

# sorites/1: two kinds of time, something appears out of nowhere

The sorites seem at first like an obscure exercise in Medieval logic ... akin to the debate about the number of angels fitting on the head of a pin. It ("sorites" is singular) is instead about a sequence that accumulates evenly objects or events that are chained by time and logic, a sequence that becomes something completely new, and often unexpected, at an indeterminate point. The issue is: what is the structure of that point, that moment, when "out of nothing, something appears, fully structured and intelligible?"

Sorites has a PR problem, which is, namely, that the examples usually given to illustrate this "out of nothing" miracle are abominably dull. Loosely put, they are of the "straw that broke the camel's back" variety: grains of sand, bits of dust. Dull in their own right, they all lead paradoxically to a miracle by which the anonymous accumulating mass acquires an equally dull identity: a pile of sand, a stack of dominos, an over-burdened camel. In fact, the sorites are an attempt to model a primordially profound *event*, something that may even pertain to the birth of the universe, and things can't get much more exciting than that! To pull back a bit, let's say that, generically speaking, the kind of event the sorites models has been for many centuries known by name: the *hapax legomenon*. Although the *hapax* refers mainly to words that appear only once in a given context, the big-picture focus is on the larger idea, that a *hapax* is a word/meaning/concept that, having never appeared before, is, once it appears, completely understood. This is the point at which the *hapax* and sorites merge: something comes out of nothing.

An example of this miraculous birth would be "tuffet" in the English nursery rhyme, "Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet." Before this verse, tuffets did not exist, either as a piece of furniture that could accommodate the likes of Miss Muffet or as a word useful for rhyming with her name. Nonetheless, by the time she sat on one, it existed — out of nowhere — and everyone, including spiders, one of which decided to "sit down beside her," seemed to already know about it. Whether a piece of furniture, a part of the landscape, or an architectural appendage no one can really say for sure, but the sound dynamics of "ffffff" suggests that it was sofffffft enough to sit on and eat one's curds and whey. The *hapax* is like a stand-alone kit. It comes with all it needs to generate the meaning required to interpret it. What makes it interesting is that, in this creative (and not simply designative) function, it is like "Adamic speech," the language used by God to create things in the act of naming them. Adam didn't need to learn the names of things so much as have God point out that the things were things, and the name and the thing were identical. No more of Saussure's contention that languages are conventional! Adamic speech created as it went. It brought the thing into existence, which had not existed before being named. (Hegel later gives a name to this: *absoluter Gegenstoss* — "absolute recoil.")

This power says a lot about the Symbolic in general. The biggest insight is the realization that the word "replaces" the thing by negating it. Once we have the word, the (real) object is no longer necessary. The expression, "world of words" is accurate: the Symbolic is a place to live in, without the need to test for validity. Its meanings are internal, tautological. One word is defined by ... another word. Speaking takes over Being, resolving Parmenides' and Zeno's issues about the contrast between the two; and, furthermore, calming all humans who, asked to make the choice between pre-linguistic Being of infancy and entry into the adult world of language, realize that they get both in the cancellation of Being by Speaking.<sup>1</sup>

Or do they? Being stays behind in the form of an empty position, an unfillable void. It is both singular and ubiquitous, permeating signifying chains in the dress of gaps, defects, antagonisms, breaks ... until, seemingly within the very void created by the negation of objective Being, a *hapax* ACTS to create something out of nothing, using the chain of signifiers as a series of grains of sand added, added, added, until at one moment, there is suddenly a *pile of sand*. The deflationary effect of the example should not detract from the importance of this event, this act. The *hapax* takes place precisely in the gap left/designated by Being's negative image. The sorites tries to give us an accurate picture of what happens in this gap, which is not known until it is encountered, and not encountered without the unexpected and miraculous creation of "something out of nothing." This is what is at stake in the question of sorites and the *hapax* meanings that seem to come from nowhere. At the level of human discourse, the sorites aims to explain the mystery of the cosmos's "black holes," where massive gravitational pull traps even light. The *hapax* is a reverse black hole. Without giving away its secrets, it becomes an inexhaustable fount of meanings. Instead of a trap, it is a passage to the infinity of meaning, at a "zero degree" where anything means everything. In other words, it's worth our while to figure it out!

<sup>1</sup> The choice is a forced choice: if one "chooses" Being, autism is the result. This is equivalent to the robber's demand, "Your money or your life!" The issue in forced choices is the position of the demand-ER in relation to the demand-EE. No matter how many concessions are made by the demandee to the demander, removing a condition from the bottom of the list, so to speak, a new condition is added to the top of the list. This situation is captured by the myth of Sisyphus (and many folktales about impossible tasks).

