

A New Refutation of Time

Vor mir keine Zeit, nach mir wird keine seyn.

Mit mir gebiert sie sich, mit mir geht sie auch ein.

[Before me there was no time, after me there will be none./With me it is born, with me it will also die.]

—Daniel von Czepko, *Sexcenta Monidisticha Sapientum* III, II (1655)

Preliminary Note

Had this refutation (or its title) been published in the middle of the eighteenth century, it would be included in a bibliography by Hume, or at least mentioned by Huxley or Kemp Smith. But published in 1947 (after Bergson) it is the anachronistic *reductio ad absurdum* of an obsolete system, or even worse, the feeble artifice of an Argentine adrift on a sea of metaphysics. Both conjectures are plausible and perhaps even true, but I cannot promise some startling new conclusion on the basis of my rudimentary dialectics. The thesis I shall expound is as old as Zeno's arrow or the chariot of the Greek king in the *Milinda Pañha*; its novelty, if any, consists in applying to my ends the classic instrument of Berkeley. Both he and his successor David Hume abound in paragraphs that contradict or exclude my thesis; nonetheless, I believe I have deduced the inevitable consequence of their doctrine.

The first article (A) was written in 1944 and appeared in number 115 of *Sur*; the second, from 1946, is a revision of the first. I have deliberately refrained from making the two into one, deciding that two similar texts could enhance the reader's comprehension of such an unwieldy subject.

A word on the title: I am not unaware that it is an example of that monster called a *contradictio in adjecto* by logicians, for to say that a refutation of

time is new (or old, for that matter) is to recognize a temporal predicate that restores the very notion the subject intends to destroy. But I shall let this fleeting joke stand to prove, at least, that I do not exaggerate the importance of wordplay. In any case, language is so saturated and animated by time that, quite possibly, not a single line in all these pages fails to require or invoke it.

I dedicate these exercises to my ancestor Juan Crisótomo Lafinur (1797–1824), who left a memorable poem or two to Argentine letters and who strove to reform the teaching of philosophy by refining out traces of theology and by explaining the theories of Locke and Condillac in his courses. He died in exile: as with all men, it was his lot to live in bad times.¹

Buenos Aires, December 23, 1946

A

I

In the course of a life dedicated to belles-lettres and, occasionally, to the perplexities of metaphysics, I have glimpsed or foreseen a refutation of time, one in which I myself do not believe, but which tends to visit me at night and in the hours of weary twilight with the illusory force of a truism. This refutation is to be found, in one form or another, in all of my books. It is prefigured in the poems “Inscription on Any Tomb” and “Truco” in my *Fervor of Buenos Aires* (1923); it is openly stated on a certain page of *Evaristo Carriego*; and in the story “Feeling in Death,” which I transcribe below. None of these texts satisfies me, not even the last on the list, which is less logical and explanatory than sentimental and divinatory. I will attempt, in this present writing, to establish a basis for them all.

Two arguments led me to this refutation of time: Berkeley’s idealism and Leibniz’s principle of indiscernibles.

¹All expositions of Buddhism mention the *Milinda Pañha*, an Apology from the second century; this work recounts a debate between the king of the Bactrians, Menander, and the monk Nagasena. The latter argues that just as the king’s chariot is not the wheels nor the chassis nor the axle nor the shaft nor the yoke, neither is man matter nor form nor impressions nor ideas nor instincts nor consciousness. He is not the combination of those parts, nor does he exist outside them. . . . After this discussion, which lasts several days, Menander (Milinda) converts to the faith of the Buddha. The *Milinda Pañha* has been rendered into English by Rhys Davids (Oxford, 1890–94).

Berkeley (*The Principles of Human Knowledge*, par. 3) observed:

That neither our thoughts, nor passions, nor ideas formed by the imagination, exist without the mind is what everybody will allow. And to me it is no less evident that the various *Sensations* or *ideas imprinted on the sense*, however blended or combined together (that is, whatever *objects* they compose), cannot exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving them. . . . The table I write on, I say exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed—meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it. . . . For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that is to me perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them.

In paragraph 23 he added, foreseeing objections:

But, say you, surely there is nothing easier than for me to imagine trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and nobody by to perceive them. I answer, you may so, there is no difficulty in it; but what is all this, I beseech you, more than framing in *your* mind certain ideas which you call books and trees, and at the same time omitting to frame the idea of anyone that may perceive them? But do not you yourself perceive or think of them all the while? This therefore is nothing to the purpose; it only shews you have the power of imagining or forming ideas in your mind: but it doth not shew that you can conceive it possible that the objects of your thought may exist without the mind.

