Defence of Eternity

Volume Two
A Critique of Linear Time

Jaromír Hladík

Clementinium Editions

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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

Of Time as a Grammatical Fiction

The first volume described the eternities, those refuges which European thought built far from time, and left them as they were: high, motionless, complete. It remains to look at time itself, and to take it, this time, not by its high figures but by its machines. I thought to approach it through the most visible of these—the clock, the calendar, the workshop bell, with which Europe has covered her façades, as though to measure time were enough to make it real. A reflection has obliged me to begin lower down, beneath the clock, where time is not yet displayed but is being made: in the sentence. For the bell tolls only for one who already knows how to say *before* and *after*.

Nothing, however, seems more solidly given than that gliding in which our days are steeped. It is, one will say, the most immediate of certainties, the one that precedes all speech: we feel time pass as we feel cold or hunger, before saying anything of it, and grammar comes too late to have produced it. I shall not deny the feeling; no one has that power. I would only ask whence it comes to us; and I suspect—it is a conjecture that this whole chapter must put to the test—that it comes to us, more than is supposed, from the tongue before it comes to us from the world. Before questioning the clockmakers, then, I shall question the conjugations.

To fix the inquiry, let one imagine a man to whom, for some days, time arrives no longer save in the form of three sentences. A clerk says to him: "*Sie werden morgen verlegt*" (you will be

transferred tomorrow). Another says to him: "*Man hat über Sie entschieden*" (a decision has been taken about you). And he himself, counting his strokes upon a slip of paper, says to himself: "*Ich bin seit acht Tagen hier*" (I have been here eight days). Three sentences; three tenses of the verb: a future, a perfect, a present. Between them nothing one could name "time" has flowed: there have been three conjugations. I call upon this man, I confess, only in imagination, and he marks no more than the two boundaries of the chapter, because at the two ends the case is there at its plainest. In between I shall prefer to him quieter witnesses—a sleeper, a traveller, a watchman—for the thesis, if it is true, must hold for the most tranquil of men: it is not the constraint of his situation that proves it, it is grammar, and grammar is the same for all. I shall follow it in five stages: the printer's case, which ranges our tenses like so many pieces of type; the knife that shows this ranged time to be the least tenable; other cases, where the grain of the world is cut differently; three great minds caught in the trap of their own conjugation; and, to finish, two trials.

I. Language as a Printer's Case

Let us consider first German, the tongue of my father and the one in which I write these pages. Of all those I practise, it is the one whose conjugation ranges time with the greatest minuteness. To say a single action—to push a door—it obliges me to choose among a host of forms: *ich stoße, ich stieß, ich habe gestoßen, ich*

hatte gestoßen, ich werde stoßen, ich werde gestoßen haben (I push, I pushed, I have pushed, I had pushed, I shall push, I shall have pushed), to say nothing of voices and moods. None is neutral. I am forbidden to utter the verb *stoßen* (to push) whole and in the block, as I should say *Tisch* (table) or *Mauer* (wall): the noun I may lay bare upon the table; the verb, never. The mere fact of using it has already made me choose a tense, before I have so much as thought of the world I am speaking of. Language, then, does not describe time: it ranges it before I speak, and presents it to me already sorted.

I know, in Josefov, old typographers who still set by hand. Before them is laid the *case*: a great wooden tray divided into boxes, one for each character, where each letter waits, motionless, for a hand to come and take it. The compositor does not invent his letters; he chooses and aligns them, and from that alignment is born the printed sentence. Conjugation is a case of this kind, where there sleep not letters but tenses. To speak is to draw upon it; and the "course of time" which we believe we feel is, most often, no more than the movement of the hand passing from one box to another, while nothing, in the world, has stirred. The tray was full before we spoke; we add nothing to it, we take from it.

Add to these forms the family of the adverbs and connectives—*schon, noch, bald, gestern, morgen, dann, endlich* (already, still, soon, yesterday, tomorrow, then, at last)—which designate no object and describe no quality, but order the sentences among themselves. When I say *ich habe die Tür schon gestoßen* (I have already pushed the door), the word *schon* (already) teaches nothing about the door; it fixes the place of my gesture in a succession that exists only in the sentence. These are the leads of the tray,

those fine strips of metal which the compositor slides between the words to hold them apart: they do not print, and yet without them the characters would touch and the line would no longer say anything. Let us take up again, then, the three sentences of the preamble. The first clerk did not observe a transfer: he conjugated it in the future; the second did not trace back the course of an affair: he lodged a decision in the box of the past. None of the three touched time; all three composed from the case.