- (1) The only animals in this house are cats;
- (2) Every animal is suitable for a pet, that loves to gaze at the moon;
- (3) When I detest an animal, I avoid it;
- (4) No animals are carnivorous, unless they prowl at night;
- (5) No cat fails to kill mice;
- (6) No animals ever take to me, except what are in this house.
- (7) Kangaroos are not suitable for pets;
- (8) None but carnivora kill mice;
- (9) I detest animals that do not take to me;
- (10) Animals that prowl at night, always love to gaze at the moon.

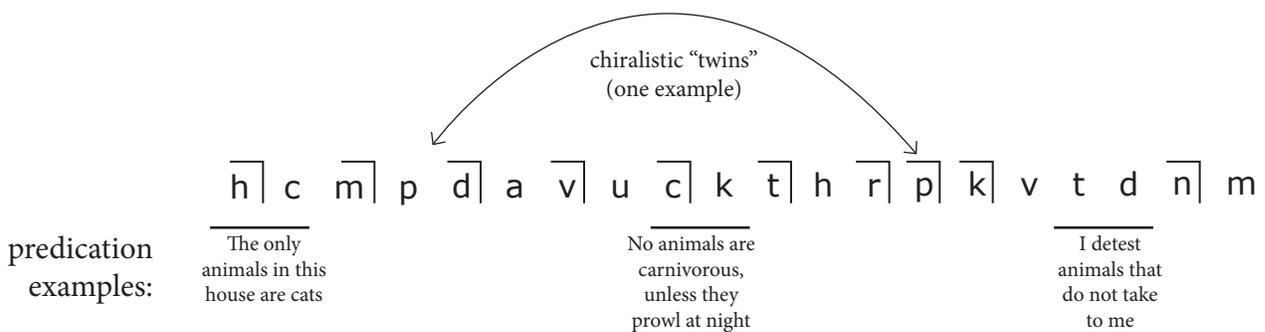
- h — house, in this
- c — cat
- p — pet, suitable for
- d — detested by me
- a — avoided by me
- m — moon, loved to gaze at
- v — carnivorous
- n — night, prowl at
- k — kill mice
- t — take to me
- r — kangaroo

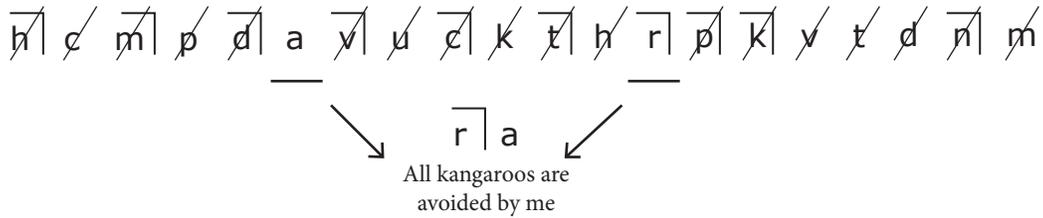
A close reading of these statements reveals that the collection is “chiralistic” — each statement seems to appear twice, one in a “positive” or predicating position, its twin in a “negative” or predicated position. Sometimes a negative can be negated, of course, but to see what happens we have to abbreviate the conditions by the calculus of brackets.

These abbreviations make it possible to show Carroll’s puzzling list of relationships using the “calculus” of brackets, where each bracket is capable of indicating negation (“don’t take to me”) so that if the condition appears as a predicate, the bracket symbol disappears.

**1 /** How does a sorites work? Instead of using a deadly dull example, such as grains of sand falling onto a spot, let’s use one of the sorites’ most prestigious champions, Lewis Carroll (Rev. George Dodson), the author of *Through the Looking Glass* and *Alice in Wonderland*. Carroll liked to invent puzzles — brain teasers — comprising of sequential trivial statements, which conceal a secret relationship. For “statement,” we use the designation, “predication.” A predication is a relationship of subordination by one thing (*predicator*) of another (the *predicated*). “The only animals in this house are cats” predicates the house, h, by the predicator, cats, c. “Every animal suitable as a pet loves to gaze at the moon” predicates the moon as a quality belonging to all suitable pets. The statements are a bit nonsensical, so abbreviating them doesn’t make a lot of difference, so we can use a symbol, an angle bracket, to show the predicated term beneath it, with the predicator on the right, outside. Above, the string of clues is abbreviated and put into the bracketed forms. The bracket can be reversed by negation. “I detest animals who *do not* take to me” reverses “animals who take to me” and removes the bracket that would be present in “I detest animals who take to me.” Allowing negation of positive statements to mingle with the action of predication is very useful, as we shall see. It gives us a short-cut to solve this otherwise complicated puzzle.

