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# Telling time

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According to Einstein's renowned declaration, for those who believe in physics – or, more precisely, in its capability to offer a "scientific" representation of the world – the distinction between present, past and future is just "an illusion, though obstinate". If we consider an effective analogy by Mauro Dorato, we can state that those who agree with the famous German scientist will recognize in the present, past and future a relationship very similar to that between "here" and "somewhere else" – in other words, the present is just a located moment and has no privileged status. In other conceptual universes, some of which are explored by philosophy, or imagined by art, as well as in other scientific disciplines like biology, the need for a strong distinction between "what has happened", "what will happen" and "what is happening" seems to be unavoidable. At the macroscopic level of living beings there does not seem to be a way out of the "eternal present", which cannot be escaped even by the desire of some well-developed mammals to understand reality or such an apparently primary experience as the "passing of time". Even the "timeless" description of reality offered by physics is immersed in time and changes with it. This paradox seems to contain the core of the irreducibility between two cultural constructions which we will be calling "the time of the soul" and "the time of the world", after Ricoeur. The main thesis of this essay is that there are two fundamentally different ways of facing the mystery of time, which have a precise relationship with the mentioned contrast between the subjective and the objective conception of time – mental, qualitative and experienced in the first case; physical, quantitative and measurable in the second. Considering Ricoeur's research on time and stories, we can conclude that this dichotomy may give rise to another similarly radical difference between the two opposite options of inquiring and telling about the time. The first task has traditionally been dealt with by science and philosophy, the latter by art, in particular through the narrative imagination and the opportunity to create a story. To reach "objective" and verifiable knowledge, science and philosophy had to pay the price of denying,

though not completely, time as experienced by people. Art, on the other hand, has been able to put into practice the opportunities offered by the unreality of the time told, thus offering a provisional solution – poetic rather than theoretical – to the aporias raised by the clash between the time which is "made of moments" and the time that "passes".

# Part One

## The telling of time

There is an apparent disagreement among the historians of philosophy about a passage by Parmenides in which he criticized the "two-headed mortals", who believed that "being and non-being are identical and are not identical". It is not clear whether this statement is to be interpreted as a polemical allusion to the philosophical opinions of his contemporary Heraclitus or if Heraclitus himself had been influenced by those words.

What is certain is that these two philosophers embody the first and more radical contrast between the so-called philosophies of being and becoming. On the one hand Parmenides states that if the immutable laws of discourse and thought are not to be infringed, "what is and cannot not be" does not and cannot have any relationship with "what is not and is neccessarily not". Hence, being is innately unique, eternal and immutable and its shape is "similar to the mass of a round sphere". On the contrary, Heraclitus believes that the unity of being is the result of its multiplicity and reality, subject to a continous becoming, is fed through the struggle between its opposites. The following passage gives a fascinating illustration how Heraclitus expresses his opinion: "The living and the dead, the awake and the sleeping, the young and the old are the same thing within us, for when these things change they become those, which in form change to those". It is not important to point out to what extent this contrast can be looked upon as a stereotype, that is the result of subsequent interpretations which emphasize its harshness. What is worth noting is its implications as regards the fundamental problem of the reality of time and becoming: with Parmenides time begins to be dealt with in terms of a philosophical problem, since it is opposed to the eternity and the immutability of being and therefore is to be connected to changeable sensitive

opinion. On the contrary, Heraclitus' philosophy considers time as a mere subjective characteristic, fundamental for the description of the world.

With an apparent paradox, we may thus say that the philosopher known traditionally for the matters of being, oneness and identity (gnosiologically speaking, we might say the objectivity of knowledge), draws such a conclusion as the unreality of time. Yet, if we are to take into account the subsequent development of this line of thought and avoid attributing false thoughts to Parmenides, we had better say that he reduces time to a mere subjective, and to some extent illusory characteristic. Hence, Eraclito's philosophy of becoming turns out to be the first stage of what was subsequently defined a dynamic conception of (objective) time. Time is therefore looked upon as an earthly property and subject to movement.

The possibility to identify time with movement is the demarcation line between two of the most significant thinkers of ancient times, Aristotle and Augustine. Their speculations on the nature of time represent the synthesis, and at the same time the beginning, of important and parallel currents of thoughts. They also give rise to what Ricoeur defines the first aporia of time, which, in his opinion as well as in ours, sees its response in narrative action, on the basis of history or fiction. There follows a passage contained in the third volume of Time and Narrative, which illustrates how he looks upon the dispute on time between the two famous philosophers: "The main flaw of Augustine's theory is not being able to replace a psychological conception of time with a cosmological one, despite the undeniable progress represented by this psychology as opposed to any cosmology of time. The aporia is represented by the fact that psychology is legitimately added to cosmology, but it cannot be displaced; even separately, neither of them can suggest a satisfactory solution to their unbearable contrast".

Augustine rebuts the renowned definition of time contained in Aristotle's Physics, according to which time is "the number (the measure) of movement according to 'before' and 'then'", even though he does not make any direct reference to Aristotle's doctrine. Apart from those passages in which Aristotle states that time has "something to do with movement", it is not identified with it.

In his famous reflection on time, Augustine does more than just polemically hint at the simplistic identification of time with the circular movement of the principal celestial bodies: "I heard an educated person saying that time is itself the movement of the sun, the moon and the stars. I did not agree". Soon after he concludes "thus, time is not the motion of bodies". Augustine's thesis is based on the simple, though not

demonstrable (yet religiously accepted by Newton, as we will see) conviction that all movements could vary (accelerate or slow down) without causing any variation in the corresponding temporal intervals. As noted by Ricoeur, this is questionable not only for Greek thought, according to which the motion of planets was absolutely invariable, but even in a modern perspective, as it preserves the perspective of the search for an absolutely regular movement (hence, 'the absolute clock'). In our view, Augustine's thesis is dubious by virtue of the Einstein's above-mentioned theory and the consequent relation of dependence between matter and space-time.

Since Augustine does not accept the connection between time and movement, he is bound to wonder what criteria the measurement of time can be based on. If only what exists can be measured, and the future and the past do not exist in a proper sense (the first not yet, the latter no longer), then how is it possible to compare the durations and tell with certainty a long time from a short time, or claim that a given syllable is twice as long as another one?

As Ricoeur notes, Agostino is bound to search for the principle of the extent of time within the 'dimension of the spirit' (distensio animi). After he has changed the distinction between the past, present and future into the renowned distinction between "the present in the past, the present in the present, the present in the future", he finds himself disarmed before "the impossibility of finding in waiting and memory the principle of their measure".

