Defence of Eternity

Volume One
A History of the Conceptions of Eternity

Jaromír Hladík

Clementinium Editions

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Volume One — A History of the Conceptions of Eternity

Jaromír Hladík

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Editor's note. — The text follows Hladík's German autograph (the Hradčany notebook, *Národní archiv*), the only complete witness to the work and still in good condition. In the author's lifetime this first volume had known only a confidential printing at Prague, by the Verlag Calve (late 1928 – early 1929, some 240 copies), a printing now lost. The present edition gives its English translation; the German original is reproduced in the appendix. The editor's interventions are kept apart; the single note called in the body is in Hladík's own hand, and marked as such.

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Contents

A Note on the Text 8

Chapter I — Parmenides and the Being Without a Fissure 9

Chapter II — Aristotle: Time, the Number of Motion 37

Chapter III — Plotinus: the One Outside Time 58

Chapter IV — Eternity as Negation (Stoics, Sceptics) 81

Chapter V — The Eternal Numbers: Pythagoras, Philo, Augustine 93

Chapter VI — Boethius and the Latin Scholastics 112

Chapter VII — The Sephiroth: Structure and Duration in the Kabbala 131

Chapter VIII — The Alphabet as Architecture of the World (Sefer Yetzirah) 144

Chapter IX — Böhme and the Contraction of the Abyss 162

Chapter X — Nicholas of Cusa: the coincidence of opposites 179

Chapter XI — Bruno and the Infinity of Worlds 197

Chapter XII — Temporality among the Medieval Rabbis 216

Chapter XIII — Spinoza: Under the Form of Eternity 228

Chapter XIV — Newton: Time as Universal Container 247

Chapter XV — Leibniz: Relational Time 261

Chapter XVI — Hume: Succession as Habit 280

Chapter XVII — Kant: Time as the A Priori Form of Intuition 296

Chapter XVIII — Hegel: Time and the Concept 312

Chapter XIX — Einstein: The Relativity of Time 330

Chapter XX — Hinton and the Fourth Dimension 350

Chapter XXI — Psychic Repetition (Janet, Freud) 364

Conclusion of Volume One 379

Appendix: the original German text 392

A Note on the Text

The *Defence of Eternity* was composed in German, at Prague, in the late nineteen-twenties. Hladík reasoned upon the languages of his life, the German in which he wrote, the Czech of his city, the Hebrew of his prayers, and it is upon these, never upon the reader's own, that his grammatical examples bear. The present translation renders his reasoning in the language of this volume, but has left those examples in the languages in which he took them ; let them be read as the specimens of a demonstration that would hold of any language that ranges time into compartments.

Chapter I

Parmenides and the Being Without a Fissure

Were one to follow the custom of the schools, it would no doubt be proper to begin this "history of the conceptions of eternity" with Egypt, with Babylon, or with the opening chapters of Genesis. The reader would there find consoling images: cycles of flood and drought, reigns succeeding one another, a creation that has a beginning, a Sabbath that fixes its rhythm. All this still presupposes a world in which one counts the days and the generations, in which eternity, if it exists, envelops time as an indulgent king tolerates the disorder of his subjects.

I shall not begin there. I have chosen, on the contrary, to place at the head of this volume a text that refuses time with an intransigence almost scandalous: the poem of Parmenides of Elea. It recounts neither creation nor deluge; it offers no lost golden age, no catastrophe to come. It gives us only a symbolic scene, a chariot, young maidens, a goddess, in order at once to freeze it within a bare affirmation: *it is*. Whatever does not allow itself to be uttered in this simple form, "it is", is relegated to the domain of illusion.