In another paragraph, number 6, he had already declared:

Some truths there are so near and obvious to the mind that a man need only open his eyes to see them. Such I take this important one to be, viz., that all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world have not any subsistence without a mind—that their *being* is *to be perceived or known*; that consequently so long as they are not actually perceived by me, or do not exist in my mind or that of any other created spirit, they must either have no existence at all, or else subsist in the mind of some Eternal Spirit.

Such is, in the words of its inventor, the idealist doctrine. To understand it is easy; the difficulty lies in thinking within its limitations. Schopenhauer himself, in expounding it, is guilty of some negligence. In the first lines of his book *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*—from the year 1819—he formulates the following declaration, which makes him a creditor as regards the sum total of imperishable human perplexity: “The world is my representation. The man who confesses this truth clearly understands that he does not know a sun nor an earth, but only some eyes which see a sun and a hand which feels an earth.” That is, for the idealist Schopenhauer, a man’s eyes and hands are less illusory or unreal than the earth or the sun. In 1844 he publishes a supplementary volume. In the first chapter he rediscovers and aggravates the previous error: he defines the universe as a cerebral phenomenon, and he distinguishes between the “world in the head” and the “world outside the head.” Berkeley, nevertheless, will have made his Philonous say, in 1713: “The brain therefore you speak of, being a sensible thing, exists only in the mind. Now, I would fain know whether you think it reasonable to suppose, that one idea or thing existing in the mind, occasions all other ideas. And if you think so, pray how do you account for the origin of that primary idea or brain itself?” To Schopenhauer’s dualism, or cerebralism, Spiller’s monism may legitimately be counterposed. Spiller (*The Mind of Man* [1902], chap. 8) argues that the retina, and the cutaneous surface invoked to explain visual and tactile phenomena, are in turn two tactile and visual systems, and that the room we see (the “objective” one) is no greater than the imagined (“cerebral”) one, and that the former does not contain the latter, since two independent visual systems are involved. Berkeley (*The Principles of Human Knowledge*, 10 and 116) likewise denied primary qualities—the solidity and extension of things—or the existence of absolute space.

Berkeley affirmed the continuous existence of objects, inasmuch as when no individual perceives them, God does. Hume, with greater logic, denied this existence (*A Treatise of Human Nature* I, 4, 2). Berkeley affirmed personal identity, “for I myself am not my ideas, but somewhat else, a thinking, active principle that perceives” (*Dialogues*, 3). Hume, the skeptic, refuted this belief, and made each man “a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity” (I, 4, 6). Both men affirmed the existence of time: for Berkeley it is “the succession of ideas in my mind, flowing uniformly, and participated in by all beings” (*The Principles of Human Knowledge*, 98). For Hume, it is “a succession of indivisible moments” (I, 2, 2).

I have accumulated quotations from the apologists of idealism, I have provided their canonical passages, I have reiterated and explained, I have censured Schopenhauer (not without ingratitude), to help my reader penetrate this unstable world of the mind. A world of evanescent impressions; a world without matter or spirit, neither objective nor subjective; a world without the ideal architecture of space; a world made of time, of the absolute uniform time of the *Principia*; an inexhaustible labyrinth, a chaos, a dream—the almost complete disintegration that David Hume reached.

Once the idealist argument is accepted, I believe that it is possible—perhaps inevitable—to go further. For Hume, it is not justifiable to speak of the form of the moon or its color: its form and color are the moon. Neither can one speak of the mind's perceptions, inasmuch as the mind is nothing but a series of perceptions. The Cartesian "I think, therefore I am" is thus invalid: to say I think is to postulate the I, a *petitio principii*. In the eighteenth century, Lichtenberg proposed that instead of "I think," we should say impersonally "It thinks," as we say "It thunders" or "There is lightning." I repeat: there is not, behind the face, a secret self governing our acts or receiving our impressions; we are only the series of those imaginary acts and those errant impressions. The series? If we deny matter and spirit, which are continuities, and if we also deny space, I do not know what right we have to the continuity that is time. Let us imagine a present moment, any one at all. A night on the Mississippi. Huckleberry Finn wakes up. The raft, lost in the shadows of twilight, continues downstream. It may be a bit cold. Huckleberry Finn recognizes the soft, ceaseless sound of the water. Negligently he opens his eyes: he sees an indefinite number of stars, a nebulous line of trees. Then he sinks into a sleep without memories, as into dark waters.² Metaphysical idealism declares that to add to these perceptions a material substance (the object) and a spiritual substance (the subject) is precarious and vain. I maintain that it is no less illogical to think that they are terms in a series whose beginning is as inconceivable as its end. To add to the river and the riverbank perceived by Huck the notion of yet another substantive river with another riverbank, to add yet another perception to that immediate network of perceptions, is altogether unjustifiable in the eyes of idealism. In my eyes, it is no less unjustifiable to add a chronological precision: for instance, the fact that the above-mentioned event should have