Thus he concludes that it is not the long or short sound of a syllable that should be measured, but rather "something that remains fixed in my mind". Such a conclusion does not resolve the difficulty of making a comparison between successive durations, nor the problem of explaining the direct access to these supposedly spirit-related impressions or that of making out the fixed measure of comparison which cannot be derived from the movement of celestial bodies.

Furthermore, if aware of the limits as well as the strengths of a psychological conception of time like Augustine's we turn to what Ricoeur defines "the other end of the chain", that is to say the time of the world described by Aristotle, we shall find similarly deep contradictions and paradoxes in our attempts to capture the objective, cosmic and measurable time.

We have already mentioned on what basis Aristotle considers time as being strictly related to movement: "When a certain time seems to pass, a certain movement seems to take place simultaneously". We must not be misled by the subjective conditions of the awareness of time, for the question is firmly rooted at an ontological

level: “If the perception of time cannot disregard the perception of movement, it is the existence of time itself that cannot disregard the existence of movement”, states Ricoeur. Yet, if movement can be slow or fast, then time, which is implicit in the definition of velocity, cannot change velocity, otherwise it would have its own definition.

Though moving from two perspectives which we aim to prove complementary, both philosophers share the belief in the existence of what Newton called absolute time, whose intervals are necessarily unvarying; however, Aristotle does not identify them and sets a precise relationship between time and movement, defining the former as an (accidental) “property” of the latter.

As a result of these premises, Aristotle’s definition of time is soon improved on the basis of an analogy between three continuous entities: extent, movement and time. The relation between ‘before’ and ‘after’, which completes the definition, is introduced with respect to time on the basis of the same analogy – it is derived from extent and movement, even though the spirit does not perceive it: this relation of order is implicit in the world rather than in the soul. As stated by Ricoeur, the spirit “begins to be subject to this relation, or rather suffer from it, before it conceives it”.

With the introduction of the concept of number this relation is finally specified and therefore the definition completed. Aristotle’s reasoning is based on an aspect of time perception, that is the soul’s ability to distinguish two moments and the intervals that they delimit. However, if the moment is acknowledged to have the decisive role, it must be borne in mind that Aristotle’s renowned definition of time as “number of movement according to ‘before’ and ‘after’” denies any explicit reference to the soul, despite the continuous recourse to such operations as perception, discrimination and comparison implicit in thought.

In short, in Aristotle’s view the ultimate principle is change (including local movement, that is motion in the proper sense of the word), intended as a passage from power to action, rather than time, which can actually be perceived only thanks to change. As he avoids defining time (though he reasons about it, as we have seen), Aristotle is bound to come across a series of difficulties, to some extent complementary to those deriving from Augustine’s thought.

In the first place, the analogy between point and moment, logically derived from that between time and continuous extent, is not acceptable: without considering Zeno’s paradoxes of the concept of continuity as “infinitely divisible”, Aristotle himself acknowledges the imperfection of the analogy because the moment, unlike the point,

“divides only on the basis of power”, thus expressing only a virtual break in continuity; in his view the present has no privileged status and it is just a ‘located moment’, though he notes that it can finish, as it limits the analogy with the movement, while time cannot.

Secondly, although Arsitotle admits that the existence of a “numerable element” (time) is connected to the “numerating element” (soul), he still considers the activity of the spirit (in modern words, the role of man) only with respect to reasoning, rather than the definition of time. He does not want to compromise the absolute dependence of the definition of time on movement and therefore he is bound to define the problem of knowing whether “time can exist without the existence of soul” as “embarrassing”.

In conclusion, this discussion is sufficient to indicate the mutual incompatibility between the analyses of time of these two great philosophers. There is no transition, but rather an authentic gap between Aristotle’s conception combining the essence of temporality with the dynamism of movement and Agostino’s conception describing the structure of time on the basis of the present moment. “If the extent of physical time cannot be derived from the distensio animi, the opposite is equally true. What hinders the reverse derivation is simply the margin, conceptually insuperable, between the Aristotelian notion of moment and that of Agostino’s present (...) This is the greatest aporia of time – at least before Kant. It consists in the duality of moment and present”.

Following this analysis of the reasons and the limits of Aristotle and Agostino’s opposed philosophies of time, the turning point which is necessary to understand the subsequent development of the discussion of time is represented by the birth of modern science.

After the opposition between substance (which does not change with becoming and remains out of time) and accident (the qualities of an object which are “immersed in time”, and therefore time itself “with no differentiation between time and changes or events that happen within time”) had been questioned, for the first time the opportunity arose to reflect upon the metaphysical problem of space and time. There was an attempt to attribute to them a primitive and immutable existence, different from material mass, not because time had to be conceived as a substance, a transcendent object – time, as well space, must have a sui generis status. This view led to the consolidation of the conception of space and time as “the stage of physical events”, to put it in Einstein’s words, a conception which held good, in the field of physics theories, right up to the 20$^{th}$ century.

According to Kuhn's terminological note, all this can be defined as a "change of paradigm" – the classical paradigm of substance is replaced by that of function: "Phenomena are no longer considered according to their internal condition dependent on specific substances, but rather in terms of a mutual functional relationship, which is conceived and represented in mathematical terms and therefore on the basis of measurable numerical regularities which are governed by a law". There is an incommensurable dimension between this theory and the perceived phenomenon, which Pauri defines as an authentic "founding paradox" of the scientific system. Thus, the scientific system is founded on the (infinite) possibility to reduce that margin. Beside the development of the scientific object, we deal with the denial of phenomenal perception, which implies "a provisional suspension of every experiencing individual together with every transient modality of time experience".

Having asserted the superfluity of any definition of "time, space, place and motion", Newton agrees to distinguish these "quantities" in two different concepts, so as to eliminate prejudices. He states: "Absolute, true, mathematical time passes in a uniform way, and can also be called duration; relative, apparent, vulgar time is a sensible and external measure (correct or incorrect) of duration through motion, and is commonly employed with true time – such are hours, days, months and years".

This is an apparent splitting of objective time, as both absolute and relative times are 'quantities'. In order to justify his belief in an "absolute duration" independent of the motions which enable the perception and measurement of time, Newton is bound to introduce a concept of time which is at the same time metaphysical (constantly connected to God, as in the Scholium generale at the end of Principia) and virtually physical, for he does not rule out he might come across a "movement so uniform" as to allow the measurement of the absolute time. Pomian actually saw in those words yet another re-proposal of the renowned contrast between quantitative (mathematical, whose uniform flow is assumed rather than required) and qualitative (measure-related, though correct or incorrect, as stated by Newton) time: if the former is 'mathematical' time, the latter is the time of everyday life, of perception; it is qualitative, in Pomian's view – in other words, it is human time, which Newton opposes to the time of science. Unlike Newton, Leibniz criticizes openly the possibility of the existence of time without things, this notion being contrary to the principle of sufficient cause, and therefore superfluous and problematic, as it is connected to a variant of the Augustinian question: Leibniz thinks that believing that time existed before things makes us wonder why God created everything at that moment, not earlier, nor later. In this respect no answer can be

found, as it is not sufficient to consider the mere connection to God's will. After the analysis of the absurd consequences of this reasoning, Leibniz turns to a time not less objective than Newton's, but ideal, on the same level as the number, defined as mere 'order of successions' which has the only objective of rendering the universe intelligible. It is connected to a purely logical structure on the basis of the principle of identity, the "order that governs the succession of things" and loses its absolute character to become relational, that is to say inevitably related to things and relations (temporal and causal) between things that can be perceived.

