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METAMORPHOSIS OF TRIPARTITE TIME ("THE PRESENT IS NOT IN TIME: TIME IS IN THE PRESENT")

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Abstract

The essay presented here is dedicated to the category of "time," structured around three verbs —*to be, to live, and to exist*— which, in turn, imply different linguistic terms, conceptual uses, and affective experiences.

Keywords: time, being, life, existence, teleological temporality, present, past, future.

To reflect upon time is invariably to engage with it as though it were a *thing-in-itself*—an entity susceptible to investigation and conceptualization—while recognizing that such reflection already presupposes a certain phenomenological distance. This approach grants us an access not to time as a substance, but to time as a *phenomenon*, as that which manifests itself in and through becoming. Yet, the everyday conception of temporality—subordinated to teleological activity and instrumental rationality—tends to obscure or impoverish the understanding of its genuine nature. As a temporal being, the human individual is a finite entity and, for that reason, cannot remain indifferent to what befalls them: to what time enacts

upon the body, the tissues, the cells, and the brain—structures that time allows to grow, mature, and, ultimately, to decay and dissolve.

Time, as a reality distinct from any other, is so constituted that it can barely endure the human spirit's insistence on problematizing it. When we attempt to unmask its elusive substance, "its thickness vanishes, its texture unravels, and only fragments remain with which the analyst must content himself" (E. M. Ciorán. *La caída en el tiempo*. Monte Ávila, Barcelona, 1988, p. 146). To speak of time, therefore, is already to falsify it: to reduce its polysemic and multifaceted nature into the rigid framework of linguistic or conceptual representation. This falsification begins the moment we attempt to measure, quantify, homogenize, or typify time; it becomes even more pronounced when we attribute to it evaluative determinations—when we call certain epochs *classical* or *decadent*, certain periods *catastrophic* or *thrilling*, or particular moments *youthful* or *mature*. Such attributions belong not to time itself but to the human condition, which projects its own affective and cultural categories onto the temporal continuum. Yet these projections, while perhaps inevitable, fail to exhaust the plenitude of time's manifestations.

Still, one might ask whether, without the processes of comparison, evaluation, cognition, use, consumption, enjoyment, exploitation, or mastery that structure our engagement with the world, time would nonetheless retain its indispensable function as the condition for life and evolution—for the becoming of vegetal, animal, and human beings alike. Once transformed into what Jankélévitch calls a "spatial temporality," the "shadow of itself," time as *becoming* or *duration*—measured by clock or calendar, experienced as pleasure or pain—seems, at first glance, alien to us. In a certain sense, it is: for time would persist even if there were no one left to ask "what time is it?" no consciousness to name the days and months, or to situate the epoch of existence. Time remains perpetually irreversible, whereas life appears reversible, manipulable—capable, for example, of interrupting the succession of events, redirecting their flow, slowing some while accelerating others, delaying or advancing them according to will.

As teleological beings, our purposes, goals, ideals, and hopes unfold within time, though this does not imply that what transpires in time exhausts its meaning. We tend to conflate *time* with *history*, and with the events or products that compose it. Yet history, and all that occurs within it, is not *time sensu stricto*; rather, it is time's anthropological image—its teleological and spatialized hypostasis, configured according to the contours of human existence.

Many thinkers, following Aristotle, have linked the concept of time with that of movement—understood in the full breadth of its meaning, which encompasses *becoming* as the continuous

passage of change and as that which invariably refers to the *when*. In this view, time is not an independent entity but a measure or articulation of movement itself. Conversely, the quantitative and spatial sciences—arithmetic and geometry—cannot adequately respond to the question, *"when are two plus three equal to five?"* The intrinsic relation between two and three is independent of temporal conditions; no duration can modify it. In this sense, mathematical relations are *timeless*: they occur within a conceptual order that eludes temporal succession.

The present may be conceived as a kind of *narrow passage*—a bottleneck through which the future becomes the past and the past projects itself into the future. The present divides and unites the temporal modes; it stands as the threshold of their mutual determination. It is not only contiguous with the past but also arises from it, shaped and conditioned by its determinations. Simultaneously, the present influences the future, while the future, in turn, retrospectively selects certain traces of memory, reworking them into the horizon of its own projects. Thus, the one who maintains that the present moves toward the future is no less justified than the one who claims that the future moves toward the present. Both statements are equally true —but only partially— because time as such is not merely "running" or "flowing," but inherently involves a "double movement" or a "double bind."