I shall be told that I have proved nothing yet, and rightly so. That grammar *expresses* time, granted; but to express it is not to produce it, and it might be that a real time flowed beneath our conjugations, which would do no more than clothe it, as a garment fits a body it has not created. The objection is just, and I hold it to be the true adversary of this chapter: it will not surrender at a blow, and I shall not hurry it. I remark only that a linguist, in Paris, has just this very year maintained that the verb does not place the action within a pre-existing time, but engenders it as it goes; he calls *chronogenesis* this labour by which each utterance remakes, on its own account, the image of the time it claims to describe. I am no linguist, and I distrust learned words; but I note, not without some irony, that it is pleasant to be thus seconded so late. The constraint is established; the rest is still to be won.

II. McTaggart's Knife

Let us suppose, then, against me, that a real time flows beneath the case. The adversary has withdrawn to this position, and it appears strong; I shall take it seriously, for that is how one sees where it yields. It remains to know what time he is defending there; for grammar does not offer us any time whatever, but a very precise one, and it is here that an English blade, read some years ago in a philosophical review at the Clementinum, comes to cut into the defence at the very point where it believed itself secure.

One may range moments in two ways, and it is important not to confound them. One may range them according as they are past, present, or future: that is the mobile order, the order of our verbs, the one that glides, since what is future becomes present, then past. One may also range them according as a moment is simply before or after another: that is a fixed order, in which the battle precedes the treaty and will precede it always. Now, of these two orders, only the first deserves the name of time in the sense we mean, for it alone carries passage, menace, the falling due of a term; the order of befores and afters does not pass, it abides. It is therefore the first that conjugation installs within us, and it is the first that my adversary would save beneath the case: what he calls real time is the time that flees.

But this first order, on examination, contradicts itself. One and the same event ought to be in it, by turns, future, present, and past—three characters that exclude one another, for what is future is not present, and what is past is no longer present. It will be answered that the event takes them on one after the other, and not all at once; but this "one after the other" already presup-

poses a time in which these three states would succeed each other, which time, being itself made of past, of present, and of future, calls for a second to sustain it, then a third, and so on without end. Each time one summons to explain the passage demands another, and the foot finds no ground. Here is the knife: the order that passes cannot be thought without destroying itself.

I do not press on, as the author of this blade does, to the conclusion that time is nothing: that is to go further than I dare, and this chapter has no need of so much. I retain from it a narrower consequence. The real time which the adversary wished to save beneath the case, grammar has shown him under one face only: the mobile face, that of the past, the present, and the future—the order that passes, and that contradicts itself. What conjugation installs within us as self-evidence itself is, under analysis, the less tenable of the two orders; and it is that one which we compose the moment we conjugate in the future, that one which we align the moment we lodge a fact in the box of the past. This is what the tray concealed: the row of boxes from which we draw without thinking is precisely the spoiled row, the one whose characters will not hold together.

There subsists, I grant it readily, a coherent order: that of the before and the after, the fixed rank of things, which nothing in all this touches. The battle remains before the treaty, and no regress dislodges it. But that order does not flow, brings no term falling due, makes no one grow old. And that is all I claim to have won: not that time is nothingness, but that the only time of which grammar gives us the feeling—the time that passes and bears us away—is, when pressed, the cracked compartment of the tray.

But let no one believe the true adversary thereby struck down. He said that language does not create time, that it merely clothes it, as a garment fits a body it has not made; and all I have shown is that the body it claims to dress—the time that passes—does not stand upright under examination. That is much, and it is not all. For he may always say to me: "so be it, your knife has cut the time of my verbs; but beneath the garment and the body it dresses so ill, there remains perhaps still a real time, which is neither grammatical nor yours, and which you have not so much as approached." I hold him for my adversary to the end, and I do not give him here for vanquished: grammar does not refute him, it only dislodges him from his first entrenchment. That real time he keeps in reserve for me, it is in the chapters of facts, of the instant, and of physics that it will have to be pursued.

