find an ideal state between mysticism and action". This action, however, is illusory. It is not a medicine that cures but a simple placebo that diverts the imagination and, like myths, proposes soothing or reassuring perspectives. It is not much, but at the same time it is a lot.

Objectively, we do not have the possibility to re-orientate the march of time. Subjectively, we do have the means to suppress it, invert it, lengthen it or stop it, although it is only through our own individual and isolated use. Actions that produce these effects isolate the subject, but they still have the gift of soothing the terror of history and obtaining the exit or the illusion of exit from time.

The weak can only obtain these results by means that go against someone or most often against themselves. Rousseau foresaw strong moments in which "we are sufficient unto ourselves," where the individual is no longer a consciousness but a passion, a violence, an excess. Baudelaire put it more clearly, "One must always be intoxicated in order to not feel the horrible burden of time". Among the means which allow flight from reality by exalting the idea we make of our own power must be included drugs which are the ones that lie the best. About two centuries ago, writers and intellectuals began to take them with an experimental and cognitive end in view. Among them, Thomas de Quincey, who affirmed that drugs had allowed him to live seventy years

in one night, but that is only the subliminal repetition of the myth of the ball of yarn of life that unrolls during the day. Another was Theophile Gautier, who boasted of having known nights of “about three hundred years”. Still another was Henri Michaux, who discovered his talent as an artist in mescaline.

All the means are not so outrageous. Mystical contemplation, in which Dante located the supreme happiness of Paradise, is at the opposite pole, but it is a particular gift very parsimoniously distributed: the spirit blows where it will, and it probably does not will that we are all pure spirits. In exchange, sacred space is still attainable, and it is perhaps because of that that it is often vacant. We know that from the believer’s point of view liturgical time, suppressing the hollowness of reality, forms the image of a stasis, an arrest of time, and in a way of eternity.

Mircea Eliade englobed in the idea of liturgical time the hours and days devoted to creation, whether it be artistic, literary or scientific research. In our secularized world, this false addition to what remains to us of spiritual forces is easily understood. It is certain that in any creative act there is a surpassing and displacement—that is, an issue—of interior forces that are devoted to a transcendence, annulling the negative effects of time, which becomes a neutralized environment.

All that is very well. However, I cannot help thinking that from this point of view any reader is also a creator. He creates the work, which is not a simple perceived object. He takes it on and lives in it, as it lives in him. His aspirations have a more modest transcendence, no doubt, but it seems similar to what the believer seeks in the holy place. This all presumes an act of faith and the presence of devotion. Thanks to this devotion, which leads the reader to an ecstasy in a reduced form, he participates in the adventures of Don Quixote. He becomes the contemporary of the character and the author at the same time, like the worshipper is the contemporary of the priest and at the same time of the sacrifice of Christ. The reader who has escaped from the present assumes at the same level the past of Don Quixote as the memory of Cervantes, the memory of Quixote and of himself. Real time, assuming that there is a real time, is abolished, and the reader sees through his own will the miracle of a different time, detached from the circumstances through his own innocence.

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For example, he may, in Goethe's steps, become aware without astonishment of a Faust enamored of Helen of Troy, be himself enamored of Helen and the contemporary of Goethe, while the consciousness of his own time floats like a cork on the "waves that bygone ages make on the ocean of eternity". (Theophile Gautier). On these waves also floats this last thaumaturgy remaining to us, heritage of the sacred places previous to our civilization, secularized but not entirely deconsecrated, bearer of the only miracle of the Word. It is true that Renan detested modern miracle-workers who perform miracles without believing in them. It is also true that it is only faith that saves. However, in our destitution, a little faith is better than none.

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I believe that a final observation should be made. We have spoken a great deal of imagination and phantoms, which is not unusual since this is a question of the history of the imagination. In my opinion, this opening could also serve for the history of mentalities. Would this be a new fantasy? Sartre affirmed that an unreal object could not bring about a causal action. Not knowing what time is, I cannot say if it is unreal. In the Sartrian doctrine it should not be, because we cannot say that it is unreal and use it in the definition of being. On the other hand, Ortega y Gasset affirmed that "the fact of believing is a function of existence as such" and that the existence of the individual is organized beginning with what he believes, which implicitly admits the possibility of a direct influence of the assumption of time through its symbols.

This could be demonstrated in a different way. In his book *Linguistics and Anthropology*, Benjamin Lee Whorf, a well-known linguist, describes at length the cultural situation of the language of the Hopis, an American Indian tribe. He observes that this language contains no references to time, implicit or explicit, nor to space. The language has no word designating time, no form of conjugation that suggests it, no term in which the idea of duration, or movement is implied. In Kantian terms, the *a priori* form of time and space are replaced in their language and judgment by the opposition between the concept of "manifested ob-

ject” or “non-manifested object”. There is a way to say that the object mentioned is visible, has feeling, is present or not present. Whorf asks “if a civilization like ours would be possible with a different linguistic treatment of time”. In the end, he does not answer the question: I believe with him that it is not worth the effort. The miracle exists, once more, in the Word.

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