If one attempts to deduce the unidirectionality of time from its irreversibility, one must also accept the coexistence of two opposing unidirectionalities: the irreversibility of the future toward the past and that of the past toward the future. This reasoning risks becoming circular: time is irreversible because it is unidirectional, and unidirectional because it is irreversible. Such circularity reveals the difficulty of defining temporality in terms of a single logical or ontological vector.

Hence, the image of time as an "arrow" that flies ceaselessly forward expresses but one aspect of its nature—its irreversibility. Even this image, however, remains insufficient. For time is not only *movement* or *flow* but also *becoming* and *decay*. The heterogeneity of temporal experience may therefore be more accurately represented by a *curved line*, within which ascents and descents alternate, reaching peaks and descending into troughs. Time is not simply the occurrence of change; rather, it is that by which things change, the condition of their ordered movement and transformation.

Time is neither a being that dissolves into nothingness nor an eternity devoid of being that endures without change. It is that which subsumes both being and non-being, the perpetual transition from one to the other. Time transcends the polarity of being and nothingness, for

both are its immanent determinations. Every being that exists *in* time moves inevitably toward non-being: to endure is to change, and to live and to exist are, intrinsically, to die. Time is *becoming* precisely because it cannot be arrested or annihilated. Thus, when we say "being is time," we affirm that time transcends every individual being; and when we say "time is a being," we reify time—lowering nothingness to the level of a parasite feeding upon the "body" of being, even though both being and nothingness remain attributes of time itself.

As an attribute of Being, time allows the organization of events into a sequence: past, present, and future. The present serves as a "nest" within this current of becoming. To say "the present is" may imply that the past has entirely passed without residue—or, conversely, that it has taken root in the now, transmitting its "seeds" into the future. Only within the present do past and future coexist; only the present grants them form and mode of being. The past no longer exists, yet it has not vanished into the abyss of non-being; it persists in the depths of the present. The future does not yet exist, but it subsists as *becoming*, as that which is in the process of being born. Its advent is prepared in the now, even though its arrival remains unforeseeable.

The essence of time—like that of any essence—is disclosed through existence, in its embodiment within reality. What fails to be realized cannot constitute an essence. Reality, therefore, does not present itself as an isolated instant, but as a succession of instants—The present "sustains" and unites what departs and what approaches, what becomes and what vanishes. Reality itself is born, endures, becomes, lives, exists, decays, and disappears in temporal form. It is in the present that the origin of finite being emerges, and in the present that its end is fulfilled.

Only time constitutes a true *perpetuum mobile*, moving ceaselessly without requiring or expending the energy that all material beings must employ to move in space. It is unsurprising, then, that real time conceals itself behind the veil of consciousness, which transfigures it into a "sacred trinity": the past, the present, and the future. In the paradoxical formulation of André Comte-Sponville, "the present is not in time; time is in the present." Meanwhile, in the practical order of everyday existence—structured by teleological imperatives—real time hides behind another mental trinity: the *already*, the *now*, and the *not-yet*.

This vital and existential time that we ceaselessly experience and employ is not, strictly speaking, the time that unfolds in itself. Rather, it is the time we *remember* and *anticipate*—the temporality constructed by consciousness as recollection and projection. We retain what no longer is, and we project ourselves toward what is not yet. This temporal mode may thus

be termed *teleological time*: time oriented toward ends, structured by intention and expectation. Yet, paradoxically, only this teleological *temporality* enables us to form any notion of *real time*, for it is the form of time most intimately adapted to human thought. It corresponds to the purposive structure of consciousness and, in that sense, is consubstantial with human behavior, valuation, knowledge, and existence. Hence, the past and the future together constitute vital and existential time—anchored in memory and anticipation, though often at the expense of the present itself.

As is well established, this vital and existential time—or teleological temporality—forms a unity of past, present, and future: a tripartite structure that organizes the human experience of temporality. The future, verbally designated as *not yet*, is apprehended either sensorially or conceptually as *anticipation*; the past, perceived as *no longer*, is experienced in consciousness as memory; the present, referred to as *now*, manifests as a *sui generis* duration—a lived reality in which the subject synthesizes within itself two opposing derivations: the time that has gone and the time that is yet to come. Thus, tripartite time—past, present, and future—appears as the unity of three interrelated mental and experiential acts: attention, recollection, and anticipation.

