

PREFACE

The Undeducible Present

*To what use history? Only—
and it's a lot—to multiply ideas—
and not to keep us from seeing the original
present—undeducible.*

—Paul Valéry

CHRONOS—WHO OR what is it? The question is not new, yet it renews itself each time we reflect on the times in which we live—the present, our present. Yet instantly that warning arrives from Paul Valéry, who never missed an opportunity to lecture the historians who, alleging that they were practicing science, were in fact practicing literature. In his *Notebooks*, the record of the day's thoughts drawn up late at night, he often criticized the history that, looking backward, saw no further than from one day to the next. The lessons of history? Certainly not! Rather, a history “to multiply ideas,” which is not bad at all—indeed, it is a great deal. Offering up ideas by multiplying points of view helps us to see that which we do not see, do not wish to see, are not able to see—that which blinds us, fascinates us, or terrifies us—in a word, the “undeducible” present.¹

Still, is this a case of utter novelty? No, to the extent that it does not spring from nowhere and is not made of nothing: it is a social object with its own texture, a tapestry in which warp and weft interlace, fashioning distinctive hues and patterns. The texture of the present has fascinated me—an understatement—for many years. That interest inspired the reflections on time that I inaugurated with *Regimes of Historicity* and then extended in this new study. As always in my work, my path has amounted to a long detour.² That has meant

setting out from the present and traveling deep into time, so as to return to the present somehow improved. On this occasion, we do not start from Odysseus's stinging encounter with historicity, the moment when he hears a Phaeacian bard praise "Odysseus" as though he had ceased to exist. Rather I shall begin by traveling toward the very beginnings of Christianity and even earlier still, to understand which revolution in time ushered in the minor apocalyptic sect that broke away from Judaism—a revolution precisely in the texture of time, through the establishment of an unprecedented present. Why begin one's journey from so distant a point? Because this new time left a lasting, possibly even permanent, mark on Western time. Because modern time, in every sense of the term, emerged from Christian time: from there it came, and from there it has moved on.

For humans, life has always meant experiencing time—an experience by turns intoxicating, painful, often tragic, and, finally, ineluctable. Confronting Chronos has always been, for each social group, routine—whether that meant trying to catch hold of it or flee from it. Trying to regulate it by cutting it up or measuring it has meant setting out to master it, wholly a matter of believing in it and convincing others to believe as well. Over the course of millennia many methods have been used, countless really: everyday stories, myths, religious formulations, as well as theological, philosophical, and political formulations, scientific theories, works of art, works of literature, of architecture, urban designs, the invention and fabrication of tools to measure time and to regulate the life of societies and individuals. Nothing truly human is foreign to time—nothing escapes from its grip, its domination.

Yet such a history, the most familiar—the one that humans have told themselves, the one they have claimed—is only partial. Forgotten or overlooked, Chronos extends far beyond human time or that world time that the moderns fashioned for their own use and gain, thinking that it might be reduced to a pure present, as with the ass's skin in Balzac's novel, a process that nearly amounts to destroying time. Since our recent arrival in a new era, known as the Anthropocene, our economy of time has been dislodged by a time both immensely old and quite new, that of the Earth. Those various strategies for dominating time that were developed and deployed over the

centuries, the rhythm and rule of the history of the West initiated by the splitting of Chronos into natural time and human time—all now undone, ruined. How are we to come to terms with this unprecedented time, a time more “undeducible” than ever? We stand in need of a shift in perspective, a conversion really, but to what?

Chronos is the omnipresent, the inevitable, the ineluctable, “the child of the finite,” to cite the final words of the great history of the philosophy of time, Krzysztof Pomian’s *The Order of Time*.³ But above all it is that which cannot be grasped: elusive Chronos. That is the label that appears, as soon as Chronos is mentioned, from the earliest Greek tales to today, including along the way the famous Augustinian paradox on time—so long as no one asks him what time is, he knows; as soon as the question is posed, he no longer knows.⁴

So it is that, in the early 1920s, a leading Swiss horological engineer, author of a work on electric clocks, feels obliged to write that time “cannot be defined in substance; it is, metaphysically speaking, as mysterious as matter and space.”⁵ This comment, surely not meant to stir up trouble, is but a reminder of a truism; the hatching of ever more precise clocks—evidently the writer’s first priority—will not be affected. In *The Order of Time*, Pomian scrutinizes what he calls the “well-known polysemy” of the word “time.” Also, due to the “fundamental presupposition” that there are “plural times,” he advocates a “stratigraphical approach” to time.⁶ Rather than bring us face to face with Chronos itself, such an approach illumines the paths and procedures by which others have pursued it.⁷

The Order of Time is also the title of a book by the physicist Carlo Rovelli, who readily addresses the “mystery” of time. Published in 2017 (English edition: 2018), that work opens by showing that the “growth” of our scientific knowledge has been accompanied by a “disintegration” of the notion of time; in the second part, Rovelli leads the reader toward the “world without time” of quantum gravity, while the third part is a return toward lost time, “the time that we are accustomed to.” He concludes that “the mystery of time is ultimately, perhaps, more about ourselves than about the cosmos.”⁸ While I am not competent to offer any pronouncements on quantum gravity as a world without time, I have retained Rovelli’s approach to the problem, for in his contribution to the endless debate over cosmic time versus

psychological time—initiated by the Greeks and dramatized by Augustine—the physicist, our contemporary, thrusts us toward psychological time.⁹ Rovelli even ends his book with a passage from Ecclesiastes evoking the approach of death.