Whether absolute or relational, real or ideal, Newton's time is an objective time in any case, as its nature disregards the nature of the individuals who perceive it. It is deductive reasoning or intellectual intuition which give rise to the nature of objective time, as these can correct our subjective, fallible and changeable impressions which in Newton's view belong to "apparent and vulgar" time.

When Newton was still alive, however, Berkeley had already stated that time, being separate from the ideas that follow each other within the spirit and considered as abstract duration, is totally incomprehensible and is therefore nothing – no intelligible notion corresponds to such a combination of words.

Most of Newton's certainties were vigorously and definitely disputed in 1740, after the publication of David Hume's Treatise on Human Nature, which was expected to reach great fame by Hume himself, but it actually went unnoticed for a long time. Taking Berkeley's radical nominalism and developing its scope and consequences, Hume presents a rigorous critique of his ideas, conceiving them as enfeebled copies of impressions, being derived directly from 'perceptions', a term with which he refers to every psychic subject.

Thus, Hume shows the groundlessness of various ideas accepted in the philosophical tradition, as that of substance, personal identity as well as that of the cause-effect relation. This last, depending on experience, can only lead to a probable knowledge in Hume's view, as it is merely the (mental) result of the habit of transforming a repeated temporal succession (hoc post hoc) into a causal relation (hoc propter hoc) without any logical necessity whatsoever.

It is a paradox that Hume's original attempt to apply Bacon and Newton's experimental method to the study of human nature brings him to a religious and radical critique of objective time, whether real (in the case of Newton) or ideal (in the case of Leibniz), in any case an entity which exists independently of the individuals who

perceive it – for the great Scottish philosopher the intellect creates ties between sensorial data on the basis of the force of habit and continuous errors and tautologies.

Hume connects every relation among ideas, however complex, to the prompt reality of impressions; he then critizes both the division of time and space in entities distinguishable by every single spatio-temporal experience and the notion of their infinite divisibility. His point of view shows us perfectly how Newton's idea of a correction allowing to pass from 'apparent' time to 'absolute' time appears to be a trivial and incomprehensible fiction.

Considering these premises, Kant cannot connect time to phenomena (nor to things, which are not directly objects of knowledge – in Kant's view phenomena are objects related to us, as they are perceived through senses) and their succession. Indeed he looks upon time as an autonomous entity and therefore he cannot accept Hume's concept as it is limited to psychological time only. In order to maintain the validity of Newton's theories despite Hume's objections, Kant claims the universality and the necessity of mathematical and physical propositions – put in his words, tha possibility of the existence of synthetic judgements a priori. In Kant's opinion, thus, space and time precede (rather than succeed, as stated by Hume) experience and are perceptual forms a priori, 'transcendental' categories of the intellect, that is to say subjective conditions of knowledge which also allow the formulation of universally valid judgements (synthetic a priori) – An example is the propositions of (Euclidean) geometry which allow the description of spatial properties through a pure intuition that is the ground of all empirical intuitions on space.

**The philosopher and the scientist: chronicle of a "double monologue"**

On the 6th of April 1922 Bergson and Einstein had a famous argument at a meeting organized by the Société française de Philosophie, to which they were both invited. At the time Bergson was an undisputed authority on culture in France. Einstein had published the theory of general relativity only five years earlier, and it was still widely disputed within the scientific community (the Nobel prize he won the year before was due to the discovery of the photoelectric effect, not to relativity). He had not yet become an international celebrity, the most famous scientist since the days of Newton.

André Robinet defined their argument as a “double monologue” which gave rise to a mutual misunderstanding rather than an exchange of ideas – it is well known that neither of the two found any reasons to change his convictions and although they saw and wrote to each other again (without mentioning the subject of time), Einstein used to say “God forgive him!” when the name of Bergson was mentioned.

It is obvious, though, that Einstein and Bergson’s critics were absolutely right about the fact that the French philosopher had not understood the whole meaning of relativity from a strictly physical point of view. The example contained in Duration and Simultaneity, in which he compares the time expansion envisaged by relativity limited to the effect of perspective (according to which a distant person seems smaller) is certainly misleading, even if interpreted as mere analogy.

With respect to the renowned paradox of the twins (what he calls ‘trip on the cannonball’), Bergson notes that Einstein, ‘alive and conscious’, is bound to choose a frame of reference and “only” attribute (foresee, calculate, or in Bergson words ‘imagine’) a slower time to its twin’s reference frame rather than experience or perceive it. In both cases ‘the duration’ would be the same, but the confusion between psychological and physical time is all too clear – in this respect Bergson expresses one of the most popular consequences of relativity which destroys Aristotle and Newton’s belief in absolute time. After Einstein, it is no longer true that if all movements slowed down, “time”, whether individual or cosmic, would go on unperturbed, as stated by the two above-mentioned philosophers; it would rather slow down with us and for this reason expansion of dilatation would be invisible to the unfortunate twin who is thrown into space. This does not exclude, however, that this time slowdown (or acceleration, according to the opposite perspective) dictated by relativity can be “real”, that is visible and measurable to such an extent that it can be verified through a comparison between the two frames of reference.

At this point, a clarification is necessary about the various possible levels on the basis of which we can choose how to compare Einstein and Bergson’s ideas. On a deeper level their epistemological positions seem to be incompatible (exactly!, as Bergson would say), almost like an exemplary mirror of the eternal debate on nature which we have tried to illustrate so far.

The next paragraph will deal briefly with the precise theoretical question to which relativity has given an unexpected answer and will attempt to illustrate his continuity with the seventeeth-century paradigm of the experimental method, so as to consider it a “scientific” theory. At this point, it is necessary to mention Einstein’s

"realist" position on the problem of the nature of time, which the scientist himself expressed with these very words: "This is the question: is the philosopher's time the same as the physician's? I believe that the philosopher's time is both a psychological and physical time. Physical time can be derived from consciousness. Originally individuals had the notion of simultaneity of perception; they could understand each other and agree on some things that they perceived. This was the first step towards objective reality. However, objective events do not depend on individuals, for these are just mental constructions, logical entities. There is no such a thing as a philosopher's time; there is just a psychological time which is different from physical time".