The future becomes actual in the present, the "now" in the form of hopes or anticipatory expectations. The same occurs with the past, which takes the form of the present as a memory that unfolds now. Attention (a concept that encompasses everything that happens, including retention and expectation), memory, and anticipation condition one another, and in this way the total representation of an event or occurrence that endures in the present is constructed. The resurrected memory and the planned expectation underlie the recollection of an episode and the foresight of a particular event. They are linked in the now and correlate in a primordial way with past and future, integrated within the present in which everything occurs: acting, contemplating, experiencing, remembering, and foreseeing.

The present, therefore, is above all the *time of action*. It can be understood as a dialectical synthesis of three components: possibility (future), necessity (past), and operation (present). These are bound together in relations that are both oppositional and complementary, forming the ontological conditions of teleological activity—not only in the human being but, to varying degrees, in other sentient and animate species as well.

Human consciousness, however, tends to impose an equivalence upon these three modalities of time, conceiving them as if they possessed *equal status*. This interpretive tradition begins with Saint Augustine, who observed that "the past no longer *is*; the future is *not yet*; and only

the present *is*"—yet even the present, in his account, is "a mere instant without duration," for the present "exists only by *ceasing to be*." "No one denies that the present lacks duration, since it immediately falls after the past; yet the attention through which what will be passes and recedes into the past still endures" (San Agustín. *Confesiones* XI, 28, 1).

This Augustinian conception of temporality appears, at first glance, both compelling and coherent, especially when viewed through the lens of teleological and formal rationality. Nevertheless, it effects a transformation of time itself: in this interpretation, *real* time becomes *subjective* temporality, produced and constituted by consciousness. For Augustine, temporality arises not from the external world but from the interior of the soul; it is not an objective dimension but a psychological synthesis. Yet, even if we grant that the past no longer is—because it has ceased to be—and that the future is not yet—because it has not yet arrived—the present, unlike either, never ceases; it does not interrupt itself. This endurance of the present allows us to affirm that time possesses an objective reality, one that sustains itself independently of consciousness and does not dissolve with the vanishing of the moment.

Time is an instant at the boundary between two "nothings" —the past and the future— yet it is a real instant, the only one that exists, and it endures. "Who among us has ever lived or perceived anything other than what is present in the present? The past? We never perceive it. We see its remnants or traces (statues, documents, memories...) which are themselves present. The future? We never perceive it, except through its signs... or its anticipations within us (forecasts, projects, hopes...), and all of this exists only in the present... I am sure that I have never inhabited the past or the future, but only the present, which endures and changes. In time? No, for it is time itself (the present is no more in time than the universe is in space)" (André Comte-Sponville. *¿Qué es el tiempo?* Andrés Bello, México, 2001, p. 54–55).

As an attribute of infinite matter, time manifests in three modes of Being: inorganic being, living being, and existing being. For human beings, time is given as an indispensable condition (including both an end and a means) of existence in the form of interaction with the world, with others, and with oneself. In this sense, we can not only observe the passage of time and establish temporal relations with different natural phenomena and processes, but also use, interrupt, or subject them to our will, as when we extinguish fires or aid accident victims. We can interrupt the order of events to alter the natural course of occurrences; by modifying causes, we obtain favorable effects.

Although, as is known, *post hoc non est propter hoc* ("after this does not mean because of this"), it is quite evident that causal order, like temporal movement, consists of relations of

succession. Only that in the first case (defining cause) it abstracts from duration, and in the second (defining time) it disregards the material substance of temporal events. For this reason, the "cause–effect" relation can be deduced from temporal succession, and conversely, the temporal relation can be derived from the causal relation.

About forty-five years ago, molecular biologists began to see the possibility that the biochemical components of plants and animals might serve as "clocks" with which to measure time and to date the moments when evolutionary divergences occurred. The pioneer who initiated these new forms of dating evolutionary processes through the genetic information of *mitochondria* was the molecular biologist Allan Wilson. In his famous article published in *Nature* in 1987, he discovered "the ticking of the molecular clock," showing that, over long periods of time, the molecular structures of genetic information undergo modification.