The reader will forgive a Prague Jew, in 1928, for yielding to the temptation of reading the Greeks from the standpoint of a city where the epochs are stacked like storeys of dust: Gothic above Baroque, Baroque above the Empire, the Empire above the modern bureaucracy. In Prague the centuries cohabit too well for us readily to believe in a "history" that would run, by successive stages, from a beginning to an end. Parmenides is certainly not

the only ancient to have distrusted becoming, Melissus prolongs his Being, Zeno defends its paradoxes, the sceptics will later suspend all judgement upon the nature of time ; but he represents its purest pole, and it was that philosopher who seemed to me, one evening, closer than any Latin theologian to the eternity I am seeking to defend.

I am no Hellenist, and I do not pretend to correct the philologists. I read Parmenides in the halting Greek that the silent reading-rooms of the Clementinum have given me, and in the translations which, every decade, shift the sense of his verses a little. But the essential matter, here, is not to decide between variants. It is to take the measure of the enormity of the conceptual gesture accomplished by this obscure poet: he imagined a being without a fissure, a uniform whole, without before or after, within which our histories, our dramas, our catastrophes are no more than provincial fables.

This first chapter has not, therefore, the ambition of adding one more commentary to the already overburdened dossier of Parmenidean studies. It would rather show how this poem, so slight in appearance, introduces into Western thought a decisive cleavage: either we accept its consequences and time collapses, or we refuse its argument, and then we must explain why it nonetheless appears to us irresistible. The whole history of eternity, as I shall attempt to follow it, will oscillate between these two ways: fidelity to the Being without a fissure, and the obstinate claim of a world that changes.

I. A Prague Preamble: Why Begin with Parmenides?

1. A Reader of Eternities Before a Greek Poem

I remember rather precisely the first time I read, not Parmenides, but what is said of Parmenides. It was in one of those German editions in close-set type, shelved too high for my eyes in a side room of the Clementinum. The volume opened upon a map of Magna Graecia, a list of numbered fragments, and a critical apparatus so minute that it seemed to wish to bury the text beneath its own commentary.

The fragment itself ran to a few lines: a young man borne off in a chariot, a road of Night and Day, a goddess who promises truth and, into the bargain, the opinion of mortals. Thence, very soon, that dry formula: "It is, and it is not possible that it should not be." I was given to understand that all the rest, the cosmology, the theories of the elements, the catalogues of stars, was but concession, pedagogy, or compromise: the true thought of Parmenides was contained in the negation of non-being.

At that moment I had not yet conceived the idea of this book. I was writing notes on the Kabbalah, losing myself in combinations of Hebrew letters, attempting to understand what it means, for a text, to be "without end" rather than "eternal." But I recognised, at the centre of this Greek poem, an audacity that already touched upon my obsession: Parmenides dares to say that what is not cannot in any sense be thinkable. If he is right, all history, biblical or profane, is condemned to be no more than a provisional language for distracted minds.

I have no illusion of entering, like the young man of the proem, by chariot through the "gates of Night and Day." I cross only,

somewhat too often, the heavy door of the Prague library where the centuries lie heaped. Far from the mythical roads of Elea, my journeys are more modest: from the tram of the Josefov to the Latin shelves, from my too-narrow room to a corner desk where a drowsy librarian watches over the fragments of the ancients. And yet something in the Parmenidean description, this invitation of the goddess to hear "voice and arguments", has the same colour as those grey afternoons when one has the impression that the city suspends its own time in order to let a man think.

It is from this standpoint, and not from that of the philologist, that I shall begin: from the effect that a poem so brief can produce upon a modern consciousness which continues, despite the newspapers, to be haunted by the idea of a real without a fissure. Let the reader consent for a moment to follow me into this Prague perspective: I shall speak of Parmenides as of a contemporary, not because I am ignorant of the historical distance that separates us, but because the hypothesis he formulates, the pure and simple abolition of the fissure between being and non-being, seems to me more present than the manifestos of the avant-garde.

There is, I believe, a secret bond between this library where I persist in taking notes and any room where men seek, among the books, a form not surrendered to the hazard of the days. In both cases it is the same anguish that works upon the tables and the shelves: the fear that time may be only a provisional figure of an order already given.