III. Other Cases

The adversary, here, shifts his ground. "You have described," he will say, "the case of one language; but if all languages ranged time in the same fashion, that would be the mark that the grid belongs not to them but to the things which they all alike conform to. The agreement of the languages would be the voice of the world, and not that of grammar." The stroke is adroit, and I shall not answer it by reasoning: it is enough for me to change languages, for I practise several, and they do not agree. It will be no proof by

argument, but a demonstration from fact: I open another case, and it has not the same boxes.

The Czech of my street places at the heart of the verb a distinction which is neither of tense nor of mood: the same action is there said by two different verbs according as one holds it for completed or for in progress. For "to read" it has *číst* and *přečíst*: the first says that one is within the reading; the second, that one carries it through to the end. *On četl* (he was reading) designates the process in progress; *on přečetl* (he read through), the process carried to its term. Before thinking of *when* a thing came about, the Czech has already settled *how* it unfolds, and that cut, which he names *vid* (aspect), matters more to him than the date. The proof of it is singular: for his verbs of completion he has no present at all, and the form that would serve in its stead stands for the future—as though one could not, in this tongue, be in the act of completing. His case, then, has not first of all the boxes of past and future that German hollows out with such care; it has others, cut on another partition. And yet it produces neither muddled chronicles nor halting narratives: the tales my landlady tells her children hold together, and the time they unroll is not mine.

But it is the Hebrew of my nights that has instructed me most. The tongue of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, which I once translated, often subordinates position in time to yet another partition: that of the accomplished and the unaccomplished, which regards the degree of completion of the action rather than its date. Hence that turn which disconcerts the Latin translators: the prophets there sometimes announce the future in the perfect, as a thing already done. I long took this turn for a poet's licence; I believe so no longer. The clerk of a moment ago did no otherwise, who conjugated in

the future what he already held to be settled. The prophet and the clerk draw upon two opposed cases—the one ranged by completion, the other by the date—and both lodge the future in the compartment of the certain: which is to say that this compartment is not in the same place upon the two trays.

One will wish me to draw from this a doctrine, and will cite to me such-and-such a Berlin savant who, a century ago, held each language to be a particular manner of cutting experience, and lent it a "genius" of its own. I shall do nothing of the kind: I have not the competence of a comparative philologist, and that word "genius" inspires in me the same distrust as, a moment ago, the word *chronogenesis*. But the languages I speak do the work by themselves. If grids so irreconcilable—the Hebrew completion, the Czech aspect, the minute tenses of German—all engender law-codes, prayers, and coherent prophecies, then the linear time which our conjugations seem to describe is not the grain of the world: it is one of the possible cuts. Not that mine is false—how should it be?—but that we have taken it for the thing itself, for want of having looked over the rim of our own tray. The diversity is proved; the falsehood of any grid is not, and I do not pretend to it.

IV. Augustine, Hume, and the Grammar They Did Not See

If grammar fabricates to this degree the appearance of time, one will wonder that great minds should have sought it elsewhere than beneath their own pen. Their authority will be raised against me as a last bulwark: "Can it be that Augustine, that Hume, that Kant probed time so far without ever suspecting that they were probing only their language? Their silence condemns you." The objection would be strong if silence proved anything. But I believe, on the contrary, that their silence instructs me: one does not see the pane through which one looks. Three witnesses, then, and with increasing reserve: Augustine, whom I venture upon; Hume, whom I prolong; Kant, whom I merely touch upon.

Augustine, in the eleventh book of the *Confessions*, arrives, by an admirable analysis, at the doctrine of the three presents: the present of the past, which is memory; the present of the present, which is attention; the present of the future, which is expectation. I have praised the psychologist elsewhere, and I withdraw nothing of that praise; I add only a suspicion. The sceptic I have become suspects him of having described, while believing he was probing his soul, three positions of his language: *memini, attendo, exspecto* (I remember, I attend, I await), three operations that Latin held ready for him—memory, attention, expectation. His Latin prose offered him these three boxes ready cut; he took them for three chambers of the soul. The man most attentive to his own interior was still reading his grammar while he believed he was reading his heart.