As is well known, the genetic inheritance of every living being —humans included— is found in fine double filaments of DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) within the chromosomes, contained in the cell nucleus. But alongside the DNA of the cell nucleus, there exist tiny particles scattered throughout the cell, discovered only through high-resolution microscopes: mitochondria. These are indispensable parts of the cell, often called its "powerhouses," because mitochondria chemically transform energy into the necessary form for cell's vital processes.

And although cells depend on the contribution of mitochondria, the latter do not belong to the former. Rather, they are descendants of minuscule bacteria that, at the dawn of life, were absorbed by cells and formed a mutually advantageous symbiosis; beneficial to the cell because mitochondria supply it with energy, and beneficial to the mitochondria because they gain an ideal place to live.

Mitochondria possess their own genetic information, independent of the genetic information contained in the chromosomes of the cell nucleus. What is most curious is that the sperm cell contains the father's genetic information, which, when it fuses with the ovum, gives rise to a new living being, but it does not provide mitochondria to the fertilized female ovum. All mitochondria belong to the woman, which means they pass from mother to offspring, forming a *purely maternal lineage*.

The genetic information in mitochondria is copied many times throughout the life of a cell in an individual organism and is completely independent from the genetic information of stem cells. This means that the organism configuration also gradually changes, forming the

biological evolutionary clock ticking at the molecular level. By comparing differences between mitochondrial DNA lineages and calculating the rate at which they appeared, it is possible to trace these lineages back to a common female ancestor: the so-called "Mitochondrial Eve."

At its birth, civilization is characterized by the language formation, agriculture formation, animals' domestication, metallurgy emergence, dwellings constitution, writing development, trade, state power establishment, religion unfolding, and closely linked to them, war, slavery, and exploitation. The evolutionary twilights of the *Homo Sapiens* becoming were replaced by the bloody dawn of its history.

Unlike the concept of pure time (time in itself), abstracted from the movement of material objects, real time —which links the past with the future through the present— is not characterized by the equivalence of its temporal moments: no moment of real time is identical to another, even if they may be equal in duration. Real events and phenomena, even naturally recurring cyclical processes, do not simply happen one after another; they derive from one another, forming a specific and essentially unrepeatable order. In this sense, the world itself, said Leibniz, is unrepeatable, as it is life, and of course, the history of humanity and the existence of any of its members. The irreversibility of time and the unrepeatability of worldly events reflect one another. And this inevitable succession of changes constitutes the essence of time, in its fullest and most meaningful sense for human beings.

The idea of the world's unrepeatability lies at the foundation of the notions of development, evolution, becoming, and the worldly current into whose waters no one can step twice. It was precisely this idea, born in ancient Greek philosophy, that replaced the perception of the world based on a spatial-visual worldview, shifting attention toward a conception that emphasizes the temporal, the changing; one that considers not so much what is, but what becomes, what unfolds, what is or ceases to be.

Unfortunately, our anthropological mind places the three modalities of temporality on the same level, robbing the present of its reality through fugacity or irreversibility, without properly emphasizing that the present incessantly endures and perpetually passes. Irreversibility is defined as the impossibility of repetition, and this creates the temptation to dissolve duration into instantaneity. Time is not composed of instants, just as the continuum is not composed of indivisibles. These instants, obtained through the infinite division of time, exist in time only in potentiality, not in actuality. This "dialectic," as we know, is what

prevents Achilles from overtaking the tortoise, even though it is an undeniable fact that he does overtake and surpass it.

Henri Bergson did not deny the co-extensibility of infinite time in relation to infinite space; however, he wrote about "virtual halts" that allow us to demonstrate that time is also infinitely divisible. The idea of the divisibility of time —its fragmentation into "instants" as the smallest temporal particles— stems from the spatial image of time as a point stretched into an infinite line in both directions. Aristotle had already shown convincingly that temporal concepts can only be expressed through spatial images, apprehended by the senses. These images are projected onto and applied to the time of our mind, subjecting it to the dictatorship of spatialization and quantification.

