IN LOVE WITH ETERNITY?

"Eternity is in love with the productions of time", so I quoted the poet William Blake in my last article. But do the productions of time return eternity's love? They do not! If we take "productions of time" and "history" as synonyms, there seems to be rather a tendency to replace eternity with infinity, which is something quite else. Wendorff (in his "Zeit und Kultur", 1980[2]) labelled our modern conception of time as "pagan", because our arithmetical and chronological system has become so "closed" that it leaves God no possibility whatsoever to enter into human history. In antiquity, as far as any historical system existed then, the idea of "cyclical time" prevailed, the conception that after an unbelievable great number of years - the Babylonian "Great Year" for instance - everything which had happened would happen again in exactly the same way. Some Greek thinkers even draw the inference that Socrates would drink the hemlock cup again under circumstances perfectly the same as in 399 B. C. This fundamental Greek idea certainly bore a ressemblance to their conception of the cosmos as global and of the earth as a flat round disc, encircled by the river Okeanos flowing on and on, without having an origin and an end. "Ocean! thou mighty monster! That lies curled like a green serpent, round about the world!" (first lines of the famous "ocean aria" in the English libretto by J. R. Planché for Von Weber's opera "Oberon", 1826).

The eternal return of the same had a great hold on the Greek philosophers, on Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics. Therefore Gerhard Nebel characterised not only the ancient, but also our modern philosophy as being 'of Titanic origin' (in his "Weltangst and Götterzorn", that is to say that it constantly tries to unhinge the Godgiven temporal order of the world and to substitute it by the timeless conceptions of the human mind like the Platonic ideas. In an informative book ("Philosophies of history", 1962) Grace E. Cairns has taught us that cyclical patterns are rather the rule than the exeption and that

historical thinking the world over and in all ages has been dominated by circular and semicircular time systems. Our own linear chronology finds itself therefore in an isolated position and is certainly not impervious to other conceptions. Cairns shows that it sometimes comes remarkably near to the cyclical and semicyclical patterns. This is particularly the case in theories of cultural cycles, built on the idea that not so much history itself, but civilisation or civilisations are completing cycles, of growth, bloom and decay. The godfather of this way of thinking about culture has been the Arab Ibn Kkaldun, later, in Europe, Vico. And we all know their modern godchildren, Spengler, Sorokin and Toynbee. Sometimes the course of the cycle is spiral so that the author can remain optimistic and point to regular progress. It all may end, as in classical Marxism, with the creation of the new man and a regenerated world.

How popular such theories may become shows the incredible success of Teilhard de Chardin's "Le phénomène humain" (1955) which became a bedside book for many intellectuals. The success of this very esoteric book (many admirers admitted that they found it puzzling, even incomprehensible) seems due to the fact that it combined history, evolution theory and theology into an integrated vision. The history of the world was presented by Teilhard as a "cosmogenesis" during which all lines and tendencies were steadily mounting untill they would finally converge in an "omega point", where all distinctions of matter shall be dissolved and love will be all in love. Now if we take all this different conceptions of history and of historical time together, they really represent the idea of an endless world. "For cyclical time is the first and perfect imitation of the timeless", says Wendorff. So not only the cyclical theories, but also our linear chronology, which undergoes pressure from within and without, are tending in the direction of the elimination of time.

Now I want my readers to realize that I am writing all the time with history teaching and the composition of history schoolbooks at the back of my mind. My strategical position is that I would let histori-

cal science fend for itself, because I expect no solutions from that quarter - history typically being a science, in contrast to mathematics, that is not able to solve its own problems. History didactics will have to seek and go its own way and is, as I have stressed in these columns already, sorely in need of a didactical theory, with the problem of historical time as its first issue. However, such a didactical theory cannot be established without the use of a number of "metadidactical" elements. Therefore I have indicated here some of these elements. My opinion is that we must apply them to the analysis of history text books. Schoolbook analysis is a brand new branch of didactics, it is developing rapidly, but at the moment it still neglects the "higher" or more general aspects. Schoolbooks must be examined with regard to the way they handle time. The use of the time concepts in schoolbooks seems so completely selfevident that nobody ever takes a look at it. Nevertheless we might ask some pertinent questions.

Does there not exist a tendency to the elimination of time in historical paedagogics? In my former article I tried to show that the very popular device of the time-line - "more than a visual aid - properly used it is an intellectual exercise", Burston said in his "Principles of History Teaching" (1972^2) - does not represent time, but space. Has not eternity been replaced by infinity, cannot the time-line always be extended, may not always a new date be added to the last one? The chronological order of the books seems to be linear, but are there no cyclical tendencies? There exists a Dutch schoolbook, called "History in the perspective of the future" ("Geschiedenis in toekomstperspectief") the authors of which explicitly appeal to Teilhard, trying to build their work on his theory. But above all I should like to know how many books more or less openly present cultural cycles and in what manner they do that.

But still more important is the following. At first sight it seems only a (formidable) practical difficulty, but it contains a very fundamental didactical problem. "Time is the precondition of the mul-

tiple", says Wendorff. Here we have one of the manifestations of the oldest problem of philosophy, that of the One and the Many. History firmly stands on the side of the Many, the Multiple, with over and against it the philosophers, the staunch defenders of the One, that is to say the big and generalized concepts, the "container ideas". Every one who has ever told a story or made a report - and who has not? - knows that one needs a certain extension of time to make it sufficiently detailed and consecutive. The more you have to compress it in time the more of a "block" it becomes and the less of a story. A Persian king experienced this when he ordered his scholars to write history for him. After ten years they came back with a long train of mules all bearing two large baskets full of thick volumes. The king refused to read all this and ordered a much smaller book. After five years some of them returned with two slaves both of them having two large volumes under each arm. But he sent them away and wanted a still smaller one. After a year one scholar presented the king with a slim and handy booklet. But by now his eyesight was failing and he could not read it. The next day however this author was back again and read out to the king what he had written on a small slip of paper: "People are born, live and die". And the king awarded him.