²For the reader's convenience I have chosen a moment between two intervals of sleep, a literary, not a historical, instant. If anyone suspects a fallacy, he can insert another example, if he wants, one from his own life.

taken place on the night of June 7, 1849, between 4:10 and 4:11. In other words, I deny, using the arguments of idealism, the vast temporal series that idealism permits. Hume denied the existence of an absolute space, in which each thing has its place; I deny the existence of one single time, in which all events are linked. To deny coexistence is no less difficult than to deny succession.

I deny, in a large number of instances, the existence of succession. I deny, in a large number of instances, simultaneity as well. The lover who thinks, "While I was so happy, thinking about the faithfulness of my beloved, she was busy deceiving me," is deceiving himself. If every state in which we live is absolute, that happiness was not concurrent with that betrayal. The discovery of that betrayal is merely one more state, incapable of modifying "previous" states, though not incapable of modifying their recollection. Today's misfortune is no more real than yesterday's good fortune. I will look for a more concrete example: At the beginning of August 1824, Captain Isidoro Suárez, at the head of a squadron of Peruvian hussars, assured the Victory of Junín; at the beginning of August 1824, De Quincey issued a diatribe against *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*; these deeds were not contemporaneous (they are now), inasmuch as the two men died—the one in the city of Montevideo, the other in Edinburgh—knowing nothing of each other. . . . Every instant is autonomous. Not vengeance nor pardon nor jails nor even oblivion can modify the invulnerable past. No less vain to my mind are hope and fear, for they always refer to future events, that is, to events which will not happen to us, who are the diminutive present. They tell me that the present, the "specious present" of the psychologists, lasts between several seconds and the smallest fraction of a second, which is also how long the history of the universe lasts. Or better, there is no such thing as "the life of a man," nor even "one night in his life." Each moment we live exists, not the imaginary combination of these moments. The universe, the sum total of all events, is no less ideal than the sum of all the horses—one, many, none?—Shakespeare dreamed between 1592 and 1594. I might add that if time is a mental process, how can it be shared by countless, or even two different men?

The argument set forth in the preceding paragraphs, interrupted and encumbered by examples, may seem intricate. I shall try a more direct method. Let us consider a life in which repetitions abound: my life, for instance. I never pass the Recoleta cemetery without remembering that my father, my grandparents, and my great-grandparents are buried there, as I

shall be; then I remember that I have remembered the same thing many times before; I cannot stroll around the outskirts of my neighborhood in the solitude of night without thinking that night is pleasing to us because, like memory, it erases idle details; I cannot lament the loss of a love or a friendship without reflecting how one loses only what one really never had; each time I cross one of the southside corners, I think of you, Helena; each time the air brings me the scent of eucalyptus I think of Adrogué in my childhood; each time I recall fragment 91 of Heraclitus, "You cannot step into the same river twice," I admire his dialectical skill, for the facility with which we accept the first meaning ("The river is another") covertly imposes upon us the second meaning ("I am another") and gives us the illusion of having invented it; each time I hear a Germanophile deride Yiddish, I reflect that Yiddish is, after all, a German dialect, barely tainted by the language of the Holy Ghost. These tautologies (and others I shall not disclose) are my whole life. Naturally, they recur without design; there are variations of emphasis, temperature, light, general physiological state. I suspect, nonetheless, that the number of circumstantial variants is not infinite: we can postulate, in the mind of an individual (or of two individuals who do not know each other but in whom the same process is operative), two identical moments. Once this identity is postulated, we may ask: Are not these identical moments the same moment? Is not one single repeated terminal point enough to disrupt and confound the series in time? Are the enthusiasts who devote themselves to a line of Shakespeare not literally Shakespeare?