Indeed, the *now* is, because we find ourselves *here*; for our mind, the instant is a point to which we ascribe duration —as if duration were to pause— although in reality time never ceases. The *after* is *there*, *ahead*, somewhere distant from the *here*. In fact, it is not yet, but will be. And the before, once no longer here, lies behind, though in truth it has vanished forever and will "live on," at best, only in our memory. Through the here, the now "halts" the present, but the present is irreversible and constitutes the very objectivity of time; and, in the case of life as a peculiar form of its manifestation, it endows it with an "invisible purpose," a "meaning." Whenever we speak of "life," we indicate "meaning," as a geometer indicates direction by drawing an arrow on a vector.

In reversibility —this "spatial idol," as Jankélévitch called it— a symmetrical attribute is revealed: the path that has been traveled in one order may also be retraced in the reverse order; the return folds exactly over the way there. This possibility of inversion serves as proof of spatial existence and determines the being of objects traversed forward and backward along two paths. "The impossibility of retracing, in reverse, the same stages, and thus of confirming for oneself the evidence of the path, depriving the becoming of that limiting circumscription that defines a path as an object, gives our lived time something unfinished, dreamlike, and unreal. What has been experienced only once, without ever being able to repeat or confirm the experience, becomes ever more equivocal and, in the long run, infinitely doubtful… Did I really live it? Was it truly I who lived it? But above all, the asymmetry or one-sidedness of this time lies at the very root of our tragedy: the prohibition not only to invert but to repeat confers upon each moment something unique and exceptionally precious, the uniqueness of Kairos, that is, of the decisive conjuncture…" (Vladimir Jankélévitch. *La mala conciencia*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1987, p. 48).

From this it follows that the irreversibility of *lived time* dramatizes and intensifies duration, escaping our control. It is impossible to bring the becoming back; the *future*, once turned into memory, will never again become *future*. The car driving back along the same road retraces the same path in reverse, but the driver experiences a new series of moments that, in a qualitative sense, are irreversible.

To overcome the monistic approach imposed by common sense, Henri Bergson and Vladimir Jankélévitch suggest putting an end to the reduction of time to space and freeing it from "bastard concepts" such as number, speed, simultaneity, and the like. According to this view, there are two kinds of "time": "real time" and "space-time." Of these two, only one is true, for the other is merely the counterimage of the first. Or, more precisely still, mathematical time is a falsified time only insofar as it claims to play the role of true time; science, which would be truthful with respect to completed facts, becomes deceitful when it claims also to legislate over facts in the process of being realized, over the present that is on the verge of fulfillment" (Ibid., p. 69)

From this perspective, every lived duration possesses a specific quality, a particular value, an affective coefficient derived from our effort, our waiting, or our impatience. For this reason, lived duration has an intrinsic purpose; what matters here is the interval itself, which has value in and of itself. According to Bergson and Jankélévitch, the perceived duration through intuition provides the basis for a kind of higher anthropocentrism, allowing us to affirm that in all circumstances there exists a privileged system —no longer a system of reference, but a system superior to all reference—, the one we experience from within, at the very instant we speak. No paradox can prevail against the certainty of an inner thought that experiences itself as willing, living, and enduring.

Every human being possesses a duration that becomes conscious; consequently, each person rightly takes themselves as a "reference" within this privileged plane. Since duration is irreversible, it carries with it events that are absolutely prior and absolutely subsequent and whose order cannot be altered. In this same way, the intuition of duration restores to the universe hierarchies and prerogatives. That is, an axiological realm that egalitarian relativism strives to abolish in its attempt to "spatialize" time.

From such an approach arises the question: What is the immanent stigma of humankind —of its mode of living and its teleological temporality— that constitutes the source of its origin and possibly bears within itself the seeds of its future disappearance? According to Jankélévitch, this enigma is the *will*: "Before willing, there is still willing, and always willing.

Will irradiates into tissues, brain, and intellect, instead of being suddenly born to execute the plans of the intellect and to satisfy the tissues needs. Will is comparable to a magic lantern, in which a single flame makes visible the most varied images... Behavior, organs —the entire etiology and morphology— are, thus, nothing more than an irradiation of will, which alone is primary and alone is productive." (Vladimir Jankélévitch. *Henri Bergson*. Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa, 1962, pp. 178–179)

This metaphorical statement, however paradoxical it may seem, holds some truth, though not the whole truth. The biological foundation of any vital process is constituted by metabolism, a set of chemical reactions that occur within cells to obtain nutrients and energy from the external environment and to synthesize macromolecules from simple compounds with the goal of maintaining homeostasis: a balance among all bodily systems necessary for survival and functioning.

