

# A History of Eternity

## I

The passage of the *Enneads* that seeks to question and define the nature of time states that a prior acquaintance with eternity is indispensable since—as everyone knows—eternity is the model and archetype of time. This prefatory statement, all the more crucial if we take it to be sincere, appears to annihilate any hope of our reaching an understanding of the man who wrote it. For us, time is a jarring, urgent problem, perhaps the most vital problem of metaphysics, while eternity is a game or a spent hope. We read in Plato's *Timaeus* that time is a moving image of eternity, and it barely strikes a chord, distracting no one from the conviction that eternity is an image wrought in the substance of time. I propose to give a history of that image, that awkward word enriched by human discord.

Inverting Plotinus' method (the only way to make any use of it), I will begin by listing some of the obscurities inherent in time, a natural, metaphysical mystery that must precede eternity, which is a daughter of mankind. One such obscurity, neither the most challenging nor the least beautiful, keeps us from ascertaining the direction in which time moves. It is commonly held to flow from past to future, but the opposite notion, established in Spanish verse by Miguel de Unamuno, is no less logical:

*Nocturno el río de las horas fluye  
desde su manatial que es el mañana  
eterno . . .*

[Nocturnal the river of hours flows/from its source, the eternal tomorrow . . .]<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Scholastic concept of time as the flow of the potential into the actual is akin to this idea. Cf. Whitehead's eternal objects, which constitute "the kingdom of possibility" and participate in time.

Both directions are equally probable—and equally unverifiable. Bradley denies both possibilities and advances a personal hypothesis, which consists in ruling out the future, a mere construction of our hopes, and reducing the “actual” to the death throes of the present moment as it disintegrates into the past. This temporal regression usually corresponds to states of decline or dullness, while any kind of intensity seems to us to advance on the future. . . . While Bradley negates the future, one school of Indian philosophy negates the present as unattainable. *The orange is about to fall from the branch, or else it lies on the ground*, these curious simplifiers affirm. *No one sees it fall.*

Other difficulties are suggested by time. One, perhaps the greatest—that of synchronizing each person’s individual time with the general time of mathematicians—has been greatly vociferated by the recent relativist scare, and everyone remembers it, or remembers having remembered it until very recently. (I retrieve it by distorting it in the following way: If time is a mental process, how can it be shared by thousands of men, or even two different men?) The Eleatic refutation of movement raises another problem, which can be expressed thus: *It is impossible for fourteen minutes to elapse in eight hundred years of time, because first seven minutes must pass, and before seven, three and a half, and before three and a half, one and three-quarters, and so on infinitely, so that the fourteen minutes will never be completed.* Russell rebuts this argument by affirming the reality and even the triteness of infinite numbers, which, however, by definition occur once and for all, and not as the “final” term of an endless enumerative process. Russell’s non-normal numbers are a fine anticipation of eternity, which also refuses to be defined by the enumeration of its parts.

None of the several eternities men have charted—nominalism’s, Irenaeus’, Plato’s—is a mechanical aggregate of past, present, and future. Eternity is something simpler and more magical: the simultaneity of the three tenses. This is something of which ordinary language and the stupefying dictionary *dont chaque édition fait regretter la précédente* [whose every new edition makes us long for the preceding one] appear to be unaware, but it was how the metaphysical thinkers conceived of eternity. “The objects of the Soul are successive, now Socrates and now a horse”—I read in the fifth book of the *Enneads*—“always some one thing which is conceived of and thousands that are lost; but the Divine Mind encompasses all things together. The past is present in its present, and the future as well. Nothing comes to pass in this world, but all things endure forever, steadfast in the happiness of their condition.”

I will pause to consider this eternity, from which the subsequent ones derive. While it is true that Plotinus was not its founder—in an exceptional book, he speaks of the “antique and sacred philosophers” who preceded him—he amplifies and splendidly sums up all that those who went before him had imagined. Deussen compares him to the sunset: an impassioned final light. All the Greek conceptions of eternity, already rejected, already tragically elaborated upon, converge in his books. I therefore place him before Irenaeus, who ordained the second eternity: the one crowned by the three different but inextricable beings.

Plotinus says with unmistakable fervor,

For all in the Intelligible Heaven is heaven; earth is heaven, and sea heaven; and animal, plant and man. For spectacle they have a world that has not been engendered. In beholding others they behold themselves. For all things There are translucent: nothing is dark, nothing impenetrable, for light is manifest to light. All are everywhere, and all is all, and the whole is in each as in the sum. The sun is one with all the stars and every star with the sun and all its fellows. No one walks there as upon an alien earth.