Strictly speaking, we could object that the same logical gap noted by Einstein in the passage from the simultaneity of perceptions to that of events is cyclical, as he believes, in the same way, in the existence of "objective events which do not depend on individuals". Bertrand Russell saw no contradiction in maintaining that the reality surrounding us disappears when we do not look at it, however, this point will not be dealt with here.

What is worth pointing out is that Bergson never wanted to write a scientific text – he never questioned the results obtained from relativity in the field of physics theories, as he said to the Société française de Philosophie: "In the first place I will say what I admire about Einstein's work. It seems to impose itself on the attention both of philosophers and scientists. It is not just a new physics, but also, in some respects, a new way of thinking".

Bergson's statements are not, or not only, circumstantial: he tried explicitly to analyse the consequences of the theory of relativity and derive a philosophical interpretation with respect to his duration theory. His ambition, as we have said, is that of finding a fresh space for philosophy and creating a metaphysics that could escape from the internal contrast between classical metaphysics and positivist science, which are united by their characteristic of being symbolic systems abolishing reality's time dimension. In this respect, Bergson sees no contradiction between 'multiple times', as postulated by relativity, which he considers 'fictitious', and his idea of a 'Universal Time' consisting of all individual consciousnesses.

The misunderstandings related to the physical interpretation of relativity need be considered here as irrelevant – it is on this level that Bergson's epistemological convictions can be humbly compared to Einstein's and his belief in an objective reality which can also be considered as measurable and accessible to scientfic research (and moreover, in his case, governed by deterministic laws). Einstein's famous remark

(which has almost the same importance as that of Newton about absolute time), according to which the distinction between past, present and future is just an illusion, though 'obstinate', is actually the evidence of an authentic "underlying choice", which was shared by Einstein and widespread. However, it met with strong opposition even within the scientific community, but from all points of view it must be accorded the same respect as Bergson's theory of the primary reality of time flow.

The idea that the present does not exist and past and future events have the same reality as present events is not so absurd as it might seem to the common sense, now a discredited concept. Indeed this conception is supported (or rather not confuted) by all known physics theories, according to which this tripartition has no significance. If it still makes sense, after Einstein, to say that event A is in the future of event B, this statement has nothing to do with the "happening" of events, and the relation between A and B is a timeless property which is not connected to the existence of the present. At this point it is legitimate to wonder whether this is a "proof" of the irreality of becoming or rather a perspective effect due to the precise limits of a scientific research on reality.

Zeno's paradoxes on the impossibility of movement and the fact that Achilles should never reach the turtle do not seem less convincing and in the same way do not resolve the question. Finally, in favour of a substantial incommensurability between Einstein and Bergson's opposed philosophies, it is necessary to quote the judicious remark of the American physician and philosopher David Park, who was convinced, as was Einstein, that time does not pass "in reality": however, Park notes, the idea of the passing of time must not be considered an illusion, but rather "a myth (...) for it implies no deception of the senses (...). No experiment will tell us unambiguously whether time passes or not".

**Time and analytic philosophy**

In 1908, Minkowski confirmed that space and time are not to be looked upon as separate entities on the basis of his famous diagrams which aimed at representing the conceptual revolution brought about by relativity on such concepts as space and time from a geometric point of view. In that very year, the journal Mind published an article by the Scottish philosopher John McTaggart, whose objective was likewise to demonstrate the 'unreality of time', though from a different point of view. In McTaggart's opinion, there are two fundamentally different ways to connect events to

time. According to a first series of enunciations, events are ordered on the basis of such non-relational predicates as “x is past”, “y is present”, “z is future”. The characteristic of these statements (which he called ‘series-A’ and tensional enunciations) is that they must inevitably be referred to the temporal perspective of the person who enunciates them. In the second series of enunciations (‘series-B’, atensional enunciations) events are ordered in a series of temporal positions through a two-term relation, asymmetrical and transitive, like “x is before y”, “y is after z”.

The fundamental aspect of this distinction is the fact that the language-related content of these two series of propositions, that is to say their value of truth in terms of analytic philosophy, in the first case is related to the time of the utterance and therefore changes with it, while in the second case it is independent from time, it is unchangeable and absolute.

McTaggart’s discussion on the unreality of time, which cannot be illustrated in depth as we can appreciate his linguistic clarification even though we may not agree with it, consists in the demonstration that the ‘qualitative’ elements of series-A (past, present and future) are intrinsically contradictory. The point is that if the reality of series-A is denied, then only series-B can refer to time, and this series cannot be distinct from any set of events ordered on the basis of such relations as ‘smaller than’, ‘bigger than’ (for example the continuum of real numbers). Thus series-B is limited to a third class of enunciations (series-C), which refers to an atemporal structure by definition, which lacks directionality. In this way, the distinction between past, present and future is ‘unreal’ for it “depends on mind”.

Although McTaggart’s discussion on the contradictions resulting from series-A is still questioned, his distinction between (temporally) tensional and atensional enunciations (enunciations referring or not to the temporal perspective of the person who expresses them, respectively) has become a classic of the analytic philosophy of time, to such an extent that Dorato states that “every philosophical-scientific discussion on the reality of time that does not take this distinction into account is bound to miss the fundamental aspect of the problem or lead to confusion”. In this respect he mentions Prigogines, according to whom the progressive discovery of becoming by physics unites the two distinct problems of the arrow of time and the reality of becoming.

It is not essential to share’s Dorato’s view, but his reconstruction of the struggle, though apparently pedantic and captious, between the static and dynamic theories of time (whose main features we will be illustrating) proves to be as precious with respect

to our work, for it allows us to find the elements quoted so far in favour of an impossible mediation between objective and subjective time.

All analytic philosophers of time (whether ‘static’ or ‘dynamic’) agree on one thing: McTaggart was wrong when he connected the condition of series-B to that of series-A. The (possible) contradictory nature of the (tensional) elements of series-A has no implication on the class of atensional enunciations, as both are subject to an authentic “principle of untranslatability”. Thus, the passage from one series to the other implies an irremediable loss in significance. A clarification will be attempted through an example, for this point is of the essence to comprehend the qualitative leap which separates the scientific from the narrative discourse on time.

Such atensional enunciations (series-B) as “x is before y” as well as “it is raining in Rome on the 24th February 1996 at 7 o’clock” have, by definition, an “eternal” value of truth, that is to say dependent on the “time” in which the enunciation is pronounced. In other words, they are either always true or always false, this contrast deriving from our impossibility to verify this value, which in any case does not change. For this reason, these enunciations cannot serve as guide to the action: if I do not have further information, like “we are in Rome”, “today is the 24th February” and “now it is 7 o’clock”, I will not know if I need an umbrella or not. This additional information has a tensional nature and therefore a value of truth that changes with time, or rather depend on the spatio-temporal context of the speaker.