From this, it follows that metabolism presupposes certain movements, certain activities performed by all living beings, which begin precisely with *wanting* (lack, deficiency, deprivation, insufficiency, absence, and at the same time renewal, restitution, appetite, aspiration, satisfaction, pleasure). This "wanting" drives them toward the search for and appropriation of what is necessary and, first and foremost, the nutrients selection through which the exchange between the organism and its natural environment takes place. This search and evaluation of what is beneficial or useful is almost always intertwined with the confrontation and overcoming of various internal and external obstacles.

As a "physiological exchange" of energetic substances between the living organism and its external environment, metabolism is a fundamental attribute inherent to all living things. For this reason, it constitutes a criterion distinguishing living matter from inorganic, inanimate, or inert matter that predominates in the universe.

It is now a fact that our era increasingly reveals a rupture between past and future, between tradition and innovation. Whereas earlier periods were characterized by the continuity of habits, attitudes, and meanings established, preserved, and even sacralized for centuries, postmodernity presents itself as something discontinuous, a rupture resulting from the dizzying acceleration of change in every sphere of human activity. The link between what comes from the past, what occurs in the present, and what is expected of the future becomes ever more problematic, contingent, and unpredictable.

The flood of transformations, innovations, discoveries, information, evaluations, and interpretations inherent to the age of the Internet and mobile phones leads us to think that time not only endures but also incessantly passes, escapes, surprises, saddens, and even exhausts us. It even seems that *time contracts* under our obsession with fleeing the past, intensifying the present, and hastening the arrival of the future.

The present, as real time, becomes more "servile" and less "habitable," because we burden it with the urgent tasks of tomorrow and the unfinished obligations of yesterday. Although we are always in the present, we feel that its rivals —the past and the future— urge it to become either a *memory* of our mind or a premonition of our hope. It seems that the "poor present" is always overloaded, because it must constantly pay tribute for its neglect of the past and its indifference to the future; and if it did not pay this tribute, it would pass from being "poor" to being "miserable."

It seems that humanity is in a state of perpetual transition, and this "inconvenience" has become permanent. Moreover, the direction in which we move is defined less and less by what is desirable, and more and more by what is feasible. This situation not only generates agitation and upheaval but also turns life into something unfinished, making more evident than ever the idea that every point of arrival is only a transit station. Transitoriness is the new "temporality" of modern man.

As Jean Baudrillard observes, we have become, at least virtually, masters of this world, but the object and purpose of this mastery have disappeared. The world in which we find ourselves, instead of being under our control, has escaped it and become a runaway world.

Reverence for time and its increasingly vertiginous rhythm has given rise to what might be called a *novocracy*: a regime of thought marked by the arrogance of novelty and the conviction that "everything new is superior simply because it is new". This principle, which urges both an unrelenting pursuit of the future and an evasion of the present, transforms existence into a succession of fleeting moments, each of which claims supremacy over the last.

At the same time, any inquiry into the origin or destination of time is regarded as meaningless, for progress and the tendency toward perfection are assumed to be intrinsic attributes of time itself, autonomous and independent of human relations or of the efforts of those who seek to employ or comprehend it. To the one who strives passionately toward a goal, it may even appear as though time itself trembles because of the impatience to realize the desired end.

The acceleration of temporal experience, driven by the avalanche of technological innovation, has resulted in the *contraction of the present*. This has fostered a series of modern myths: that to pause is to *fall*, that speed is synonymous with efficiency, that the present serves only as a springboard toward the future, and that the past no longer bears significance. Yet from this acceleration a paradox arises. The very discoveries, innovations, behavioral norms, and future-oriented projects that dominate the present promise to liberate *tomorrow's present* from the anxieties of yesterday. Nonetheless they intensify our sense of being subjugated by time. Our restlessness does not abate; it expands, gathering momentum like a snow avalanche.

The rhythm of time that structures contemporary life may be compared to a film reel spinning at a velocity that surpasses the natural capacity of visual perception. Small wonder, then, that meeting the despotic demands of *novocracy* increasingly requires risking neurosis or the prospect of physical collapse.