This unanimous universe, this apotheosis of assimilation and interchange, is not yet eternity; it is an adjacent heaven, still not wholly emancipated from space and number. Another passage from the fifth Ennead exhorts us to the contemplation of eternity itself, the world of universal forms:

Whatsoever man is filled with admiration for the spectacle of this sensible universe, having regard to its greatness and loveliness and the ordinance of its everlasting movement, having regard also to the gods which are in it, divinities both visible and invisible, and daemons, and all creatures and plants; let him next lift up his thoughts to the truer Reality which is its archetype. There let him see all things in their intelligible nature, eternal not with a borrowed eternity, but in their proper consciousness and their proper life; their captain also he shall see, the uncontaminable Intelligence and the Wisdom that passes approach, and the true age of Kronos, whose name is Fullness. For in him are embraced all deathless things, every intelligence, every god, every soul, immutable forever. It is well with him: what should he seek to change? He has all things present to him: whither should he move? He did not at first lack this blessed state, then win it: all things are his in one eternity,

and the true eternity is his, which time does but mimic; for time must fetch the compass of the Soul, ever throwing a past behind it, ever in chase of a future.

The repeated affirmations of plurality in the preceding paragraphs can lead us into error. The ideal universe to which Plotinus summons us is less intent on variety than on plenitude; it is a select repertory, tolerating neither repetition nor pleonasm: the motionless and terrible museum of the Platonic archetypes. I do not know if mortal eyes ever saw it (outside of oracular vision or nightmare), or if the remote Greek who devised it ever made its acquaintance, but I sense something of the museum in it: still, monstrous, and classified. . . . But that is a bit of personal whimsy which the reader may disregard, though some general notion of these Platonic archetypes or primordial causes or ideas that populate and constitute eternity should be retained.

A protracted discussion of the Platonic system is impossible here, but certain prerequisite remarks can be offered. For us, the final, solid reality of things is matter—the spinning electrons that cross interstellar distances in their atomic solitude. But for those capable of thinking like Plato, it is the species, the form. In the third book of the *Enneads*, we read that matter is unreal, a mere hollow passivity that receives the universal forms as a mirror would; they agitate and populate it, but without altering it. Matter's plenitude is exactly that of a mirror, which simulates fullness and is empty; matter is a ghost that does not even disappear, for it lacks even the capacity to cease being. Form alone is truly fundamental. Of form, Pedro Malón de Chaide would write much later, repeating Plotinus:

When God acts, it is as if you had an octagonal seal wrought of gold, in one part of which was wrought the shape of a lion; in another, a horse; in another, an eagle, and so for the rest; and in a bit of wax you imprinted the lion; in another, the eagle; in another, the horse; and it is certain that all that appears in the wax is in the gold, and you can print nothing but what is sculpted there. But there is a difference; in the wax it is of wax and worth little, but in the gold it is of gold and worth much. The perfections of the creatures of this world are finite and of little value; in God they are of gold, they are God Himself.

We may infer from this that matter is nothing.

We hold this to be a poor, even incomprehensible criterion, yet we ap-

ply it continually. A chapter by Schopenhauer is not the paper in the Leipzig archives, nor the act of printing, nor the contours and curlicues of the gothic letters, nor an enumeration of the sounds that comprise it, nor even the opinion we may have of it. Miriam Hopkins is made up of Miriam Hopkins, not of the nitrogenous or mineral rudiments, the carbohydrates, alkaloids, and neutral lipids that constitute the transitory substance of that slender silver specter or intelligible essence of Hollywood. These illustrations or well-intentioned sophistries may encourage us to tolerate the Platonic hypothesis which we will formulate thus: *Individuals and things exist insofar as they participate in the species that includes them, which is their permanent reality.*

I turn to the most promising example: the bird. The habit of flocking; smallness; similarity of traits; their ancient connection with the two twilights, the beginnings of days, and the endings; the fact of being more often heard than seen—all of this moves us to acknowledge the primacy of the species and the almost perfect nullity of individuals.<sup>2</sup> Keats, entirely a stranger to error, could believe that the nightingale enchanting him was the same one Ruth heard amid the alien corn of Bethlehem in Judah; Stevenson posits a single bird that consumes the centuries: “the nightingale that devours time.” Schopenhauer—impassioned, lucid Schopenhauer—provides a reason: the pure corporeal immediacy in which animals live, oblivious to death and memory. He then adds, not without a smile:

Whoever hears me assert that the grey cat playing just now in the yard is the same one that did jumps and tricks there five hundred years ago will think whatever he likes of me, but it is a stranger form of madness to imagine that the present-day cat is fundamentally an entirely different one.