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In what follows, you will find neither a philosophy of Western time, nor a history of time from antiquity to the present, nor a catalogue of the technologies that made the measurement of time ever more precise. Such a catalogue, if one dared attempt it, might never end—and what would it tell us?¹⁰ We would know more, but would our understanding be any better? Instead this survey of Chronos embarks with a question in hand and tracks a unifying thread. My previous books, themselves just so many freeze frames on temporal crises, posed the same question addressed here, an unsettled inquiry into the present time. What is that time? What is our relation to time? What is our “today”—few would be tempted to call it a “beautiful today”—made of? The thread unifying this work of conceptual history is the regime of historicity’s radar, and the goal has always been to illumine temporal crises. In those moments shifting landmarks throw us off balance, and the articulations of past, present, and future come undone.

As always, it is the shift that interests me: temporal crises or “gaps,” as Hannah Arendt called them. Think of those moments when something that was still there yesterday, which left a trace, slips into darkness and undoes itself, while at the same time something new, something unprecedented, seeks a voice, despite lacking (for now) the words it needs to shape itself. For a long time, I was haunted by that sentence from Michel de Certeau: “It might seem that an entire society expresses what it is in the process of fabricating through the representations of what it is in the process of losing.”¹¹ And so, as always, we encounter that discrepancy, that lag between what we know and what we see. How are we to see something never before seen? How are we to say something that has never been said? How are we to offer a meaning that is not the “purer” meaning with which Stéphane Mallarmé sought to endow the words of the tribe, but a meaning

that signifies something unprecedented? Valéry was posing, in his own way, the same question. But could it be that today the gap between what our societies are “in the process of losing” and what is coming into existence has become so vast that those societies no longer even know what to “build,” let alone how? Or, more seriously, it may become impossible to build without making something utterly other. Valéry’s “undeducible” would be intensified. This question, that of today, will accompany us throughout this inquiry, beginning with the Christian crisis of time and its resolution, continuing with the crises of modern time, and concluding with the contemporary crisis of time, that of the Anthropocene.

Thus the following pages do not all address time, and they do not address all of time. Rather, they constitute an essay that examines the order of times and the eras of time in what was becoming the Western world. Much as Buffon distinguished among the “epochs” of nature, one may distinguish among the epochs of time. And as we examine the transition from one to the next, we shall pass from how the Greeks understood Chronos to the Anthropocene, a time that eludes our grasp, maybe for now, maybe forever. We will dwell on the time of the Christians, a new order of time conceived and instituted by the early church.¹² Christianity opened a new era of time—for the faithful, it endures today. This unprecedented way of talking about the past, the present, and the future amounted to a specific regime of historicity committed to presentism: the present is the dominant category, specifically apocalyptic presentism. Even though there has been much flirting with apocalypse lately, Christian presentism was quite different from today’s presentism, which has been with us for a half century. Why then, given that presentism allows for only a minimal chronos time, revive scenarios that, in one way or another, picture an ending that draws ever nearer?

What entitles me to open an inquiry on Christian time? After all, I am anything but an exegete, one who offers guidance and interpretations from within a canonical text. Nor am I a commentator, for that would mean thinking alongside and explaining those texts. I possess none of the authority that accompanies such titles. I am only a reader, posing as I read these documents a single question—what is the time that they weave? A common reader then, with a question.

I must thank those who were kind enough to read these pages, whose encouragement and advice over the past few years, as the book was gradually coming together, meant so much to me. My thanks to Olivier Bomsel, to Thomas Hirsch, to Christian Jambet, to Gérard Lenclud, who has acted as my first reader for a good many years now, to Olivier Mongin, to Robert Morrissey, to Guy Strouma. My thanks, too, to Dipesh Chakrabarty, my guide to the Anthropocene. With each of them I have spoken more than once. To Pierre Nora, in closing, I wish to convey gratitude and friendship. He published my first book, *The Mirror of Herodotus*, forty years ago, when I was a young member of the “Vernant gang,” and he both encouraged me to persevere with this one and helped me bring it to a happy conclusion. I am aware of my debt to him. This book, finally, is dedicated to my granddaughter Georgia, born at the very moment when this study of Chronos, the ever elusive, was being completed. Maybe one day she will read it.