Finally, let us consider what has been stated so far with respect to both enunciations – “it is raining on the 24th February, etc.” (atensional) and “it is raining now” (tensional). If we say that these utterances are translatable, it means that they have the same meaning and this in turn can have two meanings – they have the same value of truth, which is impossible as the value of the former enunciation is unmodifiable, while the value of the latter is connected to the temporal perspective of the speaker. Or, following Wittgenstein’s thesis according to which meaning is identified with usage, both enunciations must be able to be used in the same circumstances. Yet we have already noted that when an enunciation is atensionally true, it cannot give information on its spatial-temporal context and therefore it cannot be used as guide to action as specified above in the same way in which such a tensional enunciation as “it is raining now” could be. In conclusion, both enunciations are untranslatable.

A fascinating re-formulation of what Ricoeur defined as “the mutual concealment” between “the time of the soul and the time of the world” may be seen in the irreducible difference of these two ‘fundamental ways’ of referring to time.

According to the strict terminology of analytic philosophy, the contrast between a static and a dynamic conception of time is due to this division into series of enunciations which are not comparable to each other. This question takes on a different aspect according to whether it is dealt with from the point of view of the philosophy of language or that of ontology. In the first case, the contrast will be about the conditions of truth of tensional enunciations, which according to static theorists can be expressed only through atensional enunciations, as it is from these that the 'subjective and 'mental' nature of tensional utterances can be deduced.

In the second case the contrast is even more radical. According to the static theory, the future and the past exist in the same way in which the present exists: with a very popular "spatial analogy", as stated by Dorato and agreed on by Bergson, we can say that in this perspective "with respect to now, the future and the past exist in the same way in which somewhere else does with respect to here". In other words, the future is epistemically open (we do not know it) but ontologically closed – its events are logically (but not casually) determined like those of the past and there is no objective line of demarcation (present).

On the contrary, according to dynamic theorists events come into being in the present and cease to exist in the past, while the future events are simply non-existent or only possible; thus, the sum of 'happened' events increases with time as an ontologically open future is realized.

The connection with our ability to influence events and therefore another ethically related infinite problem of the choice between free will and determinism is evident, but it cannot be dealt with here. This semantic clarification (or complication), however, is not be conceived as a re-proposal of the dichotomy that has characterized our telling of time so far.

In all these years, though, philosophy has broadened its bases, thus causing a shift in the sphere of interest from being to knowledge and finally language. However, the reconciliation of opposites

has revealed itself as impossible from all points of view – if the reality of becoming and changing is not easy to deny at a first attempt, still no one has so far been able to explain exactly how Achilles can reach the turtle; time is certainly a fundamental category for the organisation of knowledge, yet it is difficult to imagine that its condition is connected to that of improbable results of evolution, conscious beings with evident self-destructive tendencies. Tensional utterances might prove contradictory or elusive, but it is difficult to act, or simply orient oneself in a “static” world which is only subject to the present. After all, a long time has passed since Parmenides. Hasn’t it?

## Part two

### The time of telling

Besides Paul Ricoeur's recounting of philosophical and scientific reflections on time, and his progressive efforts to attain an organic summary of his knowledge to continuously keep astride of his achievements, he shows us one more possible story, one that entails other conceptual universes, and is capable of shedding light on various aspects of our condition of beings in time.

Historical and fictional tales have the power to reshape time, according to Ricoeur. With the poetics of story telling, history and fiction jointly provide a reply to the aporias of time emerging from what we have defined as an impossible mediation between objective and subjective time. The oscillation between these two irreconcilable extremes has led to the birth of scientific rationality, and to the transformations it has brought, about the concept of objective time. Notwithstanding, the reasons for "flowing" time, of time that is being experienced and perceived directly, have not disappeared completely.

Ricoeur recognises two different ways to "handle" time in historical and fictional tales: or rather to widen the various meanings of this term – its "usages", following Wittgenstein – given that the unresolved debate dealt with in the first chapter, has finally been transferred to the linguistic level, with the advantage of defining the boundaries of the underlying (or related) ontological or ethical conceptions.

In contrast to the atemporal structures created by a physical description of reality, and perhaps in secret harmony with the intrinsic duration implied in the functions and in the evolution of living organisms described by biology, history and tales, we can thus find two further ways to recount the passing of time. These may be considered either in formal opposition , on the basis of the asymmetry of their respective standpoints, or complementary, if the basis of the problem they have in common – the relationship between tale and reality – is compared.

The way in which history replies to the aporias of time, (or attempts to do so) is, according to Ricoeur, the elaboration of a third, appropriately historical time, which aims at re-inserting experienced time into cosmic time, through thought-generated instruments functioning as connectors. These connectors are the calendar, the idea of generation succession (Ricoeur, following Alfred Schutz, classifies generations into

contemporary people, predecessors and successors) and instruments like archives, documents and traces. They bear witness to the poetical function of history, to its capacity (which Ricoeur considers a mainly creative one) to reshape time by elaborating a solution for its aporias, unceasingly and without a solution that may be considered definitive.

The re-insertion of experienced time into cosmic time, in history, is paralleled by an opposed solution to the same problem in fiction, that is, the imaginative variations that fiction enacts on the main themes of temporal phenomena. Regarding the relationship of complementarity between history and fiction, the main issue to be tackled is the relationship between reality and the events told. On the level of historiography, the main (or classical) problem was and still is understanding what is meant when one states that historical tales are related to events that 'really' occurred in the past. Ricoeur believes that the concept of a 'real past' is based on an implicit ontology, thanks to which the constructions of historians can aspire to be more or less approximate re-constructions of what was "real" on one day. The concept of representativeness, or lieutenancy in Ricoeur's view, is attributed to the task of revealing the paradox marking the concept of 'real past', a paradox which at first sight seems to have no correspondence in fiction, whose characters, events and plots are by definition 'unreal'. The ambitious task of the French philosopher is to reach beyond this simple dichotomy. His purpose on the one hand is to show the preconditions for the concept of 'real past', and on the other, the positive content that the creations of fictional tales can achieve beyond the mere negative definition of "unreality".

The relationship of representativeness is paralleled in the field of fiction by the relationship of application. Within an effect theory, this notion allows the investigation of fiction, and consequently "its positive function of revelation and transformation of life and customs". Ricoeur believes that the effects of fiction are essentially the effects of reading. "Reading is the way through which literature comes back to life, i.e., through the action and suffering that characterise existence".