Hume goes further, and I followed him in the first volume: he refuses all sensible impression of time and retains only a habit of the mind, which threads the perceptions upon a string. The analysis is just, but it stops half-way; I prolong it, I do not refute it. This habit, I believe, is perhaps not only that of the mind: it is already prepared by the language. It is syntax that invites me to say "A, *dann* (then) B"—that German *dann* which slips between two clauses—and it might be that in uttering it I fabricate it as much as I observe it. The connective, too, is a lead of the case: it names nothing in things, it holds them apart in the wished-for order. What Hume lodges in the mind was perhaps already in the grammar on which the mind was nourished.

As for Kant—upon whom I shall do no more than gesture, having no warrant to approach him face to face—he posits time as the *a priori* form of all sensibility, a universal condition, independent of the languages. The diversity I have just recalled breathes a doubt into me, and I shall give it for no more than a doubt: what if a part of what he erects into the form of all sensibility were but the common form of the grammars he spoke, the German and the Latin of his masters? I do not decide; I have neither the means nor the audacity for it. I note only that it is imprudent to call universal what one has tested in a single family of languages, and that a philosopher born within the Hebrew case would perhaps not have drawn up the same table of the categories. These three men had been composing since childhood without seeing the tray from which they drew their characters. That is all that prudence permits me: not to refute Kant, but to suspect that his firmest stone rests, in part, upon a case he did not see.

V. Two Trials of Conjugation

To touch this dependence with the finger, I shall hazard two trials, the one light, the other grave, governed by the same rule: to change the conjugation while no new fact is added, and to watch whether the time of the scene changes with it.

The first holds in a scene that each may reconstruct within himself. Take a traveller who, in a station, reads a letter while waiting for his train. Said without a verb—*ein Mann, eine Bank, ein Brief* (a man, a bench, a letter)—the instant is a tableau, without before or after. Said in the present—*ein Mann liest einen Brief* (a man reads a letter)—the act is posited, but does not yet flow. Said at last in the thicknesses that conjugation holds in reserve—*er las den Brief; er hatte ihn schon eine Weile gelesen; er würde ihn noch eine Weile lesen* (he read the letter; he had already been reading it a while; he would go on reading it a while)—the same reading, the same verb bent into three tenses, hollows itself out with a before and an after, though no new fact has been added to it. The traveller has not stirred from the bench; the letter has not changed by a word. Nothing has changed but the time of the verbs; the flux was in the boxes, and the hand that took it thence is the hand that speaks.

The second trial is graver, and I return to it but once, having promised to spare this man. Let a man know that, in the morning, he will be transferred. He can say it in several ways, each setting him down in another time. "*Ich werde morgen verlegt*" (I

shall be transferred tomorrow): here he is projected forward, towards a point he awaits. "*Ich muss warten*" (I must wait): a necessity is added that was not in the fact. "*Morgen werde ich verlegt worden sein*" (tomorrow I shall have been transferred): he looks at himself from a point already later than the departure, and finds himself there, in a sense, already gone. "*Ich lebe meinen letzten Tag in dieser Kammer*" (I am living my last day in this chamber): he settles into a duration that knows itself to be closed. "*Meine letzten Schritte in diesem Garten sind die von heute*" (my last steps in this garden are those of today): and the future, all at once, withdraws. The outward fact has not budged by a line: the same morning, the same decision. What changes, with each sentence, is the place that grammar assigns to this transfer; and that place decides the time he has still to wait. What he calls "his time" is therefore not a datum which language would come to name: it is an object which language has cut in advance.

Let one observe the third of these sentences, for it is the strangest. This future of the accomplished—*ich werde verlegt worden sein* (I shall have been transferred)—does not belong to this man as his own: it existed in the language before him, empty, available, like a piece of type in its box, and it was enough that a hand should take it and align it with a noun. The compositor did not forge it for the occasion; he found it in the tray, in its place, between others. Thus a man's last day is composed in advance: the form in which he will lodge his departure awaited him, cut and ready, in a case that no one chose. I do not draw from this that the departure is the less real, nor its morning the less certain—I know nothing of that, and grammar can change nothing of it; I say only that the *time* of this event was furnished him ready made.