And later:

It is the life and fate of lions to seek lion-ness which, considered in time, is an immortal lion that maintains itself by the infinite replacement of individuals, whose engendering and death form the pulse of this undying figure.

<sup>2</sup>Alive, Son of Awake, the improbable metaphysical Robinson of Abubeker Abentofail’s novel, resigns himself to eating only those fruits and fish that abound on his island, and always tries to ensure that no species will perish and the universe be thus impoverished by his fault.

And earlier:

An infinite time has run its course before my birth; what was I throughout all that time? Metaphysically, I could perhaps answer myself: "I was always I"; that is, all who throughout that time said "I" were none other than I.

I presume that my readers can find it within themselves to approve of this eternal Lion-ness, and that they may feel a majestic satisfaction at the thought of this single Lion, multiplied in time's mirrors. But I do not hope for the same response to the concept of an eternal Humanity: I know that our own "I" rejects it, preferring to jettison it recklessly onto the "I"s of others. This is an unpromising beginning, for Plato has far more laborious universal forms to propose. For example, Tableness, or the Intelligible Table that exists in the heavens; the four-legged archetype pursued by every cabinetmaker, all of them condemned to daydreams and frustration. (Yet I cannot entirely negate the concept: without an ideal table, we would never have achieved solid tables.) For example, Triangularity, an eminent three-sided polygon that is not found in space and does not deign to adopt an equilateral, scalene, or isosceles form. (I do not repudiate this one either: it is the triangle of the geometry primers.) For example, Necessity, Reason, Postponement, Connection, Consideration, Size, Order, Slowness, Position, Declaration, Disorder. With regard to these conveniences of thought, elevated to the status of forms, I do not know what to think, except that no man will ever be able to take cognizance of them without the assistance of death, fever, or madness. And I have almost forgotten one more archetype that includes and exalts them all: Eternity, whose shredded copy is time.

My readers may already be equipped with specific arguments for discrediting the Platonic doctrine. In any case, I can supply them with several: one, the incompatible cluster of generic and abstract terms coexisting *sans gêne* in the storehouse of the archetypal world; another, their inventor's silence concerning the process by which things participate in the universal forms; yet another, the conjecture that these antiseptic archetypes may themselves suffer from mixture and variety. Far from being indissoluble, they are as confused as time's own creatures, repeating the very anomalies they seek to resolve. Lion-ness, let us say: how would it dispense with Pride and Tawiness, Mane-ness and Paw-ness? There is no answer to this question, nor can there be: we do not expect from the term *lion-ness* a

virtue any greater than that of the word without the suffix.<sup>3</sup>

To return to Plotinus' eternity, the fifth book of the *Enneads* contains a rather vague inventory of its parts. Justice is there, as well as the Numbers (how many?) and the Virtues and Actions and Movement, but not mistakes and insults, which are diseases of a matter whose Form has been corrupted. Music is present, not as melody, but as Rhythm and Harmony. There are no archetypes from pathology or agriculture because they are not needed. Also excluded are tax collection, strategy, rhetoric, and the art of government—though, over time, they derive something from Beauty and Number. There are no individuals; there is no primordial form of Socrates, nor even of the Tall Man or the Emperor; there is, in a general way, Man. Only the primary colors are present: this eternity has no Grey or Purple or Green. In ascending order, its most ancient archetypes are these: Difference, Identity, Motion, Rest, and Being.

We have examined an eternity that is more impoverished than the world. It remains for us to see how our Church adopted it, and endowed it with a wealth far greater than the years can transport.