Beyond the dichotomy between history and fiction and the related one between reality and unreality, and thanks to their common capacity to reshape time, Ricoeur reaches the last stage of his investigation, what he considers the core of the problem. He initially calls it 'reference', and then 'crossed reshaping', "to refer to the joint effects of history and fiction on human actions and suffering". These effects become tangible thanks to the mutual exchanges between the two narrative methods: history incorporates the resources of attribution of a fictional form, derived from narrative imagination, into

its viewpoint, while fictional tales bring about their effects of revelation and transformation only by symmetrically adopting the resources of attribution of a historical form offered by the attempts to reconstruct the effective past. “These exchanges […] give birth to what we call human time, which is simply a recounted time”.

Ricoeur’s words seem to summarise the sense of the description attempted in this second chapter in the best possible way: the time of the story, capable of quickly overcoming the contrasts and aporias witnessed by the efforts to investigate the “real” nature of time, from the points of view of science and philosophy. The psychological time which each of us “experiences” in ceaseless opposition to tangible, measurable time, and the origins, evolution and fruits of this clash (which is no longer conceptual but practical, maybe existential) will have to be told by the narrator, the tale-creator, by mastering an “imaginary” time such as the narrative one.

Within the power of persuasion hidden in literary devices, the riddles of time seem to disappear, its paradoxes are activated and rendered productive. Time shows its several faces to those who are curious to know other “tales”, by temporarily suspending their disbelief. It seems to re-acquire its ineffable unity and an unbreakable link with the existence of every individual, which is made up precisely of time itself.

**Time in novels**

Under the label of ‘fictional tale’ may be included (following Ricoeur and without claiming to be exhaustive), all those literary creations that do not aspire to narrate a “real” tale. This is the case of historical tales: besides tragedy, comedy and epopee, tales (from short stories to folk tales) and novels come thus to the fore.

In this context, one will naturally wonder whether the formal principle of plot construction (mythos) elaborated by Aristotle in relation with classical genres may be equally valid for much more heterogeneous works, which are born from, and exist parallel to, a far more complex social reality. In accordance with Ricoeur, we believe that the answer to the question must be positive, although “precisely in the context of modern novels does the relevance of the concept of plot construction seem to draw most criticism”. However, leaving aside the dogmatic interpretations accrued over time on the principles set out in Poetics, such as the obligation to start a story in medias res and explain the present situation only subsequently (just like Homer does in his Odyssey),

or the restraints set to the time unit rule, the plot appears to be the only principle of formal configuration inspiring the innovations produced by novels, their various shapes and their continuous overcoming of all established conventions. True, modern novels greatly widen the social sphere in which the actions take place. They are no longer limited to feats of legendary or renowned characters. What is more, the focal point of the literary work is shifted (as Henry James explicitly claimed) from the action to the character, with a series of events bringing the protagonist to maturation during the development of the novel (this is the case of Bildungsromane, or 'formation novels'). However, Ricoeur underlines that there is no case in which "we leave the Aristotelian definition of mythos through 'action imitation'. If the field of the plot is extended, the field of the action is extended accordingly". The action may therefore legitimately include the moral transformation of a character, as well as his or her stream of consciousness, provided it develops within one story, which may be read as a "singular totality", with a theme and a style, without the plot reducing itself to the thread of the story or, even worse, to a mere summary of events.

Ricoeur investigates the limits that the plasticity of modern novels may attain before marking the end of the Aristotelian paradigm, and finds out that if mythos is the "imitation of a single and complete action", the action must have a beginning, a development and an ending, for the configuration to prevail over the episode. A splendid example may therefore be found in the Bible, with its perfect consistency between the (recounted!) time of the world and the historical time of the book: these two times are perfectly synchronic, they begin and end together. This complete alignment between the time of the narration and the time of the world may aptly illustrate the core of this paragraph, i.e. the imaginative variations in time that can be found in fictional tales, novels in particular.

Between chronological (objective) time and the time of tales there is a "necessary" gap, which does not concern fictional works only, but the whole universe of narration: exactly like novels and tales, historiographical works may also cover various temporal distances. For instance, they may precisely describe crucial days, or events that took place during very long periods of time ("the Middle Ages"). In any case, detailed as they might be, historical reconstructions will never exactly match the flowing of objective time, owing to an inevitable limitation, rather than "technical" difficulties. Resorting to a spatial analogy, reconstructions are temporal "maps", and exactly like geographical maps they keep their function when they reproduce their subject on a scale other than one-to-one: if an imaginary geographical map were as

large as the land it represented, it would be extraordinarily precise but completely useless.

What has been said in relation to the elastic time of history, which aims at reinserting experienced time into the time of the world, is even more true for the "imaginary" time of fictional tales, albeit construed on the basis of experienced time. As stated above, periods of inactivity are excluded, and no-one wonders how the hero used the "pauses" between one action and another. Precisely thanks to this "abyss", the construction of the plot can elaborate its own sequence of events, which is logical not temporal, according to Aristotle. The distinction must be understood cum grano salis: we must specify however, that this rejection of chronology by fiction does not equal a rejection of any principle substituting configuration. If the plot creates its own sequence of events, if the time of novels or tales "must" differentiate itself from real time, then it cannot fail to establish new norms of temporal organisation, to invent its own time units and thus to create new relevant expectations in readers. Ricoeur states that believing the contrary means underestimating the resources of fiction, "it means believing that the only conceivable time is chronological time".

The contribution of fiction to the understanding of time, as well as the force of its imaginative variations, which can reap benefit from the unresolved antithesis between subjective and objective time, are mainly (even though not exclusively) based on the possibility to play with the measurement of this gap. Following Ricoeur's precise terminology, we can therefore state that the main privilege of fictional tales consists in their capability to "doubly split into utterance and uttered". Before specifying the sense of the above, and above all before seeing it applied in some practical examples, two interrelated clarifications are needed.

Firstly, what is understood by "uttered" should not be confused at all with the reality it refers to, and the two respective times must be equally separated. Going back to the example of the Bible, it is obvious that no-one (with the exception of extreme cases like creationists) can confuse the "story" it contains with the 'real history of the world', whatever the meaning of the latter phrase. The relationship of the time found in stories, which includes the time of the utterance and the uttered, with what may be defined as calendar time (rigorously "real" objective time) creates a second way to "play" with the unreality of the events described, a way which is maybe as interesting as the previous one.