2. The Effacement of Time as Inaugural Gesture

Why, then, begin the history of the conceptions of eternity with Parmenides rather than with more reassuring doctrines?

Precisely because Parmenides does not "conceive" of eternity as a supplementary attribute of time, but as the negation of time. With him, eternity is not an unlimited number of centuries, nor an infinite "afterward" promised to the soul: it is the affirmation that there is, strictly speaking, neither before nor after, neither the day before yesterday nor the day after tomorrow, but a single being, without flaw, that admits of no addition.

The religious traditions to which I belong by birth or by reading have shown themselves more cautious. The Bible recounts a creation, a succession of generations, a history of covenants broken and restored. The Kabbalah, from which I borrow so many metaphors, even imagines worlds that shatter and are mended: it supposes catastrophes internal to the infinite. All this leaves a place, illusory though it be, for our sense of living "in time."

Parmenides leaves no place whatever. If it is true that "what is, is," and that "what is not, is not," then no birth is thinkable (for it would require a passage from non-being to being), no death is thinkable (for it would require the reverse), no real change is possible (for it would require that being be other than it is). Time finds itself thus abolished not out of piety, but by a kind of obstinate logic.

This inaugural gesture seems to me precious for this book. Were I to begin with more conciliatory doctrines, in which eternity coexists amiably with a succession of events, the reader might believe that the very notion of eternity is a mere prolongation of time: a "more" of duration, a distant horizon that one need only extend off to our right. Parmenides forbids this misunderstanding. His being without a fissure is not an infinite

time: it is what remains when every temporal fissure has been declared contradictory.

It will be objected that this suppression of time scarcely resembles our experience. We feel ourselves changing, growing old, losing and gaining, and it would be almost indecent, in 1928, to claim that nothing changes. But it is exactly this contradiction between feeling and thought that renders Parmenides irreplaceable here. He inaugurates a line of reflection in which eternity is no longer the consolation of a slave or the illusion of a mystic, but the result (perhaps untenable) of a reasoning upon what we have the right to say.

In beginning with him, I accept that the reader should find himself confronted, from the outset, with a thesis almost inhuman. The chapters that follow, Plotinus, the eternal numbers, the sephiroth, the modern geometers, may be read as so many attempts to soften or displace this inhumanity: sometimes by reintroducing degrees into being, sometimes by playing upon the image, sometimes by changing the language. But I was anxious that the first word of this book should be a word of arrest: "it is." All the rest will be, in a sense, commentary upon, or resistance to, this utterance.

II. The Poem of Parmenides: Scene, Structure, Promise

1. The Mythic Scene: Chariot, Goddess, Gates of Day and Night

I know the poem of Parmenides only by fragments, and these fragments themselves reach me only through the patient architecture of several scholars. Between the thinker of Elea and myself there have interposed themselves ancient scribes, Byzantine lexicographers, distracted copyists, then modern editors who number, classify, reconstitute. To read Parmenides in Prague in 1928 is to look upon a film of which there remain only a few still images and some notes for the projection.

Yet, despite these lacunae, the opening scene imposes itself with a singular distinctness. A young man, the "Parmenidean" himself, or an exemplary figure, is borne off upon a chariot. The mares conduct him "as far as the heart may desire," along a road that seems to cross the limits of this world. There is no precise landscape: only the impression of a passage. What is essential lies at the end of this road: gates kept by the daughters of the Sun, the common hinge of Day and Night.

The detail here deserves that one should dwell upon it: Parmenides situates his revelation neither in a temple nor at the summit of a mountain, but at a threshold. The decisive place belongs neither to day nor to night; it is that neutral point where one decides why and how these two states alternate. Thought will be called to perform the same gesture as the chariot: to pass beyond the alternation, to place itself on the side of that which does not change when light succeeds to shadow.

The daughters of the Sun, forewarned by their father, set the traveller down before the goddess. She speaks, and the form her speech takes is already a lesson. She promises neither visions nor ecstasies, but a doctrine in two parts:

- first the truth (*aletheia*),
- then the opinion of mortals (*doxa*), "in which there is no true conviction."