I am still not certain of the ethics of the system I have outlined, nor do I know whether it exists. The fifth paragraph of chapter IV in the *Sanhedrin* of the Mishnah declares that, in the eyes of God, he who kills a single man destroys the world. If there is no plurality, he who annihilated all men would be no more guilty than the primitive and solitary Cain—an orthodox view—nor more global in his destruction—which may be magic, or so I understand it. Tumultuous and universal catastrophes—fires, wars, epidemics—are but a single sorrow, multiplied in many illusory mirrors. Thus Bernard Shaw surmises (*Guide to Socialism*, 86):

What you yourself can suffer is the utmost that can be suffered on earth. If you starve to death, you experience all the starvation that ever has been or ever can be. If ten thousand other women starve to death with you, their suffering is not increased by a single pang: their share in your fate does not make you ten thousand times as hungry, nor prolong

your suffering ten thousand times. Therefore do not be oppressed by "the frightful sum of human suffering": there is no sum. . . . Poverty and pain are not cumulative.

(Cf. also C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* VII.)

Lucretius (*De rerum natura* I, 830) attributes to Anaxagoras the doctrine that gold consists of particles of gold; fire, of sparks; bone, of imperceptible little bones. Josiah Royce, perhaps influenced by St. Augustine, proposes that time is made up of time and that "every now within which something happens is therefore *also* a succession" (*The World and the Individual* II, 139). That proposition is compatible with my essay.

II

All language is of a successive nature; it does not lend itself to reasoning on eternal, intemporal matters. Those readers who are displeased with the preceding arguments may prefer this note from 1928, titled "Feeling in Death," which I mentioned earlier:

I wish to record here an experience I had some nights ago, a trifling matter too evanescent and ecstatic to be called an adventure, too irrational and sentimental to be called a thought. I am speaking of a scene and its word, a word I had said before but had not lived with total involvement until that night. I shall describe it now, with the incidents of time and place that happened to reveal it. This is how I remember it: I had spent the afternoon in Barracas, a place I rarely visited, a place whose distance from the scene of my later wanderings lent a strange aura to that day. As I had nothing to do that night and the weather was fair, I went out after dinner to walk and remember. I had no wish to have a set destination; I followed a random course, as much as possible; I accepted, with no conscious anticipation other than avoiding the avenues or wide streets, the most obscure invitations of chance. A kind of familiar gravitation, however, drew me toward places whose name I shall always remember, for they arouse in me a certain reverence. I am not speaking of the specific surroundings of my childhood, my own neighborhood, but of its still mysterious borders, which I have possessed in words but little in reality, a zone that is familiar and mythological at the same time. The opposite of the known—its reverse

side—are those streets to me, almost as completely hidden as the buried foundation of our house or our invisible skeleton. My walk brought me to a corner. I breathed the night, in peaceful respite from thought. The vision before me, in no way complicated, in any case seemed simplified by my fatigue. It was so typical that it seemed unreal. It was a street of low houses, and although the first impression was poverty, the second was undoubtedly joyous. The street was both very poor and very lovely. No house stood out on the street; a fig tree cast a shadow over a corner wall; the street doors—higher than the lines extending along the walls—seemed made of the same infinite substance as the night. The sidewalk sloped up the street, a street of elemental clay, the clay of a still unconquered America. Farther away, the narrow street dwindled into the pampa, toward Maldonado. Over the muddy, chaotic earth a red pink wall seemed not to harbor moon-glow but to shed a light of its own. There is probably no better way to name tenderness than that red pink.

I stood looking at that simple scene. I thought, no doubt aloud: “This is the same as it was thirty years ago. . . .” I guessed at the date: a recent time in other countries, but already remote in this changing part of the world. Perhaps a bird was singing and I felt for him a small, bird-size affection; but most probably the only noise in this vertiginous silence was the equally timeless sound of the crickets. The easy thought *I am somewhere in the 1800s* ceased to be a few careless words and became profoundly real. I felt dead, I felt I was an abstract perceiver of the world, struck by an undefined fear imbued with science, or the supreme clarity of metaphysics. No, I did not believe I had traversed the presumed waters of Time; rather I suspected that I possessed the reticent or absent meaning of the inconceivable word *eternity*. Only later was I able to define these imaginings.