## II

The best document of the first eternity is the fifth book of the *Enneads*; that of the second, or Christian, eternity, the eleventh book of St. August-

I do not wish to bid farewell to Platonism (which seems icily remote) without making the following observation, in the hope that others may pursue and justify it: *The generic can be more intense than the concrete.* There is no lack of examples to illustrate this. During the boyhood summers I spent in the north of the province of Buenos Aires, I was intrigued by the rounded plain and the men who were butchering in the kitchen, but awful indeed was my delight when I learned that the circular space was the "pampa" and those men "gauchos." The same is true of the imaginative man who falls in love. The generic (the repeated name, the type, the fatherland, the tantalizing destiny invested in it) takes priority over individual features, *which are tolerated only because of their prior genre.*

The extreme example—the person who falls in love by word of mouth—is very common in the literatures of Persia and Arabia. To hear the description of a queen—her hair like nights of separation and exile, but her face like a day of delight, her breasts like marble spheres that lend their light to moons, her gait that puts antelopes to shame and is the despair of willow trees, the onerous hips that keep her from rising, her feet, narrow as spearheads—and to fall in love with her unto tranquillity and death is one of the traditional themes of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Read, for example, the story of Badrbasim, son of Shahrیمان, or that of Ibrahim and Yamila.

tine's *Confessions*. The first eternity is inconceivable without the Platonic hypothesis; the second, without the professional mystery of the Trinity and the attendant debates over predestination and damnation. Five hundred pages in folio would not exhaust the subject; I hope these two or three in octavo will not seem excessive.

It can be stated, with an adequate margin of error, that "our" eternity was decreed only a few years after a chronic intestinal pain killed Marcus Aurelius, and that the site of this vertiginous mandate was the hillside of Fourvière, formerly named Forum Vetus, famous now for its funicular and basilica. Despite the authority of the man who ordained it—Bishop Irenaeus—this coercive eternity was much more than a vain priestly adornment or an ecclesiastical luxury: it was a solution and a weapon. The Word is engendered by the Father, the Holy Spirit is produced by the Father and the Word. The Gnostics habitually inferred from these two undeniable operations that the Father preceded the Word, and both of them preceded the Spirit. This inference dissolved the Trinity. Irenaeus clarified that the double process—the Son engendered by the Father, the Holy Spirit issuing from the two—did not occur in time, but consumes past, present, and future once and for all. His clarification prevailed and is now dogma. Eternity—theretofore barely tolerated in the shadows of one or another unauthorized Platonic text—thus came to be preached. The proper connection among, or distinction between, the three hypostases of the Lord seems an unlikely problem now, and its futility may appear to contaminate the solution, but there can be no doubt of the grandeur of the result, at least to nourish hope: "*Aeternitas est merum hodie, est immediata et lucida fruitio rerum infinitarum*" [Eternity is merely today; it is the immediate and lucid enjoyment of the things of infinity]. Nor is there doubt of the emotional and polemical importance of the Trinity.

Today, Catholic laymen consider the Trinity a kind of professional organization, infinitely correct and infinitely boring; liberals, meanwhile, view it as a useless theological Cerberus, a superstition that the Republic's great advances have already taken upon themselves to abolish. The Trinity clearly exceeds these formulae. Imagined all at once, the concept of a father, a son, and a ghost articulated in a single organism seems like a case of intellectual teratology, a distortion only the horror of a nightmare could engender. Hell is mere physical violence, but the three inextricable Persons add up to an intellectual horror, stifled and specious like the infinity of facing mirrors. Dante sought to denote them by a symbol showing three multicolored, diaphanous circles, superimposed; Donne, by complicated serpents, sumptu-



ous and indivisible. "*Toto coruscat trinitas mysterio*," wrote St. Paulinus, the Trinity gleams in full mystery.

Detached from the concept of redemption, the three-persons-in-one distinction seems arbitrary. Considered a necessity of faith, its fundamental mystery remains intact, but its use and intention begin to shine through. We understand that to renounce the Trinity—or, at least, the Duality—is to make of Jesus an occasional delegate of the Lord, an incident of history rather than the deathless and continual auditor of our devotion. If the Son is not also the Father, redemption is not the direct work of the divine; if He is not eternal, the sacrifice of having lowered Himself to become a man and die on the cross will not be eternal either. Nothing less than an infinite excellence could suffice for a soul lost for infinite ages, Jeremy Taylor admonished. . . . The dogma may thus be justified, though the concepts of the generation of the Son by the Father and the emanation of the Spirit from both continue to insinuate a certain priority, their guilty condition as mere metaphors notwithstanding. Theology, at pains to distinguish between them, resolves that there is no reason for confusion, since the result of one is the Son, and of the other, the Spirit. Eternal generation of the Son, eternal emanation of the Spirit, is Irenaeus' superb verdict: the invention of a timeless act, a mutilated *zeitloses Zeitwort* that we can discard or venerate, but not debate. Irenaeus set out to save the monster, and did. We know he was the philosophers' enemy; to have appropriated their weapon and turned it against them must have afforded him a bellicose pleasure.