As can be seen below, the authors who aim at dissecting the narrative reshaping of time reveal that it can take place by comparing the three following levels: the time

during which the narrated event takes place; the time that passes from the beginning of the narration (which is a future but equally "imaginary" time with respect to the former, because it is implicit in the feasibility of the tale itself, it is the time of the narrator, a more or less invisible character); and the "real" time in which an actual writer decides to write a story, which may more or less directly refer to events that have really occurred. This brief explanation shows clearly that even the simplest story, such as a realist novel presenting a linear sequence of past and likely events recounted by an omniscient narrator who can attribute full sense to those events in perspective, can combine and exploit the different durations of at least three temporal levels. That is impossible in the case of speeches speculating on the enigmatic nature of time, which cannot be blocked by the aporias derived from the comparison between subjective and objective time.

Similarly, when analysing the ways in which some novels play with time, we will leave references to the time of the reading almost completely aside, meaning both the measurement of the time "objectively necessary" to read a novel, and the effects of this apprehension on the "reader's world".

To clarify the meaning of the difference between utterance and uttered, a reference (made by Ricoeur himself) to the popular distinction elaborated by Benveniste between story and speech is mandatory. In the case of stories, the speaker is not involved, and one has the impression that "events recount themselves"; a speech, instead, is any sentence implying or presupposing the presence of a speaker and a listener. Recalling what was stated above, in the first part, concerning the contrast between tense related and tenseless utterances, we seem to rediscover the two opposite linguistic dimensions highlighted by analytical philosophy within the narrative universe. This shows the fruitfulness of the dichotomy found by McTaggart.

Each of these 'modes of utterance' has a different relation with grammatical tenses. Tales exclude present and future tenses, but include all past tenses (simple past, present perfect, past perfect, to which Ricoeur adds the 'prospective' past: "he was about to leave"). Past tenses, nevertheless, lose their function of indicating "the real past of a real subject", whereas, speeches accept all three fundamental tenses (simple past, present, future), but decisively favour present tenses.

Therefore, the capability of tales to play with time is related exactly to this opportunity to combine two different speeches into one single "story", i.e. the speech of the narrator and that of the characters, where the former recounts or comments on the adventures of the latter, lengthening or shortening their "time" at pleasure. In this sense we can find a distinction that Ricoeur obtains from Günther Müller (a distinction

symmetrical to the one between utterance and uttered): there exists a ‘time of telling’ (Erzählzeit) and a ‘told time’ (erzählte Zeit), and in turn they are in non banal relationship with the ‘time of life and action’. Following Ricoeur, between the time of telling and told time there is a game that places temporal experience (Zeiterlebnis) at stake.

The comparison among these three times does not have to be reduced to the measurement of their respective chronologies. If beyond the simple return from the present of the narrator to the present of the character, we consider the time of memory, the time of dreaming, the time of the referred dialogue or the time of the stream of consciousness, then we may clearly realise that “besides quantity measurements there are quality tensions”.

This leads to a legitimate question: what is the time in which Molly Bloom’s long monologue, at the end of Joyce’s Ulysses, “takes place”? And what is the time from which Dostoevsky’s underground man writes his memories? The time of memory here is born from and overlaps with the time of the world. However, the perfection of the link, the inseparability of the shape of its content and in brief, the strength of these narrative constructions, dispel any doubts on the truth or likeness of those memories and feelings. The conceptual aporias described above are thus replaced with the persuasive strength of existences, experiences and consequently “durations” that can access a “reality” level that is different – and no less real from certain points of view – from the one we perceive directly.

We believe that even in a merely “quantitative” comparison, nonetheless, one may notice the quality gap separating the time of tales from the time of the world: narrative strategies can be extremely variegated here, with flashbacks, anticipations, summaries of year-long events into a few lines or, conversely, lengthening of pauses in time, oscillating between the expectations of the protagonist and those of the reader. Thus, the usage of the simple past (or of the “imperfect tense” in romance languages) to indicate repeated actions reflects the slow yet unnoticed flowing of identical days. However, a novel written almost exclusively in an imperfect tense, such as Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude, almost suggests a time turning on itself, and gives its characters no choice other than to follow their destiny. Vice versa, the detailed description of the hall where Madame Bovary is going to participate in the ball she has been longing so much for marks the extension of a moment that she would want to last for ever.

As Vargas Llosa put it: “the time of novels is something that extends itself, slows down, stands still or begins to accelerate. The story moves in the time of fiction across a landscape, it comes and goes, it strides or strolls, leaving long chronological periods completely blank (abolishing them) and going subsequently back to recuperate that lost time, jumping from the past to the future and then to the present again with a freedom which we, human beings, are denied in real life”.

A perfect example of acceleration is provided by Stendhal, in The Red and the Black. After the long and tormented love affair between Julien Sorel and the untamed Matilde de la Mole, everything seems set for the better for our hero: Marquis de la Mole finally seems to approve of such an embarrassing marriage. Nonetheless, everything suddenly vanishes: Madame de Renal writes to the Marquis, depicting Julien as a trivial arriviste, thus dashing any possibility of him marrying Matilde. From the moment in which Julien reads the letter to that in which he fires two shots at his long beloved in the church of Verrières, the time of the tale quickly accelerates within a few sentences, with the protagonist travelling in a coach, incapable of writing a letter to Matilde, because “his hand only made unreadable marks on the sheet of paper”. Julien’s time has stopped, suspended in the cool resolve to kill, with the fixed idea of revenge. Thus, both he and the reader do not perceive the flowing of time, in the interval from the decision to “avenge” to the actual revenge. This is all contained in one single page, on which the eyes of the reader are transfixed.

Comparisons can also be made between different texts, where repetitions may pay tribute to the universality of a plot: the long years Odysseus spent trying to return home after the Trojan War can be ironically condensed into one interminable day, the 16th June 1904, experienced by Leopold Bloom in Dublin. However, the plot offers truly endless ways to compress or lengthen time, and Joyce provides a memorable example in the tenth episode of his masterpiece, which is presented like a small-scale reproduction of the whole work: it is divided into eighteen parts (like the total eighteen episodes) plus one, which includes them all. Between three and four p.m., time in the novel ends scattered and fragmented into the infinite intertweaving and the perfunctory ferment of a series of characters moving along the labyrinth of the crowded streets of Dublin. The various actors, all absorbed in their activities, or strolling purposelessly, meet and observe one another, each from their own point of view, according to their own time, which is inevitably intertwined with the time of the others within the common time of the tale. All characters end up within the sight and perspective of Viceroy William Humble (“humble”, but actually representing civil power, as well as being the author’s

alter ego who, like God, finds enjoyment in first creating and then contemplating the breathless coming and going of his "creatures"), the Count of Dudley who meets them all again during his stroll, while they perform actions that have already been recounted, underlined by the masterly repetition of sentences from previous episodes. With an invitation to read the nineteen short chapters as if they were temporally united, and with a stratagem which is often resorted to in cinematography (Stanley Kubrick's The Killing is an evident example), the same events are thus told repeatedly, each time from a different point of view, by playing on the confluence of the temporal experiences of the characters, which are inevitably subjective, within the "objective" time of a normal day.