Now I shall transcribe it thus: that pure representation of homogeneous facts—calm night, limpid wall, rural scent of honeysuckle, elemental clay—is not merely identical to the scene on that corner so many years ago; it is, without similarities or repetitions, the same. If we can intuit that sameness, time is a delusion: the impartiality and inseparability of one moment of time’s apparent yesterday and another of time’s apparent today are enough to make it disintegrate.

It is evident that the number of these human moments is not infinite. The basic elemental moments are even more impersonal—physical suffering and physical pleasure, the approach of sleep, listening

to a single piece of music, moments of great intensity or great dejection. I have reached, in advance, the following conclusion: life is too impoverished not to be also immortal. But we do not even possess the certainty of our poverty, inasmuch as time, easily denied by the senses, is not so easily denied by the intellect, from whose essence the concept of succession seems inseparable. So then, let my glimpse of an idea remain as an emotional anecdote; let the real moment of ecstasy and the possible insinuation of eternity which that night lavished on me, remain confined to this sheet of paper, openly unresolved.

B

Of the many doctrines recorded in the history of philosophy, idealism is perhaps the most ancient and most widely divulged. The observation is Carlyle's (*Novalis*, 1829). Without hope of completing the infinite list, one could add to the philosophers he mentioned the Platonists, for whom the only realities are archetypes (Norris, Judah Abrabanel, Gemistus, Plotinus); the theologians, for whom everything that is not the divinity is provisional (Malebranche, Johannes Eckhart); the monists, who make the universe a vain adjective of the Absolute (Bradley, Hegel, Parmenides). . . . Idealism is as ancient as metaphysical angst. Its most clever apologist, George Berkeley, flourished in the eighteenth century. Contrary to what Schopenhauer declared (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* II, 1), his merit did not consist in the intuitive perception of that doctrine, but in the arguments he conceived to rationalize it. Berkeley used those arguments against the notion of matter; Hume applied them to consciousness; I propose to apply them to time. First I shall briefly summarize the various stages of this dialectic.

Berkeley denied matter. This did not mean, of course, that he denied colors, smells, tastes, sounds, and tactile sensations; what he denied was that aside from these perceptions—components of the external world—there might be something invisible, intangible, called matter. He denied that there were pains no one feels, colors no one sees, forms no one touches. He argued that to add matter to perceptions is to add to the world another inconceivable and superfluous world. He believed in the world of appearances fabricated by our senses, but he considered that the material world (Toland's, say) was an illusory duplication. He observed (*The Principles of Human Knowledge*, para. 3):

That neither our thoughts, nor passions, nor ideas formed by the imagination, exist without the mind, is what everybody will allow. And to me it is no less evident that the various *Sensations* or *ideas imprinted on the sense*, however blended or combined together (that is, whatever *objects* they compose), cannot exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving them. . . . The table I write on I say exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed—meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it. . . . For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that is to me perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them.

Foreseeing objections, he added in paragraph 23:

But, say you, surely there is nothing easier than for me to imagine trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and nobody by to perceive them. I answer, you may so, there is no difficulty in it; but what is all this, I beseech you, more than framing in *your* mind certain ideas which you call books and trees, and at the same time omitting to frame the idea of any one that may perceive them? But do not you yourself perceive or think of them all the while? This therefore is nothing to the purpose; it only shews you have the power of imagining or forming ideas in your mind: but it does not shew that you can conceive it possible the objects of your thought may exist without the mind.

In paragraph 6 he had already stated:

Some truths there are so near and obvious to the mind that a man need only open his eyes to see them. Such I take this important one to be, viz., that all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not any subsistence without a mind—that their *being* is *to be perceived or known*; that consequently so long as they are not actually perceived by me, or do not exist in my mind or that of any other created spirit, they must either have no existence at all, or else subsist in the mind of some Eternal Spirit.

(Berkeley's God is a ubiquitous spectator whose purpose is to give coherence to the world.)