The religious element (chariot, goddess, cosmic gates) has at times diverted the attention of the commentators toward a vaguely poetic mysticism. But what the goddess promises is not a rapture: it is a regulated discourse. She holds herself at the hinge of Day and Night in order to say to her disciple: I shall expound to you first that which is beyond dispute, then I shall set before you the illusions you will share, despite all, with other men.

This initial partition, truth on the one side, opinion on the other, gives the poem an almost schoolroom air. It is a table of contents at the edge of the cosmos. But beneath this apparent modesty there lies a conceptual violence: whatever pertains to our ordinary experience (alternation, mixture, birth, death) is promised in advance to the status of a pedagogical concession. The real worthy of the name is found elsewhere, in the "way of truth" that the goddess is about to draw as one would trace a single line through a labyrinth already ruined.

I keep this scenography in mind each time I reread the fragments. It has something involuntarily modern about it: a human being mounted in a vehicle, borne off toward a liminal place, receives a separation of the levels of reality. Our Prague libraries

do scarcely otherwise, in their more commonplace fashion: they set the reader down at the frontier between the rumour of the outside and the problematic purity of the systems.

2. Two Ways for Thought: "it is" / "it is not"

Once the scene is set, the goddess does not lose herself in symbols. She expounds, with a dryness that contrasts with the proem, what she calls the two ways the intelligence may take:

1. The way according to which "it is, and it is impossible that it should not be."

2. The one according to which "it is not, and it is necessary that it should not be."

The second way is at once declared impracticable:

> "From this way I turn you aside, and from the accustomed road of many mortals."

The formula seems to me capital. It is not merely an abstract reasoning: it is an interdiction. The goddess withdraws from thought one of its most familiar gestures: to imagine non-being, lack, absence, the "not yet" and the "no longer."

At first sight it is hard to see why this gesture should be forbidden. Our language seems filled with negations: we speak continually of what "is not," of what "is no longer," of what "is not yet." The poem maintains, nonetheless, that these expressions designate nothing thinkable. One cannot think "what is not": one can only think beings, to which one then adds, by a play of language, marks of negation.

The argument, in its barest form, might be stated thus:

- If I think something, it is because something is thought.
- "Non-being," taken in earnest, would mean: that of which nothing can be affirmed.
- But the moment I claim to think it, I give it a status: it becomes a content.

Non-being, reduced to a word, cannot therefore constitute a way for thought. The only viable way is the one stated by the verb "to be" in the present indicative, without a determinate subject: *it is*.

This dryness has vertiginous consequences. If non-being is unthinkable, there exists no "gap" in being, no interstice into which one might insinuate oneself in order to speak of birth ("what was not comes to be") or of death ("what was ceases to be"). At this level of analysis, the goddess of Parmenides is neither gentle nor consoling: with a single gesture she abolishes the whole arsenal of our favourite verbs.

What becomes, under these conditions, of that which we call time? Each of its features presupposes a complicity with non-being:

- to speak of the "past" is to say that what was is no longer,
- to speak of the "future" is to say that what will be is not yet,
- to speak even of the "present" seems to imply the passage of what was not to what is, then to what will be no longer.

Now it is exactly this play of shadows and gaps that the poem declares illegitimate. There will be no further question, in the "way of truth," either of "what was" or of "what will be": only of what is, without complement.

I understand that this resolution should have exasperated the commentators more sensitive to common sense than to rigour. Parmenides has often been reproached for confusing thought and being, for transforming a logical principle ("one thinks only being") into a description of the real ("there is only being"). But it is precisely this confusion, or this audacity, that interests me here. It makes of the poem not a cosmology among others, but an act of war against time.