A nice story! But is our teaching, are our text books not moving slowly in the same direction? We have everywhere lost a lot of ground, and what we have to say - and we still cling desperately to "the whole of history" - has to be condensed into fewer and fewer hours (and even schoolyears), which inevitably leads to the evaporation of the multiple. In comparative schoolbook analysis attention must be paid to this aspect: whether the shortening of the historical programs in the schools or the combination of history with other disciplines originates "block history", which in its turn would be a way to eliminate time and with time the multiple.

Some lines back I spoke about pressure from without on our chronology. During the whole of Western history there have always been thinkers for whom time was not the indispensable fundamental element

of every existence, that of the universe included. Their father was Archimedes, the prototype of all philosophy that supposes the elimination of time: it acknowledges no progress of time, no stream of time, it does not see time as an intrinsic characteristic of things - which does not mean that time does not exist for them. With this notion Archimedes has become one of the great ancestors of philosophy, because philosophy has always been interested in the idea of time, but has never quite known what to do with it. This is one of the most important reasons why philosophy has always depreciated history. Siger of Brabant has expressed this feeling very succinctly: "all that remains of Caesar is a name", he said. From ancient and medieval history spring both history and modern science, history because it has taken over the role of philosophy as "magistra vitae", and science because it has inherited the strong tendency to eliminate time.

A very important stage in this development has been Kant's "Kritik der reinen Vernunft" (1781). For the Eastprussian philosopher time was nothing else but a part of our psychic machinery, a pure form of our intuition, and not an essential element of the external order of things. Time is only a way to look at things, but because it is intuitive, it is not given to us as a completely developed concept, it has to be learned. Under the influence of this teaching the problem of time passed from philosophy to psychology, and the time concept has become something that can and must be learned and trained and practised. There you have the origin of the regular "time education" in school and in the teaching of history. In its origin it starts from a premiss that is the exact reverse of a real philosophy of history, that is to say that time belongs to the person who looks at history and not to history itself.

To return to the exact sciences, they, mathematics, physics, chemistry, are not very keen on the time concept, to say the least of it. Only that which is unchanging, unchangeable, always identical is important for them. All these sciences (with their experiments and their labo-

ratories) are built on the supposition that in nature all processes repeat themselves, that there exists identity of processes. Only so "laws" can be formulated, their most fundamental conception is "causality", which means that one can define exactly the relation between cause and effect. And just as important is the notion of "reversibility", the idea that all processes may be turned round, that you may go from cause to effect, but also from effect to cause. It is easy to see that in this conception time is absolutely useless, time is a variable or it causes variations, it is in itself the idea of change and the changeable is no concern of these sciences. If the principle of reversibility is carried through to the extreme, cause and effect become not only equivalents, but completely identical, and time (with its correlation "change") disappears entirely. In the last resort the universe becomes unmovable, altogether static, nothing whatsoever happens, it has no history. This is what the scientist call the "block universe", which has only an eternal present, but no past and no future.

May not the reader detect here a more than superfical ressemblance with the educational time-line, with that time chart for instance that stretched along the four walls of the classroom and contained "the whole of history"? Does it not represent a "block history", unmoved and unmovable, and completely "reversible", for the onlooker may walk up and down the time-line? And has this way of representing history not more to do with Lagrange than with Herodotus? For it has been Lagrange (not Einstein) who called time 'the fourth dimension of space', which seems a very mysterious slogan, but it is in my opinion an awkward attempt to assign a very humble place in the system to time (which is a refractory notion anyhow). Now, talking about history didactics and about the psychology of history teaching we must reckon with the fact that pupils who have mathematics and science as their subjects (in their opinion much more important than history) come into our classroom with quite peculiar notions of time, notions that subconsciously act as jamming stations on their historical time sense.

A fellow-member who had read my former article ("The mad voice") and whose subject is history teaching in the primary school, told me he felt discouraged by it, because it seemed to him that I had taken a very valuable paedagogical instrument (the time chart) from his hands. I hope that I have given now some more reasons for my opposition against this educational device (although speaking this essay is not about time-lines and the like). There has to be a balance between our own personal and internal time and the general time, the chronological system. But there exists a frontier which cannot be crossed with impunity. If our personal time supersedes the general time, the end is complete chaos, as it is with schizophrenic patients who live in a self constructed universe and who have severed every link with time and society. But systematic, arithmetical time may also force its way into our private domain and destroy our sense of personality, individuality, identity. This danger seems very real. The "clock" impinges more and more on the rhythms of our own existence. Therefore, in Kenneth Loach's impressive film "Family life" the girl who is growing schizophrenic smashes the clock to pieces. In my opinion the drugs problem has assumed such terrifying proportions, because, among other reasons, drugs allow the escape from the formalized and impersonal time system and make it possible to live temporarily in a free rhythm. And it says a lot that the drugs addict cannot realize this escape out of his own ressources, but has to induce it chemically. In my opinion with the devices of time charts and time-lines we are already at the wrong side of the frontier.

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