We have come to perceive ourselves as "temporal beings", for time dictates our judgment and value standards. At intervals we are overtaken by an anguish rooted in the irreversibility of temporal flow; we lament that reality has lost its former coherence and that life has become a ceaseless agitation. This sense of emptiness is not limited to those schooled in metaphysics: desolating absurdity may confront anyone, unexpectedly and without cause. Regardless of its origin, such perplexity derails the individual, compelling reflection on the meaninglessness of accelerated change and the futility of ephemeral motion.

Faced with existential vacuity, consciousness leaps instinctively toward the perennial metaphysical questions, those which are at once deeply personal and universally binding: what impels us to traverse the path of destiny, from cradle to grave, dutifully fulfilling our daily obligations, earning our bread by the sweat of our brow, while the world, moving at ever greater speed, drags us toward an unpredictable and often bitter colored future?

Death is thus perceived as a *cruel fate*, for it almost always arrives *before* our desire to live and to experience joy has waned. Even when its imminence is foreseen, its arrival is lived as an overwhelming and invariably untimely loss. Once, when we judged the past from the vantage of the present, we felt pride in living here and now; when we evaluated the present through the idealized criteria of the future, we consoled ourselves that we might yet partake in its "flashes." Today, however, our mentality has shifted: the premonition of an apocalyptic exodus leads us to feel "fortunate," believing that we shall vanish before the horrors destined for our descendants come to pass.

Common sense, of course, offers timely justifications for such sentiments; and yet —*and yet*— this reasoning, however persuasive, can dispel the persistent feeling that what awaits us, or those who come after us, is somehow unjust, treacherous, or at the very least ill-timed. We rebel against destiny in two modalities: against the inexorable future that we wish to postpone indefinitely, and against the irreparable past that, at moments, we long to retrieve.

The feeling of temporal scarcity, far from diminishing, only intensifies, for acceleration is a self-propelling process, and contemporary life compels us to move along the razor's edge. We cannot stop, rest, or begin to do what might sustain a balanced and tranquil existence. The reason for this ceaseless race lies largely in our ingrained habit of thought: that to stop is to fall, that running is the very emblem of efficiency, and that the intoxicating moments of pleasure mark the summit of happiness. "*It's now or never… tomorrow will be too late*," sings Elvis Presley, elevating the instant of amorous passion to the level of an unpostponable imperative, one that neither anticipates the future nor emerges from the past.

The contemporary dynamic is so dizzying that it has given rise to an extraordinary proliferation of what might be called the "relics of civilization". Today, not only automobiles, computers, and mobile phones age with astonishing rapidity, but so too do forms of experience, images of the human, social norms, behavioral stereotypes, and conceptual frameworks for understanding the world. With every new turn of this accelerated spiral of time, the recent past ceases to appear familiar or even intelligible. What occurs is what Hermann Lübbe has termed the "innovations condensation": a phenomenon in which the future intervenes within the present, as forecasts and projects imperiously dictate current decisions. Yet, paradoxically, this same process reduces the likelihood that future actions will correspond to the values or judgments of the present.

Simultaneously, the "volume" of the past that can no longer be mobilized for contemporary use expands. The present itself dries and shrinks —like the skin of a toad— for the increasing number of innovations within any given temporal unit shortens the interval beyond which the past already appears obsolete. We can no longer recognize, in the receding structures of the recent world, the familiar forms of our own time; the contemporary itself comes to appear alien and opaque. The modes of perceiving and judging the world that once guided our parents are, in many essential respects, no longer adequate for us, and they will be still less so for our children and grandchildren.

Our perception of time is intimately bound to our internal rhythms, yet our responses to time are socially and culturally conditioned. Owing to the natural slowness of biological rhythms,

the elderly often feel that the world moves faster, even when it does not. Yet far more decisive than this biological factor is the acceleration of social life, which transforms our sense of "expected duration". The contraction of the present —brought about by the multiplication of discoveries and innovations— entails a progressive reduction of the future span during which our technical and cultural environment will be perceived as different from the world we inhabit today. The shrinking of the present, in turn, signifies the shortening of the temporal intervals within which we can rely upon any stability in our relationships or expectations.