For the Christian, the first second of time coincides with the first second of the Creation—a fact that spares us the spectacle (recently reconstructed by Valéry) of a vacant God reeling in the barren centuries of the eternity "before." Emanuel Swedenborg (*Vera Christiana Religio*, 1771) saw at the outer limit of the spiritual orb a hallucinatory statue depicting the voracious inferno into which are plunged all who "engaged in senseless and sterile deliberations on the condition of the Lord before creating the world."

As soon as Irenaeus had brought it into being, the Christian eternity began to differ from the Alexandrian. No longer a world apart, it settled into the role of one of the nineteen attributes of the mind of God. As objects of popular veneration, the archetypes ran the risk of becoming angels or divinities: consequently, while their reality—still greater than that of mere creatures—was not denied, they were reduced to eternal ideas in the creating Word. This concept of the *universalia res* [universal things] is addressed by Albertus Magnus: he considers them eternal and prior to the things of Creation, but only as forms or inspirations. He separates them

very deliberately from the *universalia in rebus* [the universal in things], which are the divine concepts themselves, now variously embodied in time, and, above all, from the *universalia post res* [the universal beyond things], which are those same concepts rediscovered by inductive thought. Temporal things are distinguished from divine things by their lack of creative efficacy but in no other way; the suspicion that God's categories might not precisely coincide with those of Latin has no place in Scholastic thought. . . . But I see I am getting ahead of myself.

Theology handbooks do not linger with any special devotion on the subject of eternity. They merely note that eternity is the contemporary and total intuition of all fractions of time, and make a dogged inspection of the Hebrew scriptures in search of fraudulent confirmations in which the Holy Spirit seems to have expressed very badly what the commentator expresses so well. To that end, they like to brandish this declaration of illustrious disdain or simple longevity: "One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day," or the grand words heard by Moses—"I Am That I Am," the name of God—or those heard by St. John the Theologian on Patmos, before and after the sea of glass and the scarlet beast and the fowls that eat the flesh of captains: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end."<sup>4</sup> They also like to repeat the definition by Boethius (conceived in prison, perhaps on the eve of his execution), "*Aeternitas est interminabilis vitae tota et perfect possessio*" [Eternity is all of life interminable and perfect possession], and, more to my liking, Hans Lassen Martensen's almost voluptuous repetition: "*Aeternitas est merum hodie, est immediata et lucida fruitio rerum infinitarum*" [Eternity is merely today; it is the immediate and lucid enjoyment of the things of infinity]. However, they generally seem to disdain the obscure oath of the angel who stood upon the sea and upon the earth "and swore by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein, that there should be time no longer" (Revelations 10:6). It is true that *time* in this verse must be synonymous with *delay*.

<sup>4</sup>The idea that the time of men is not commensurable with God's is prominent in one of the Islamic traditions of the cycle of the *miraj*. It is known that the Prophet was carried off to the seventh heaven by the resplendent mare Alburak and that he conversed with each one of the patriarchs and angels that dwell there and that he traversed Unity and felt a coldness that froze his heart when the hand of the Lord clapped his shoulder. Leaving the earth, Alburak's hoof knocked over a jug full of water; on returning, the Prophet picked up the jug and not a single drop had been spilled.

Eternity became an attribute of the unlimited mind of God, and as we know, generations of theologians have pondered this mind, in its image and likeness. No stimulus has been as sharp as the debate over predestination *ab aeterno*. Four hundred years after the Cross, the English monk Pelagius conceived of the outrageous notion that innocents who die without baptism can attain eternal glory.<sup>5</sup> Augustine, bishop of Hippo, refuted him with an indignation that was applauded by his editors. He noted the heresies intrinsic to this doctrine, which is abhorred by the righteous and the martyrs: its negation of the fact that in Adam all men have already sinned and died, its abominable heedlessness of the transmission of this death from father to son by carnal generation, its scorn for the bloody sweat, the supernatural agony and the cry of He Who died on the Cross, its rejection of the secret favors of the Holy Spirit, its infringement upon the freedom of the Lord. The British monk had the gall to invoke justice. The Saint—grandiloquent and forensic, as ever—concedes that in justice all men are impardonably deserving of hellfire, but maintains that God has determined to save some, *according to His inscrutable will*, or, as Calvin would say much later, and not without a certain brutality, *because He wants to (quia voluit)*. Those few are the predestined. The hypocrisy or reticence of theologians has reserved the term for those predestined for heaven. Men predestined for torment there cannot be: though it is true that those not chosen descend into eternal flame, that is merely an omission on the Lord's part, not a specific action. . . . Thus the concept of eternity was renewed.