3. Truth and Opinion: A Treatise in Two Storeys

Having traced the way of truth, the goddess announces that she will also expound the *doxa*, the opinion of mortals. The contrast is so pronounced that certain exegetes have wished to see in it two juxtaposed poems: a rigorous treatise on Being, followed by an archaic cosmology of no interest. I believe, on the contrary, that the tension between the two is constitutive of the work.

The part on Truth describes, as is well known, a being:

- ungenerated and imperishable,
- unique, continuous, homogeneous,
- motionless, identical with itself,
- "like the mass of a well-rounded sphere."

Each predicate eliminates a fragment of what we spontaneously call time. No "before" is possible for that which has no birth, no "after" for that which cannot perish, no "variation" for that which is wholly homogeneous. Being has no history; it has not even a biography.

There comes next what the goddess presents almost with indulgence: the sphere of opinion. She there sets forth a world composed of two principles, light and night, which mingle and apportion themselves to produce the phenomena: heat, cold, fire, earth, the stars, animals, men. It is, in miniature, what so many systems will later be: an elementary physics, a catalogue of appearances, a sketch of biology.

But Parmenides takes care to signal its degraded status:

> "From this point onward, learn the opinions of mortals, hearkening to the deceptive order of my words."

There is no clearer contradiction: the goddess, who demanded absolute rigour in the first part, now warns the disciple that he is about to hear a deceptive order, an inferior order, and not the truth of Being; a discourse useful, perhaps, for living among other men, but one that does not fully merit the name of the real.

One ought to pause upon this paradox: a cosmology that knows itself to be false, a description of the sensible world offered to mortals while being disqualified in the name of Being. I see in it the matrix of a certain double language that will haunt European metaphysics: on the one side, an "ultimate" discourse

reserved for the initiated, on the other, provisional accounts adapted to the needs of the city.

Time belongs incontestably to these provisional accounts. It governs the deceptive order of the days and the nights, of births and deaths, of generations and empires. It is the mode of appearance of a world that the goddess holds to be ontologically suspect.

One might compare this construction to a house of two storeys:

- on the ground floor, the physics of opinion, where corridors are laid out for light and night, for heat and cold, for the seasons, for births and funerals;
- on the upper floor, invisible from below, a single room, without windows, where one admits nothing but Being, one and motionless.

We ordinarily inhabit the ground floor. There we marry, there we reckon, there we despair. The poem affirms to us that this level of habitation is provisionally tolerated, but that it does not correspond to the true plan of the construction.

I do not know whether Parmenides himself lived with this architecture in mind, or whether the centuries have lent him more coherence than he desired. Be that as it may, for a reader in Prague the distribution of the storeys has something familiar about it. There exist here too, in certain houses, libraries on the upper floor, withdrawn from the noises of the street, where one attempts to suspend the time that the city nonetheless continues to undergo below. Such a library, saturated with books and with stopped clocks, suffices to figure the Prague caricature of the room in which the goddess of Parmenides receives her traveller.

What matters, for the rest of this volume, is that the poem institutes a hierarchy which we shall never cease to encounter: below, a world of changes, of mixtures, of time; above, or on the hither side of it, a region without a fissure where being contemplates itself.

III. The Being Without a Fissure: Logic and Characteristics

I have spoken thus far of the scene of the poem, the gate, the goddess, the promise of two discourses. We must now descend into what is most refractory to staging: the bare logic. Parmenides is not merely an author of a mythic proem; he is, in his fashion, an obstinate logician. His decision to abolish time comes not from a vision but from a series of refusals, refusal of certain kinds of sentence, refusal of certain uses of the verb "to be." What I should like to attempt here is to follow this logic with the slowness of a reader who does not content himself with the textbook summaries.

1. The Impossibility of Non-Being: A Logical Argument

The point of departure is of an almost irritating simplicity. The goddess asks the young man to consider "what it is possible to think and to say." Now, she says, one can think only what is. The

moment I affirm something, however false it be, I affirm something. Even if I claim to "think the void," this void becomes, by the very act of stating it, a certain content of thought.