From early childhood, every human being learns the intervals and rhythms appropriate to the duration of different processes, events, and relations. We learn, for example, that a parent leaves for work and returns after eight hours, that a school lesson lasts an hour, and that playtime with friends in the park unfolds within a certain span. In this way, each of us constructs an internal horizon of expectations regarding duration. These rhythms possess both biological and sociocultural foundations. The current disruption of these rhythms compresses our expectations of duration within familiar events, producing the pervasive impression that we are condemned to live in a state of perpetual haste. The effects of social acceleration thus reach their limit in our biological incapacity to keep pace with them.

The accelerated rhythm of time *cultivates the compulsions* that each contemporary subject imposes upon themselves. There is an almost unanimous intuition that, in the past, the pressure of this vertiginous tempo was not so oppressive, though such coercion has always existed, at least since the emergence of that mechanical grid subdivided into spatial and quantitative units: the *clock*. This instrument, which still determines our chronological position within the temporal scale, arose in response to the necessity of coordinating opportune moments tied to social activities and collective endeavors among individuals and institutions.

The advent of language and the transmission of knowledge and *technological summas* across generations enabled the self-regulation of the speaking being in relation to time; a force that, in turn, became the emblem of a coercion exercised by society itself. The internalization of temporal norms by each new generation is so deeply rooted and ubiquitous that it ceases to appear as a cultural artifact and is instead perceived as a gift of Nature. Indeed, the social determination of time —expressed, for example, in a phrase such as "tomorrow at 12:00 p.m."—can *synthesize a priori* (to borrow Kant's expression) an immense constellation of empirical events: a lovers' rendezvous, the end of a football match, a professional

examination, a flight departure, the beginning of a surgical operation, or even some catastrophic occurrence.

The innovations condensation is inseparable from the proliferation of the obsolete. The dynamism of society manifests itself, among other ways, in the growing number of elements that still belong to the present yet are already perceived by its members as remnants of the past. Whereas once the increase in productive efficiency occurred through the installation of new machinery after the physical decay of the old, today the duration of service has been drastically reduced. Machines no longer expire through physical wear, but through functional exhaustion, in accordance with the logic of instrumental reason. Thus, the simultaneity of heterogeneous elements intensifies, obliging society to confront the acceleration of progress through techniques of selection and evaluation, through recompositing fragments drawn from diverse works by eminent thinkers. Such procedures constitute our most adequate responses to the escalating challenges of knowledge that await in the future.

The specter of the future haunts the present and, it seems, will continue to do so in whatever future presents itself. Like Janus, the two-faced god, the future threatens us—since we are finite—with ominous prophecies, while at the same time enticing us with the magic of its promises. Yet when it finally becomes the present, it exposes the reverse side of its prosaic illusions, marked by disenchantment. Hope in the future, therefore, becomes the reason we submit our present existence to the "dictatorship" of tomorrow: we live by sacrificing the instant we inhabit for the one that follows and flee from that one, too, toward the next.

As teleological beings, driven by the desire to realize our projects as swiftly as possible, we strip the present of its intrinsic worth. Its axiological essence is torn apart: on one hand, only the present is real time; on the other, its existence is constantly subordinated to its spectral siblings: the past and the future. Time, in its fugacity and irreversibility, confounds us and forces us to retreat into *subjective temporality*: to hide behind memory or imagination.

This protean nature of time, immersed in the vortex of incessant problems, led Vladimir Jankélévitch to characterize it as a "chronic illness" inherent to the human condition, from birth until death. Indeed, the present, as real time, is "pregnant" with the future, which is, at the very least, the *not-impossible*. If possibility is everything that can occur except what is impossible, this does not imply that future possibility precedes or dominates the reality of the present. On the contrary, nothing possible exists that does not depend upon reality for its practical realization, for possibility is what may or may not be actualized, or may be actualized otherwise than we conceived it.

Nevertheless, neither the anatomy of the past nor the diagnosis of the present, however precise or forceful, can yield an exact prognosis. The path toward the future always remains open to multiple possibilities, some unforeseen. Humanity learns from the errors of its past but will never acquire sufficient experience to domesticate the uncertainty of the future. Thus, foresight, however rational and exacting, can never banish the joy of hope.

To lose all hope and suddenly attain the object of desire. What miracle could rival the grace of such fortune! Yet, as a foretaste of happiness marked by the torments of waiting, hope is capable of displacing the foresight founded on analysis and the will to resolution. Hope, when detached from the objective calculation of future possibilities and from the will to act, may cause harm, even without intending it.