The doctrine I have just explained has been perversely interpreted. Herbert Spencer believed he had refuted it (*The Principles of Psychology* VIII, 6), arguing that if nothing exists outside consciousness, then consciousness must be infinite in time and space. The first is evident if we understand that all time is time perceived by someone, but erroneous if we infer that this time must necessarily embrace an infinite number of centuries; the second is illicit, inasmuch as Berkeley repeatedly denied an absolute space (*The Principles of Human Knowledge*, 116; *Siris*, 266). Even more indecipherable is the error Schopenhauer made (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* II, 1) when he held that for the idealists the world is a cerebral phenomenon. Berkeley, however, had written (*Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* II): "The brain . . . being a sensible thing, exists only in the mind. Now, I would fain know whether you think it reasonable to suppose, that one idea or thing existing in the mind, occasions all other ideas. And if you think so, pray how do you account for the origin of that primary idea or brain itself?" The brain, in truth, is no less a part of the external world than the constellation Centaurus.

Berkeley denied that there was an object behind sense impressions. David Hume denied that there was a subject behind the perception of changes. Berkeley denied matter; Hume denied the spirit. Berkeley did not wish us to add the metaphysical notion of matter to the succession of impressions; Hume did not wish us to add the metaphysical notion of a self to the succession of mental states. This expansion of Berkeley's arguments is so logical that Berkeley had already foreseen it (as Alexander Campbell Fraser noted), and had even tried to dispute it by means of the Cartesian *ergo sum*. Hylas, foreshadowing Hume, had said in the third and last of the *Dialogues*: "In consequence of your own principles, it should follow that you are only a system of floating ideas, without any substance to support them. Words are not to be used without a meaning. And as there is no more meaning in spiritual substance than in material substance, the one is to be exploded as well as the other." Hume corroborates this (*A Treatise of Human Nature* I, 4, 6):

[We] are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity. . . . The mind is a kind of theater, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, repass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of

postures and situations. . . . The comparison of the theater must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials of which it is composed.

Having admitted the idealist argument, I believe it is possible—perhaps inevitable—to go further. For Berkeley, time is “the succession of ideas in my mind, which flows uniformly and is participated in by all beings” (*The Principles of Human Knowledge*, 98); for Hume, it is “a succession of indivisible moments” (*A Treatise of Human Nature* I, 2, 3). However, with the continuities of matter and spirit denied, with space denied, I do not know by what right we retain that continuity which is time. Outside each perception (real or conjectural), matter does not exist; outside each mental state, spirit does not exist; neither then must time exist outside each present moment. Let us choose a moment of the utmost simplicity, for example, Chuang Tzu’s dream (Herbert Allen Giles, *Chuang Tzu*, 1899). Some twenty-four centuries ago, Chuang Tzu dreamed he was a butterfly, and when he awoke he was not sure whether he was a man who had dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly who dreamed he was a man. Let us not consider the awakening, but the moment of the dream itself, or one of its moments. “I dreamed I was a butterfly fluttering through the air knowing nothing at all of Chuang Tzu,” says the ancient text. We shall never know whether Chuang Tzu saw a garden over which he seemed to fly, or a moving yellow triangle, which was doubtlessly himself, but it is clear that the image was subjective, even though it was supplied to him by memory. The doctrine of psychophysical parallelism will avow that this image must have resulted from a change in the dreamer’s nervous system; according to Berkeley, at that moment the body of Chuang Tzu did not exist, nor did the dark bedroom in which he was dreaming, save as a perception in the mind of God. Hume simplifies what happened even more: at that moment the spirit of Chuang Tzu did not exist; all that existed were the colors of the dream and the certainty of his being a butterfly. He existed as a momentary term in the “bundle or collection of different perceptions” which constituted, some four centuries before Christ, the mind of Chuang Tzu; he existed as the term n in an infinite temporal series, between $n - 1$ and $n + 1$. There is no other reality for idealism than mental processes; to add an objective butterfly to the butterfly one perceives therefore seems a vain duplication; to add a self to the mental processes seems, therefore, no less exorbitant. Idealism holds that there was a dreaming, a perceiving, but not a dreamer nor even a

dream; it holds that to speak of objects and subjects is to fall into an impure mythology. Now then, if each psychic state is self-sufficient, if to connect it to a circumstance or an ego is an illicit and idle addition, with what right do we later assign it a place in time? Chuang Tzu dreamed he was a butterfly, and during the course of that dream he was not Chuang Tzu but a butterfly. With space and self abolished, how can we link those dreaming moments to his waking moments and the feudal age of Chinese history? This does not mean that we shall never know, even if only approximately, the date of that dream; I merely mean that the chronological determination of an event, of any event in the world, is alien and exterior to the event. In China, the dream of Chuang Tzu is proverbial; let us imagine that one of its almost infinite readers dreams he is a butterfly and then that he is Chuang Tzu. Let us imagine that, by a not impossible chance, this dream repeats exactly the dream of the master. Having postulated such an identity, we may well ask: Are not those coinciding moments identical? Is not *one single repeated term* enough to disrupt and confound the history of the world, to reveal that there is no such history?