Generations of idolatrous men had inhabited the earth without having occasion to reject or embrace the word of God; it was as insolent to imagine they could be saved without this means as to deny that some of them, renowned for their virtue, would be excluded from glory everlasting. (Zwingli in 1523 expressed his personal hope of sharing heaven with Hercules, Theseus, Socrates, Aristides, Aristotle, and Seneca.) An amplification of the Lord's ninth attribute (omniscience) effectively did away with the difficulty. This attribute, it was proclaimed, amounted to a knowledge of all things, that is to say, not only real things, but also those that are merely possible. The Scriptures were scoured for a passage that would allow for this infinite supplement, and two were found: in I Samuel, when the Lord tells

<sup>5</sup>Jesus Christ had said: "Suffer the little children to come unto me"; Pelagius was accused, naturally, of interposing himself between the little children and Jesus Christ, thus delivering them to hell. Like that of Athanasius (Sathanasius) his name was conducive to wordplay: everyone said Pelagius had to be an ocean (*pelagus*) of evils.

David that the men of Keilah will deliver him up to his enemy if he does not leave the city, and he goes; and in the Gospel According to Matthew, which includes the following curse on two cities: "Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes." With this repeated support, the potential modes of the verb could extend into eternity: Hercules dwells in heaven beside Ulrich Zwingli because God knows he would have observed the ecclesiastical year, but He is also aware that the Hydra of Lerna would have rejected baptism and so has relegated the creature to outer darkness. We perceive real events and imagine those that are possible (or future); in the Lord this distinction has no place, for it belongs to time and ignorance. His eternity registers once and for all (*uno intelligendi actu*) not only every moment of this replete world but also all that would take place if the most evanescent instant were to change—as well as all that are impossible. His precise and combinatory eternity is much more copious than the universe.

Unlike the Platonic eternities, whose greatest danger is tedium, this one runs the risk of resembling the final pages of *Ulysses*, or even the preceding chapter, the enormous interrogation. A majestic scruple on Augustine's part modified this prolixity. His doctrine, at least verbally, rejects damnation: the Lord concentrates on the elect and overlooks the reprobates. He knows all, but prefers to dwell on virtuous lives. John Scotus Erigena, the court schoolteacher of Charles the Bald, gloriously distorted this idea. He proclaimed an indeterminate God and an orb of Platonic archetypes; he spoke of a God who perceives neither sin nor the forms of evil, and also mused on deification, the final reversion of all creatures (including time and the demon) to the primal unity of God: "*Divina bonitas consummabit malitiam, aeterna vita absorbebit mortem, beatitudo miseriam*" [Divine goodness consumed evil, eternal life absorbed death, and beatitude misery]. This hybrid eternity (which, unlike the Platonic eternities, includes individual destinies, and unlike the orthodox institution, rejects all imperfection and misery) was condemned by the synods of Valencia and Langres. *De divisione naturae libri V*, the controversial work that described it, was publicly burned, an adroit maneuver that awoke the interest of bibliophiles and enabled Erigena's book to survive to the present day.

The universe requires eternity. Theologians are not unaware that if the Lord's attention were to waver for a single second from my right hand as it writes this, it would instantly lapse into nothingness as if blasted by a lightless fire. They affirm, therefore, that the conservation of the world is a per-

petual creation and that the verbs *conserve* and *create*, so antagonistic here below, are synonyms in Heaven.

### III

Up to this point, in chronological order, a general history of eternity. Or rather, of the eternities, for human desire dreamed two successive and mutually hostile dreams by that name: one, realist, yearns with a strange love for the still and silent archetypes of all creatures; the other, nominalist, denies the truth of the archetypes and seeks to gather up all the details of the universe in a single second. The first is based on realism, a doctrine so distant from our essential nature that I disbelieve all interpretations of it, including my own; the second, on realism's opponent, nominalism, which affirms the truth of individuals and the conventional nature of genres. Now, like the spontaneous and bewildered prose-speaker of comedy, we all do nominalism *sans le savoir*, as if it were a general premise of our thought, an acquired axiom. Useless, therefore, to comment on it.