In twentieth-century experimental works, time becomes an object for manipulation, no longer or not only from the point of view of characters or their subjective perception, but also and above all from the narrator's, who becomes increasingly present, setting aside all conventions of omniscience or invisibility. The time of the story telling enters therefore into an explicit, participating, ironical and bitter relationship with the time of the story experienced by the characters.

After the fall of the supposition of realism claiming to establish an exact correspondence (obviously within the theoretical limits examined above) between literary work and reality imitated through a rather ingenuous concept of likeness, John Dos Passos took a resolute decision. In The 42nd Parallel he intertwines the events of the protagonists with a series of brief paragraphs (entitled Photographic Eye and Newsreel), the former containing the subjective and direct impressions of one of the protagonists at certain moments of time, the latter some "signs of the time", that materialize into a dizzy collage of headlines, rallies, songs of the time, political slogans, chronicle news. These are fragments of subjective and objective time, thrown out of a non-place, blocking the temporal evolution of the main events, and at the same time attempting to convey the feelings, the speeches, the noises, in brief the atmosphere of that "time", i.e. the America of the early 1900s.

This mention of the evolution of the novel during the twentieth century, nevertheless, should not limit us within the boundaries of a history of "literary" time, which would reach beyond the scope of this paper. The difficulty with which the history of literature (just like the history of time!) can be described as a linear sequence of events (and even less so as a progression) finds its best demonstration in the (past and present) "revolutionary" work The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman. The title of this brilliant novel, written by Laurence Sterne between 1759 and 1767 (i.e.

a few years after or in the same years which saw the publishing of some modern novel "prototypes", such as Richardson's Pamela or Fielding's Tom Jones), apparently evokes the most classical and universal plot (after the Odyssey at least), i.e. the material adventures and the moral transformations of a character. The protagonist is identified by name and surname even on the cover, and he is the pivot of the whole tale, whose temporal extension is measured against the extension of his life. However, that supposition is extremely far from the truth: the novel begins, ironically, not with the birth of the protagonist but his conception (irreparably marked, at the decisive moment, by the prospective mother's inaptly asking whether the clock has been wound up). Tristram Shandy only appears at the beginning of the 5th volume, not before the delightful 250-page-long presentation of the other (secondary) protagonists: his father, uncle Toby, his assistant, Corporal Trim and Yorick the priest.

However, this delayed and unusual beginning is not the only reason why Tristram Shandy deserves mention here: there are at least two more aspects of interest for their temporal dimension, even though this is tackled in an oblique and indirect way.

Firstly, Sterne writes a novel in the first person, hiding behind Tristram's character, who in turn is almost never directly present before the recounted events (albeit more in the second part of the work). That strategy allows Sterne to continuously oscillate between the time of the telling and the time of the tale or, in Benveniste's terminology, between the story and the speech. The effect produced is an ironical but participative detachment, stressed by the continuous asides to readers (or to a hypothetical lady, chosen as their representative) asking for their comprehension, to go back with them in the time of the tale or to anticipate what Tristram/Sterne will write a few lines below. The effect, added to the merely stylistic one which will be analysed, is one of an infinite temporal extension, from the fictional present in which Tristram can be imagined intent on his very personal autobiography (which he writes with a procedure that may only be defined as Shandian) to the account of minor daily events, dating back to when he was just a 'homunculus', is extended at pleasure with infinite fantasy.

In this sense, Sterne's masterly technique, almost attempting to reproduce the spontaneity of an oral speech, has been compared to cinema techniques, i.e. crossing or overlapping different spatial or temporal perspectives. With a certain frequency, as will become clear with the final quotations, he uses his customary irony to uncover the splitting between utterance and uttered (as well as their relationship with the real life of an actual author), which is an implicit supposition in every tale, and the possibility to

play with time deriving from that splitting. The result is a revelation of the fictional tale that may be compared to the result obtained by those film directors who zoom out at the end of the film to include the set.

The second aspect which seems to be related to our subject is more concerned with Sterne's particular style, marked by continuous digressions, incidental remarks within other incidental remarks, cadenced by the famous dashes that slow down or accelerate the reading. The author begins to present dozens of thoughts, not caring to conclude any of them and flouting coherence. All the same, the work does not become less readable, and, what is more, the incredible likeness, the humanity and the prominence of his characters, above all uncle Toby (a concentration of human goodness), remain unchanged.

This "Chinese-box" style – if we may say so – almost appears like a literary translation of the already mentioned paradoxes of Zeno, which may be applied as effectively to space as to time: before a second has passed, a half of it must have passed; before a half of it has passed, a quarter must have passed; and so on to infinity. Sterne's intention, however, was not a philosophical one, i.e. demonstrating the unreality of time, but a more human and despairing one, i.e. stopping or at least distracting pressing time for a while, a time before which even his corrosive irony was transformed into melancholic resignation.

To solve the problem of finding one single excerpt from a novel so rich in inventions to illustrate the various ways in which Sterne "plays" with time, in the sense that we have managed to specify, we have opted for a two examples, so that this brief paper may conclude with words better than ours:

"– Now this is the most puzzled skein of all – for in this last chapter, as far at least as it has help'd me through Auxerre, I have been getting forwards in two different journies together, and with the same dash of the pen—for I have got entirely out of Auxerre in this journey which I am writing now, and I am got half way out of Auxerre in that which I shall write hereafter – There is but a certain degree of perfection in everything; and by pushing at something beyond that, I have brought myself into such a situation, as no traveller ever stood before me; for I am this moment walking across the market-place of Auxerre with my father and my uncle Toby, in our way back to dinner – and I am this moment also entering Lyons with my post-chaise broke into a thousand pieces – and I am moreover this moment in a handsome pavillion built by Pringello,

upon the banks of the Garonne, which Mons. Sligniac has lent me, and where I now sit rhapsodising all these affairs.

–Let me collect myself, and pursue my journey".

"Is it not a shame to make two chapters of what passed in going down one pair of stairs? for we are got no farther yet than to the first landing, and there are fifteen more steps down to the bottom; and for aught I know, as my father and my uncle Toby are in a talking humour, there may be as many chapters as steps: – let that be as it will, Sir, I can no more help it than my destiny: – A sudden impulse comes across me – drop the curtain, Shandy – I drop it – Strike a line here across the paper, Tristram – I strike it – and hey for a new chapter.

The deuce of any other rule have I to govern myself by in this affair – and if I had one – as I do all things out of all rule – I would twist it and tear it to pieces, and throw it into the fire when I had done – Am I warm? I am, and the cause demands it – a pretty story! is a man to follow rules – or rules to follow him?".

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