The word "non-being" seems to designate something; it is pronounced, it is written, it is printed. But if I seek what it signifies, I find nothing to which to refer it. Non-being cannot be an object, on pain of being... a being. It cannot be a property, on pain of there being something that possessed the property of "not being." In the one case as in the other, I fall back at once on the side of being. The second way announced by the goddess, "it is not, and it is necessary that it should not be", thus destroys itself in the attempt to formulate itself. It claims to think non-being; it can only add a grammatical negation to a verb that has sense only for being.

The argument, as one sees, bears in the first place not upon the world but upon language and upon thought. Parmenides begins like a logician who would lay down the following constraint: "Let us speak only of that of which we can speak without contradiction." Now, if to speak of non-being is to confer upon it a kind of logical existence, the only way to remain coherent is to exclude it from discourse. Being, for its part, has need only of that bare verb: "to be" in the present indicative.

This exclusion appears, at first sight, purely verbal. We might point out that our languages bear negation very well: we speak ceaselessly of what "is not," of what "is no longer," of what "is not yet." But Parmenides, it seems to me, invites us to distinguish two levels:

- at the level of ordinary usage, we say without scruple "nothing," "not," "no longer," "never,"

- at the level of rigorous thought, we must recognise that these words designate nothing positive; they mark only a prefix added to a verb that speaks, for its part, only of what is.

Thus, when I say "nothing has happened," I have not discovered a reality called "nothing"; I have simply observed the absence of events within a frame that I suppose already filled with being. Non-being is not a region of reality; it is a manner of speaking.

This distinction, which the modern logicians will reformulate otherwise, suffices to close the second way. It will remain only for the goddess, and for Parmenides behind her, to develop all the consequences of the first way: it is, and it is impossible that it should not be. So long as we remain faithful to this sentence, we no longer have the right to mingle with being the least particle of non-being. It is from this almost maniacal fidelity that the Being without a fissure is born.

2. The Predicates of Being

Once access to non-being is forbidden, Parmenides proceeds like a geometer: he enumerates the properties that being must possess, if one is to avoid all contradiction. The fragments we possess are full of gaps, disputed, translated in various ways; but they agree upon several features, which I shall summarise thus: being is ungenerated and imperishable, unique, continuous, homogeneous, motionless, identical with itself. Each of these predicates, taken in isolation, might seem excessive; taken together, they sketch a figure radically anti-temporal.

a) Ungenerated and imperishable

To show that being can neither be born nor perish, Parmenides takes up, in a still rudimentary form, what we should today call a discussion of the possible cases. If being were born, one would have to say from what it is born:

- either from being,
- or from non-being.

From being? This would then be a mere internal transformation of being, which does not justify our speaking of birth: what is would have issued from what is, without real gain of being. From non-being? This is impossible, since non-being is not thinkable: one cannot conceive a passage from "what is not" to "what is" without betraying the first way.

The same reasoning holds for death: if being perished, one would have indeed to say where it passes in perishing:

- either it becomes non-being, which is contradictory,
- or it becomes some other thing that is, and there too there is no genuine "loss" of being.

The conclusion is inevitable, in whatever manner one reformulate these arguments: being does not come into the world, and it does not leave it. It has neither beginning nor end. Every representation of a "commencement" or of an "end of the real" is denounced as imaginary.

For a reader nourished on biblical traditions, this is a scandal. Genesis speaks of a beginning, of a creating act, of a word that brings forth what was not. The Kabbalah will elaborate upon

these themes myths of contraction and emanation. All this presupposes, more or less, that between the being of God and the being of the world there is a difference of order, or even an interval. On the Parmenidean scale, this difference is effaced: there is but one being, which was not preceded by the absence of being. The very notion of "creation" becomes suspect.