Conclusion

It will be necessary, after all, to name this belief which makes us take for a reality of the world what is, in part, a reality of our sentences: for want of a better word, I shall call it a *superstition*—not the error of someone, which one might set right by an argument, but the effect of an apparatus that no one chose, the language of one's childhood. Let this word be weighed, however, for it would overreach me were I to let it go alone. I do not say that every representation of time is superstition: the bare rank of the befores and the afters, I have conceded, holds without grammar and is the effect of no tray. What I here call superstition is the other time, the time that passes, the mobile present which conjugation installs and which we take for the grain of the world; and it is of that alone, not of every temporal order, that I say one believes in it as one breathes, and not as in a thesis.

I do not exempt myself from it, and it is my last ruse to confess it before I am reproached with it. I have written "we shall see in Book III"; I shall write again "we have shown above": I make use of a future whose consistency I contest and of a past which I reduce to an effect of syntax. The contradiction is past remedy: there exists no language without time in which to conduct this critique, no empty case from which one might speak from outside. One does not get out of the case by philosophising; one learns only that one stands within it. It is little; but to know that

one composes is not nothing, when until then one believed one saw time flow.

There, then, is the first of the machines of time described. It does not suffice, and the adversary, who has held his peace a moment, lifts his head. "Granted; let us hold grammar guilty, and the case for a prison. There remain, nevertheless, beneath the sentences, events that succeed one another in a certain order, whether we speak of them or not; the morning will come, whether the man conjugate it or be silent; and it is that succession, mute, prior to every verb, that we name time." He is right not to content himself with my case: it is the fixed order, which I myself conceded to him, that he now sets up as a last firm ground. But this "series of events"—I am not sure that it will bear weight: an event, looked at closely, might well be no more than a cut made by a witness in a fabric that does not cut itself of its own accord. It is upon that ground that I should like, in the next chapter, to make him walk—to see whether it holds.

CHAPTER II

The Series of Events Does Not Exist

When time has been deprived of its grammatical support, the European mind does not give up: it falls back upon a position it believes impregnable, and which seems to it the safer for dispensing with words. Beneath the conjugations, it says, beneath the narratives and the idle talk, there remain *events*—things that happen, and that happen in a certain order, whether we say so or not. Grammar could colour time; it could not invent it out of whole cloth, since beneath grammar lies that stubborn succession of facts which men need only observe. Here, since Aristotle at least, is the most material support of time: no longer a feeling, but a real succession.

The objector I left at the end of the foregoing chapter takes up his quarters here. He had quitted me by conceding the verbs, and at once he found firmer footing lower down. "That conjugation manufactures the feeling of passage, I grant you; but beneath the sentences there are surely events that follow one upon another, whether or not we speak of them, and it is this series that we call time." He believes himself the better entrenched, and I hold him the more formidable for it: one fights badly against a man who has ceased to speak in order to point with his finger. I fear only that he has done no more than climb down from one grammar into another; for what he calls a fact is, I suspect, no more than a thing cut out with shears, and what he calls a series, no more than a register kept in advance by a clerk of the court.

Here is the figure that will govern this whole chapter, and which I warn the reader not to lose from sight: two hands, not one. The first, the witness's shears, cuts from a continuous cloth the pieces he will call facts. The second, the clerk's file, ranges those pieces in an order and takes them for a sequence. Take away the shears, and there remains only a cloth without edge; take away the clerk, and there remain only scattered cuttings, held together by no bond. The series of events, which my objector offers me as the very ground of time, is the work of these two hands—and neither of them, as I shall show, belongs to the world.

I shall follow him in five stages: the shears, first; then the want of joints in nature as in the soul; then those who sought to rebuild the world out of events and succeeded only by forging events of their own; then the file that orders even death; and last, what remains when all has been cut away. The foregoing chapter took grammar from him; this one takes the fact. This is not yet to build: it is to undo a second ground, and I promise, at the close, only to show where one will have to dig.

I. The Witness's Shears

Let us carry the inquiry first where it is easiest. Imagine a recluse in a room where almost nothing happens, and ask him to number the events of a single day: no observatory lends itself better to counting them, since there they are so few. Let us count with him.

There, on the wall opposite, is the pale rectangle that lengthens: at what instant did dawn take place? There was no dawn; there was a gliding without joint, in which no line divides the night from the day. There is the step upon the stair, the bell far off, the smell of the soup that rises: so many events, one will say. But he detaches them because they matter to him, as one cuts a silhouette from a cloth that bore no line. Where he thinks he is merely observing, he is cutting.