Up to this point, in chronological order, the debated and curial development of eternity. Remote men, bearded, mitred men conceived of it, ostensibly to confound heresies and defend the distinction of the three persons in one, but secretly in order to staunch in some way the flow of hours. "To live is to lose time; we can recover or keep nothing except under the form of eternity," I read in the work of that Emersonized Spaniard, George Santayana. To which we need only juxtapose the terrible passage by Lucretius on the fallacy of coitus:

Like the thirsty man who in sleep wishes to drink and consumes forms of water that do not satiate him and dies burning up with thirst in the middle of a river; so Venus deceives lovers with simulacra, and the sight of a body does not satisfy them, and they cannot detach or keep anything, though their indecisive and mutual hands run over the whole body. At the end, when there is a foretaste of delight in the bodies and Venus is about to sow the woman's fields, the lovers grasp each other anxiously, amorous tooth against tooth; entirely in vain, for they do not succeed in losing themselves in each other or becoming a single being.

The archetypes, eternity—these two words—hold out the promise of more solid possessions. For it is true that succession is an intolerable misery, and

magnanimous appetites are greedy for all the minutes of time and all the variety of space.

Personal identity is known to reside in memory, and the annulment of that faculty is known to result in idiocy. It is possible to think the same thing of the universe. Without an eternity, without a sensitive, secret mirror of what passes through every soul, universal history is lost time, and along with it our personal history—which rather uncomfortably makes ghosts of us. The Berliner Company's gramophone records or the transparent cinema are insufficient, mere images of images, idols of other idols. Eternity is a more copious invention. True, it is inconceivable, but then so is humble successive time. To deny eternity, to suppose the vast annihilation of the years freighted with cities, rivers, and jubinations, is no less incredible than to imagine their total salvation.

How did eternity come into being? St. Augustine ignores the problem, but notes something that seems to allow for a solution: the elements of past and future that exist in every present. He cites a specific case: the recitation of a poem.

Before beginning, the poem exists in my expectation; when I have just finished, in my memory; but as I am reciting it, it is extended in my memory, on account of what I have already said; and in my expectation, on account of what I have yet to say. What takes place with the entirety of the poem takes place also in each verse and each syllable. This also holds true of the larger action of which the poem is part, and of the individual destiny of a man, which is composed of a series of actions, and of humanity, which is a series of individual destinies.

Nevertheless, this verification of the intimate intertwining of the diverse tenses of time still includes succession, which is not commensurate with a model of unanimous eternity.

I believe nostalgia was that model. The exile who with melting heart remembers his expectations of happiness sees them *sub specie aeternitatis* [under the aspect of eternity], completely forgetting that the achievement of one of them would exclude or postpone all the others. In passion, memory inclines toward the intemporal. We gather up all the delights of a given past in a single image; the diversely red sunsets I watch every evening will in memory be a single sunset. The same is true of foresight: nothing prevents the most incompatible hopes from peacefully coexisting. To put it differently: eternity is the style of desire. (The particular enjoyment that

enumeration yields may plausibly reside in its insinuation of the eternal—the *immediata et lucida fruitio rerum infinitarum.*)

#### IV

There only remains for me to disclose to the reader my personal theory of eternity. Mine is an impoverished eternity, without a God or even a coproprietor, and entirely devoid of archetypes. It was formulated in my 1928 book *The Language of the Argentines*. I reprint here what I published then; the passage is entitled "Feeling in Death."

I wish to record an experience I had a few nights ago: a triviality too evanescent and ecstatic to be called an adventure, too irrational and sentimental for thought. It was a scene and its word: a word I had spoken but had not fully lived with all my being until then. I will recount its history and the accidents of time and place that revealed it to me.