I do not here attempt to reconcile the Eleatic and the theologians; I content myself with indicating that, if one follow Parmenides, the greater part of our accounts of origin, sacred or profane, become grammatically illegitimate. They stage a passage from non-being to being, a passage that his logic forbids.

b) Unique, continuous, homogeneous

A being that neither is born nor dies might yet be multiple: one might imagine several eternal blocks coexisting. Parmenides refuses this possibility. If one supposes that there are several beings, one must distinguish them. Now, how is one to distinguish them without bringing in non-being?

Two blocks of being might be distinguished:

- either by something they have not in common,
- or by the existence of an interval between them.

In the first case, I posit a difference that refers to a form of lack: this being is not what that other one is. In the second case, I insinuate between them a void, a "space" which, for Parmenides, can be filled only by non-being. The one case and the other reintroduce into being that fissure which it is precisely a question of excluding.

Hence comes the affirmation of unity: being is one, not in the numerical sense (one among others), but in the sense that there is

nothing other than it. It is likewise continuous: one cannot imagine it composed of contiguous pieces, for between these pieces there would have to be something that is not them, that is, non-being. Lastly it is homogeneous: one cannot suppose in it regions of differing densities or qualities. Any heterogeneity within being would already be a form of multiplicity, and therefore a fissure.

The commentators have seized upon the famous image of the sphere: being is compared to the full mass of a perfectly round ball, identical with itself at every one of its points. The image is almost naïve, but it renders sensible what the logic imposes: no edge, no centre, no privileged zones, no division. Being knows neither "here" nor "there," neither "more" nor "less"; it is wholly what it is everywhere.

One sees already what becomes of time within such a frame: for there to be a real time, there must be distinct moments, "befores" and "afters" that do not merge. Now this distinction requires a form of non-identity: what is now is not what was yesterday, what will be tomorrow is not what is now. In the homogeneous block of Parmenidean being, this non-identity has no place. To speak of the "before" and "after" of a homogeneous being is to trace arbitrary frontiers within a mass that does not allow itself to be divided.

c) Motionless, identical with itself

There remains a last predicate, doubtless the most difficult for our imagination to accept: Parmenidean being is motionless. It does not move, it does not change in quality, it does not become other. It "remains identical and in the same, reposing in itself," say the fragments.

The argument against motion may be readily divined. For a thing to move, it must quit one place for another. Now this second place is, before its arrival, either filled by something else (and one falls back into multiplicity), or empty (and one supposes a spatial non-being into which being would slip). The idea of a displacement of being thus presupposes that there exists a "where it is not yet," which is inadmissible from the standpoint of the first way. Being can have no "elsewhere."

One may refine this objection, or contest it, but what matters to me here is the result: all that we call change, motion, alteration, is expelled from the register of truth. Being passes neither from one place to another nor from one state to another. It does not take on colour, it does not grow cold, it does not ripen. It is identical with itself to the point that no "becoming" can be attributed to it without contradiction.

At this stage, the timeless being of Parmenides might already receive the name of eternity. But this word risks inducing a modern misconception. We readily imagine eternity as an infinite duration, as a temporal line prolonged without end, toward the future and, for the more audacious, toward the past. There is nothing of the kind here. Parmenidean Being is not an infinite time; it is what has no relation whatever with time. It does not last, it does not persist, it does not wait. The verbs we apply to it are all in the present, not because it "finds itself" in a perpetual present, but because grammar possesses no mode more adequate to utter what is outside all succession.

3. A First Reckoning: An Anti-Temporal Ontology

Let us gather these features: a being that neither is born nor dies, that has no other than itself, that admits neither void nor multiplicity, that does not move, does not modify itself, remains strictly identical with itself. It is not necessary to add the word "eternal": it is evident, in the almost dazzling sense of the term, that such a being excludes every form of time.

For indeed:

- birth and death presuppose a transition between non-being and being, or the reverse;
- motion presupposes an "elsewhere" where being is not yet but soon will be;
- change presupposes a non-identity of being with itself between two moments;
- mere succession presupposes differences between what is, what was, what will be.