It will be answered that language, at least, names the events, and that where it has a name, there is a thing. But the name cuts no better than the eye. My German tongue has *die Schlacht* (the battle) and *der Anbruch* (the daybreak): two nouns that congeal into a thing what was only a course, the one a battle, the other the coming up of the light. And when it would say that something is going on, it has its verb, *geschehen* (to happen)—but this verb does not carry its bounds within it. To say *es geschieht* (it is happening) fixes neither the beginning nor the end of what occurs; the verb names a coming-to-pass without bound, and only a later cut will decide where what has come to pass comes to an end. There is better still, and the language here knows more than they who speak it: for the fact it says *die Tatsache*, which is the *Sache* (the thing) of a *Tat* (a deed)—literally a thing-of-a-deed, a thing posited by an act. It confesses, without knowing it, that the fact is not found: it is made, which is to say cut out. The word does not meet the joint: it presupposes it, as the eye does, and lays it down after the fact upon a cloth that bore none.

Let us take, then, an event that may seem more solid, public, independent of any recluse: a battle. Where does the battle of Austerlitz begin? At the first volley? at the first stir of the troops

before dawn? at the order signed the day before? Where does it end? at the last shot? at the retreat? at the treaty concluded weeks later? The manual answers with a date, but the date is a decision, not a discovery. The battle has no edges save those an interest assigns it: the strategist cuts it otherwise than the peasant whose field it burns, and the historian otherwise than either. Nowhere, in the real, does one find the dotted line along which the event would detach itself of its own accord. The volley, the order, the retreat do not bear written upon them that they are the same fact; it is a gaze that shuts them into a single piece and names it.

And an isolated cut still gives no more than a fragment. A *series* requires more: there must be a hand to hold the fragments in an order—a register, a chronicle. What the witness's shears obtain is a piece; and what he afterwards calls the *sequence of events* lies not in the pieces, which are held together by no bond, but in the compartment in which he files them. The chronicle, the parish register, the marching journal, the book of accounts: these are the true places where a series exists. Croce, a historian I take to be rigorous, has said it in passing: the chronicle is dead history, a classification of abstract documents ordered by their date, and the facts one aligns there are not found but chosen, according to the need of him who orders them. The succession that was presented to me as the firm ground beneath grammar proves to be a two-handed labour, the one hand that cuts, the other that files.

I do not claim, let me be rightly heard, that nothing happens. Something changes, no doubt, and the change is not my doing: the cloth is real, the recluse did not spin it. What I deny is that it should come already cut. The hand that cuts finds a matter

before it; it does not find its edges. That is all my shears prove, and it is enough to shake the objector; but it is not the dissolution of the world: it is the dissolution of its joints.

The objector feels it, and withdraws in good order. "So be it; the events of men are cuts, because men have interests. But science, for its part, handles objective events, which no interest cuts." I was waiting for him at this second objection.

II. Neither the World nor Consciousness Yields Joints

I borrow here a page from a philosopher of Paris whom all Europe was reading twenty years ago. Our intelligence, he remarks, deals with the moving real after the manner of a certain apparatus then being installed in the darkened theatres: it takes from the reality that passes views all but instantaneous, and, these views being fixed, threads them upon an abstract and uniform becoming, supposed to lie behind them. Let me be rightly heard: it is no question of the illusion of the retina, nor of the procession of images on a screen—I shall come back to that elsewhere, and to other ends. It is a question of an operation of the mind, not of the eye: a machine for bringing becoming to a standstill. Becoming itself has no joints; it flows without articulation, and it is we who, able to think only the halt, cut instantaneous views from it and then take them for the things themselves.

The "objective event" my man of science sets against me is therefore not the real: it is the already cooled offcut of an act of

cutting. The physicist who posits "the fall of the heavy body" as a fact to be dated has not received that fact ready made; he has taken it from a continuity in which the stone fell without declaring either its beginning or its end, and he has fixed it that he might cite it, inscribe it, measure it. The gesture is the same as the historian's before Austerlitz; the interest alone differs. Where the one seeks glory or blame, the other seeks the law: but the one and the other cut, and their shears leave the same clean edges upon a cloth that bore none.