To deny time involves two negations: denying the succession of the terms in a series, and denying the synchronism of terms in two series. In fact, if each term is absolute, its relations are reduced to the consciousness that those relations exist. One state precedes another if it knows it is anterior; state G is contemporaneous with state H if it knows it is contemporaneous. Contrary to Schopenhauer's statement in his table of fundamental truths (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* II, 4), each fraction of time does not fill all space simultaneously: time is not ubiquitous.³ (Of course, at this stage in the argument, space no longer exists.)

Meinong, in his theory of apprehension, admits the apprehension of imaginary objects: the fourth dimension, say, or Condillac's sentient statue, or Lotze's hypothetical animal, or the square root of minus one. If the reasons I have indicated are valid, then matter, the ego, the external world, universal history, our lives, also belong to that nebulous sphere.

Furthermore, the phrase "negation of time" is ambiguous. It can mean the eternity of Plato or Boethius and also the dilemmas of Sextus Empiricus. The latter (*Adversus mathematicos* XI, 197) denies the past, which already was, and the future, which is not yet, and argues that the present is either divisible or indivisible. It is not indivisible, for in that case it would

³Newton had previously asserted: "Each particle of space is eternal, each indivisible moment of duration is everywhere" (*Principia* III, 42).

have no beginning to connect it to the past nor end to connect it to the future, nor even a middle, because whatever has no beginning or end has no middle. Neither is it divisible, for in that case it would consist of a part that was and another that is not. *Ergo*, the present does not exist, and since the past and the future do not exist either, time does not exist. F. H. Bradley rediscovers and improves upon this conundrum: he observes (*Appearance and Reality* IV) that if the now can be divided into other nows, it is no less complicated than time; and that if it is indivisible, time is merely a relation between intemporal things. Such reasoning, obviously, denies the parts in order to deny the whole; I reject the whole in order to exalt each one of the parts. Via the dialectic of Berkeley and Hume, I have arrived at Schopenhauer's dictum:

The form of the appearance of the will is only the present, not the past or the future; the latter do not exist except in the concept and by the linking of the consciousness, so far as it follows the principle of reason. No man has ever lived in the past, and none will live in the future; the present alone is the form of all life, and is a possession that no misfortune can take away. . . . We might compare time to an infinitely revolving circle: the half that is always sinking would be the past, that which is always rising would be the future; but the indivisible point at the top which the tangent touches, would be the present. Motionless like the tangent, that extensionless present marks the point of contact of the object, whose form is time, with the subject, which has no form because it does not belong to the knowable but is the precondition of all knowledge. (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* I, 54)

A fifth-century Buddhist treatise, the *Visuddhimagga*, or *The Path to Purity*, illustrates the same doctrine with the same figure: "Strictly speaking, the life of a being lasts as long as an idea. Just as a rolling carriage wheel touches earth at only one point, so life lasts as long as a single idea" (Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy* I, 373). Other Buddhist texts say that the world is annihilated and resurges six billion five hundred million times a day and that every man is an illusion, vertiginously wrought by a series of solitary and momentary men. "The man of a past moment," *The Path to Purity* advises us, "has lived, but he does not live nor will he live; the man of a future moment will live, but he has not lived nor does he now live; the man of the present moment lives, but he has not lived nor will he live" (I, 407), a dictum we may compare with Plutarch's "Yesterday's man died in the

man of today, today's man dies in the man of tomorrow" (*De E apud Delphos*, 18).

And yet, and yet . . . To deny temporal succession, to deny the self, to deny the astronomical universe, appear to be acts of desperation and are secret consolations. Our destiny (unlike the hell of Swedenborg and the hell of Tibetan mythology) is not terrifying because it is unreal; it is terrifying because it is irreversible and iron-bound. Time is the substance of which I am made. Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges.

*Freund, es ist auch genug. Im Fall du mehr willst lesen,
So geh und werde selbst die Schrift und selbst das Wesen.*

[Friend, this is enough. Should you wish to read more,/Go and yourself become the writing, yourself the essence.]

—Angelus Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann* VI, 263 (1675)

[1944–47]

[SJL]