Now Parmenides has carefully closed all these exits: there is no non-being, no elsewhere, no internal alterity, no distinct "moment." What we call "time" is no more, in this perspective, than a collective name for a series of confusions: confusion between being and non-being, between the one and the many, between what is thinkable and what is not.

The Being without a fissure, as it takes shape here, has something monstrous about it for our sensibility. It does not resemble the world my Prague window looks upon: trams passing, newspapers reprinted each morning, children growing, old men dis-

appearing, regimes succeeding one another. Nor does it resemble the accounts that structured my childhood, in which one recounts promises, exiles, returns. It resembles, rather, a frozen abstraction, that block of being which tradition has been pleased to figure as a mute sphere.

And yet it is this abstraction which, for the first time in our history, gives to "eternity" a radical content: no longer the confused idea of a duration without end, but the systematic negation of all that makes the texture of time. Were I to define Parmenidean eternity in too brief a formula, I should say: eternity is the condition of a real to which non-being has never, in any sense, been present.

One will understand the better, in the light of this reckoning, why so many thinkers after Parmenides will feel themselves at once fascinated and constrained to "correct" him. Plotinus, whom we shall meet further on, will displace the absolute toward a One that overflows even being, and he will reintroduce, at the lower level, degrees, emanations, returns. Others, later, will attempt to articulate this block of being with a history, a salvation, an economy of the world.

But, whether they will it or not, all will inherit this extreme hypothesis: it is conceivable, and perhaps necessary, to think a real that leaves no place to time. The rest of this volume will be, in a sense, only a long commentary upon this hypothesis: sometimes to prolong it, sometimes to repel it, sometimes to encompass it within more supple constructions. It was necessary, above all, to see it in its purity.

IV. Time Relegated to Opinion

1. A Physics for Mortals

The harshness of the "way of truth" might lead one to believe that the poem stops there: a block of Being, a few implacable predicates, and silence. It is nothing of the kind. Once she has posited this Being without a fissure, the goddess of Parmenides consents to speak of something else: of the manner in which men recount the world to themselves.

This second discourse has a name: *doxa*, opinion. It concerns not Being but the appearance of things; it does not claim to be true, but only to be acceptable to mortals attached to their eyes and to their habits. Parmenides is not so naïve as to suppose that, after the revelation of Being, the disciple will cease to perceive the sun, the moon, the seasons, the bodies that are born and disappear. He needs, therefore, a provisional physics, an account of the sensible world, but one carefully labelled as such.

This physics presents itself in the form of a catalogue:

- there are two principles, Light and Night,
- they mingle in various proportions,
- from this mixture are born the hot, the cold, fire, earth, the stars,
- then, further on, the living, men, all that moves and changes.

We recognise there the materials of so many archaic cosmologies: duality of the elements, plays of pairs (light/dark,

dry/moist, hot/cold), hierarchy of the layers of the world. Nothing, at this stage, distinguishes the Parmenidean *doxa* from the doctrines that his contemporaries were proposing in the schools of Ionia or of Sicily.

The difference lies solely in that notice of warning the goddess has affixed to the pediment: "what you are about to hear now is deceptive." Such is the cruelty of Parmenides: he gives to mortals a map of the world, but he specifies that it is false in regard to the sole reality.

2. Where Does Time Hide in This Décor of Light and Night?

If one limited oneself to this physics, one might believe that Parmenides accepts a cosmic time: there is a road of day and of night, phases, cycles, alternations. The *doxa* describes a world in which things change and in which men situate their lives between a "but lately" and a "soon."

But one must recall that this world is only the theatre of mortals, not the stage of Being. Time, in the second part of the poem, is never defined as an autonomous reality. It is only the apparent order in which Light and Night, hot and cold, denser and rarer, succeed one another before our eyes.

One might say, scarcely forcing the modern vocabulary, that the time of the *doxa* is nothing other than a mode of classifying the mixtures:

- such a mixture predominates "now,"
- such another dominated "yesterday,"
- a third will dominate "tomorrow."