He falls back then upon the within. "That nature should be without articulation, I am willing to grant; but my consciousness, for its part, yields me distinct events: a thought, then another, then a pain." This is his last datum, and the most intimate: introspection, he believes, sets ready-made pieces before him. Here a psychologist of America, whose great book is nearly forty years old, takes that support too from him. The life of the mind is not a chain of links: it is a current, in which nothing begins or ends sharply, and in which what we name the present is not a point without thickness, but a faint duration that already bears within it a before and an after.

Let one observe a sleepless man, whose attention is no longer drawn off by the affairs of the day and who may therefore surprise his own thought laid bare. He believes he passes from one idea to another as one passes from room to room, by a door. But let him watch for the threshold: he will not find it. The departing idea still tinges the one that comes, the dull pain mingles with the reverie without one's being able to say where the one ceases and the other takes hold. The current bears no links; it is the current that, afterwards, in remembering, cuts from its own course the

thoughts it then lines up. The shears have passed from without to within, and have met nothing new: the same cloth, the same want of edge. If even within there are no joints, whither will my objector go to seek his ready-made pieces? Neither the world nor the soul yields them to him. Everywhere, beneath the shears, the same cloth without edge.

I halt, however, before going too far. That the current has no joints does not prove it indivisible in principle; it proves only that no division is laid upon it by its nature. One may cut it in a thousand ways, and it is precisely this liberty of the cut that betrays its not coming from the thing: what can be cut anywhere has no cut of its own anywhere. I have not shown that there is nothing to cut; I have shown that the cuts do not pre-exist the shears.

III. Those Who Rebuilt the World out of Events

I shall be told that minds of the first rank have made of the event the first element of nature, and that they, at least, knew what they handled. It is true, and it is the most instructive argument against my objector, though he believes he opposes it to me. An English logician, in a book of 1914, and then a geometer-philosopher, in another of 1920, undertook to build nature out of events held for its true individuals. They were no dreamers; they wanted a foundation harder than substance, and they sought it in what happens rather than in what endures.

But this success presupposes a shifting of the word. To obtain it, they had to strip from "event" all its ordinary meaning—the battle, the storm, the encounter—and to give it a new, technical sense, cut expressly for the purpose: a certain stretch of experience, taken within a web of relations, which bears no resemblance to what my objector calls a fact. And the most instructive lies elsewhere still: they came up, the one and the other, against the difficulty of *bounding* their event, of saying where it ends and where its neighbour begins. The one confesses that nature, as it is perceived, has always a frayed edge, which ravels out and will not be stopped at a stroke; the other, that his events overlap, encroach one upon another, and are separated only with difficulty, as one parts two shadows. This difficulty is no weakness of their work; it is my own argument breaking the surface within theirs. The event has no edges, and it took their genius to discover it by failing to find them.

Their labour proves, then, not that the ordinary event exists; it proves, the contrary way, that one meets it nowhere ready made, since one had to forge an event of whole cloth in order to begin at all. It is the confirmation I had not dared to hope for: those very men who would make of the event the stone of the world could put it to use only after they had cut it. Their shears were learned, and they said as much; the shears of my objector are artless, and he does not know it.

The geometers, for their part, have their event too. Their science, of late, speaks of a point without dimension in that space to which time has now been joined—a *Weltpunkt* (a world-point), what others name a point-event. But this point is no more the thing my defender was seeking than the rest: it is an ideal limit, an

address within a web, and not a fact that happens. One does not witness it; one locates it. Whichever way I turn, there where given events were promised me, I gather only *constructed* events—by interest, by intelligence, by calculation—and nowhere the naked piece.

There is, in this admission, a lesson deeper than it appears. These men wanted individuals: units firm enough to build upon, as one builds upon bricks. Now a brick has faces: it stops, and it is where it stops that makes it one and not another. The event, for its part, has no faces. One may always take it a little wider or a little narrower, add the preceding instant to it or subtract it, without any inward sign coming to say that this time one has seized the true unit. That is why edges had to be lent it by convention—fixed from without, as the clerk fixes his own. A thing that must be bounded from without before it can serve is no individual of the world: it is a piece cut out, even by the most rigorous hand.

I do not conclude from this that these men were mistaken; their constructions hold, and hold very well, within their order. I conclude only that a construction which holds is not for that a thing found. The clerk who keeps a fair register does not prove that the facts were there before his columns; he proves that one may make fair columns. The objector has now lost all, save one thing. He knows it, and he plays it with the gravity that befits it.