I remember it thus: On the afternoon before that night, I was in Barracas, an area I do not customarily visit, and whose distance from the places I later passed through had already given the day a strange savor. The night had no objective whatsoever; the weather was clear, and so, after dinner, I went out to walk and remember. I did not want to establish any particular direction for my stroll: I strove for a maximum latitude of possibility so as not to fatigue my expectant mind with the obligatory foresight of a particular path. I accomplished, to the unsatisfactory degree to which it is possible, what is called strolling at random, without other conscious resolve than to pass up the avenues and broad streets in favor of chance's more obscure invitations. Yet a kind of familiar gravitation pushed me toward neighborhoods whose name I wish always to remember, places that fill my heart with reverence. I am not alluding to my own neighborhood, the precise circumference of my childhood, but to its still mysterious outskirts; a frontier region I have possessed fully in words and very little in reality, at once adjacent and mythical. These penultimate streets are, for me, the opposite of what is familiar, its other face, almost as unknown as the buried foundations of our house or our own invisible skeleton. The walk left me at a street corner. I took in the night, in perfect, serene respite from thought. The vision before me, not at all complex to begin with, seemed further simplified by my fatigue. Its very ordinariness made it unreal. It was a street of one-story houses, and though its first meaning was poverty, its

second was certainly bliss. It was the poorest and most beautiful thing. The houses faced away from the street; a fig tree merged into shadow over the blunted streetcorner, and the narrow portals—higher than the extending lines of the walls—seemed wrought of the same infinite substance as the night. The sidewalk was embanked above a street of elemental dirt, the dirt of a still unconquered America. In the distance, the road, by then a country lane, crumbled into the Maldonado River. Against the muddy, chaotic earth, a low, rose-colored wall seemed not to harbor the moonlight but to shimmer with a gleam all its own. Tenderness could have no better name than that rose color.

I stood there looking at this simplicity. I thought, undoubtedly aloud: "This is the same as it was thirty years ago." I imagined that date: recent enough in other countries, but already remote on this ever-changing side of the world. Perhaps a bird was singing and I felt for it a small, bird-sized fondness; but there was probably no other sound in the dizzying silence except for the equally timeless noise of crickets. The glib thought *I am in the year eighteen hundred and something* ceased to be a few approximate words and deepened into reality. I felt as the dead feel, I felt myself to be an abstract observer of the world: an indefinite fear imbued with knowledge that is the greatest clarity of metaphysics. No, I did not believe I had made my way upstream on the presumptive waters of Time. Rather, I suspected myself to be in possession of the reticent or absent meaning of the inconceivable word *eternity*. Only later did I succeed in defining this figment of my imagination.

I write it out now: This pure representation of homogenous facts—the serenity of the night, the translucent little wall, the small-town scent of honeysuckle, the fundamental dirt—is not merely identical to what existed on that corner many years ago; it is, without superficial resemblances or repetitions, the same. When we can feel this oneness, time is a delusion which the indifference and inseparability of a moment from its apparent yesterday and from its apparent today suffice to disintegrate.

The number of such human moments is clearly not infinite. The elemental experiences—physical suffering and physical pleasure, falling asleep, listening to a piece of music, feeling great intensity or great apathy—are even more impersonal. I derive, in advance, this conclusion: life is too impoverished not to be immortal. But we lack even the certainty of our own poverty, given that time, which is easily refutable by the senses, is not so easily refuted by the intellect, from whose essence the concept of succession appears inseparable. Let there re-



main, then, the glimpse of an idea in an emotional anecdote, and, in the acknowledged irresolution of this page, the true moment of ecstasy and the possible intimation of eternity which that night did not hoard from me.

[1936]

[EA]

In the aim of adding dramatic interest to this biography of eternity I committed certain distortions, for instance, that of condensing into five or six names a step that took centuries.

I worked with whatever was at hand in my library. Among the most useful volumes, I must mention the following:

*Die Philosophie der Griechen* von Dr. Paul Deussen. Leipzig, 1919.

*Selected Works of Plotinus*. Translated by Thomas Taylor. London, 1817.

*Passages Illustrating Neoplatonism*. Translated with an introduction by E. R. Dodds. London, 1932.

*La Philosophie de Platon* par Alfred Fouillée. Paris, 1869.

*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* von Arthur Schopenhauer. Herausgegeben von Eduard Grisebach. Leipzig, 1892.

*Die Philosophie des Mittelalters* von Dr. Paul Deussen. Leipzig, 1920.

*Las confesiones de San Agustín*. Versión literal por el P. Angel C. Vega, Madrid, 1932.

*A Monument to Saint Augustine*. London, 1930.

*Dogmatik* von Dr. R. Rothe. Heidelberg, 1870.

*Ensayos de crítica filosófica* de Menéndez y Pelayo. Madrid, 1892.