We can extend predication to the case of a cause and effect, where we designate the cause as predicated and the effect as the predicator (everything in the cause creates this effect, although there may be many *other* effects). This allows single causes to have many effects while each effect has, normally, only one cause. The presence or absence of the predicated term does not affect the predicating term. After an effect is caused, it can become a new cause of a new effect, and we can “nest” the brackets to show how “causal chains” develop. The sorites, in addition to the string of statements in the Carroll example, has the form of nested brackets (see page 5).





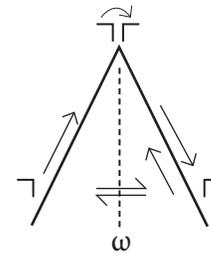
2 / The “calculus” of brackets sensitive to negation converts Lewis Carroll’s ten statements into a “sorites” of elements that, like grains of sand, pile on each other until a point is reached, equivalent to the realization that the pile is a pile. This “moment” occurs by finding each term’s chiralistic twin, the left and right-hand version, so to speak. This cancellation-matching process reveals two terms that are without twins and must be “twinned in a different way” — terms that, hitherto unknown, now appear as a hapax formation. These are the answer to the puzzle, contained but invisible until the process of matching is carried out. Because the two terms joined after the cancelled terms have been eliminated by the matching process, this match is not different from the other matches except in the way the predication is meaningful and new. This is the essence of the *hapax*. It did not appear before, but when it did appear, it came “already endowed with meaning.” The meaning was present in the “past” of the other statements, but it became the future event of revelation. Its meaning emerged from the mass of temporal accumulations, in such a way that the previous statements are now redefined *retroactively*.



The channel of “palintropic” time, from one predicate to another, creates a back-flow of reversed time in the form of turbulence built up between the list of predications and the audience’s readiness, accumulating the collective predications; this is akin to the unconscious’s “automation” of experiences within its spatial storage container, where “grains of sand” so to speak are organized with respect to predication relationships.

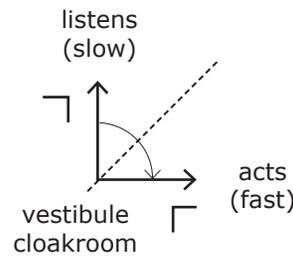
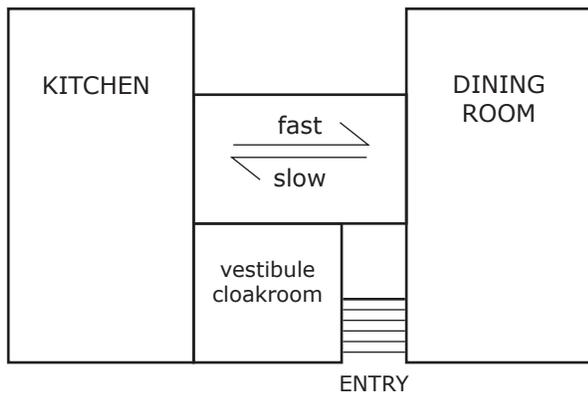


A point of balance, transition, or transformation bends/folds the palintropic-palintonic fold so that it is able to “face itself.” Inside the fold, palintonic signifiers can establish echo relationships (“acousmatics”) that “signalize” a delayed union of meaning based on negation. For the subject this event can be an external trauma; it is quick in comparison to the slow build up of tension between palintropic and palintonic structures. Hence, *festina lente* is operative rule: not a coincidence of opposites but chirality.



The “bent-folded channel” uses palintropic narrative in a linear way to construct an internal, palintonic space of affordance (cf. the idea of exaptation, of things produced to remain ready-at-hand, as a proximate reserve). Like the conclusion to Carroll’s sorites (“all kangaroos are avoided by me”), the purloined letter in Poe’s short story is located precisely in this space, definitively identified by the fact that “card-rack” where the letter is openly hidden is a phonetic palindrome (kcardrac). This middle space-time has acoustic properties (it is “acousmatic” in its palindromic function) and thus the source of “kenosis.” The broken double structure is a “tesseræ,” while the palintonic backflow constitutes “clinamen.”

3 / The temporal structure of the sorites is the most important aspect. We can see, in the list of predications, one kind of time ( $T_1$ ) that runs from a beginning, through a middle, to an end. But, this “end” is “already-always” present inside the sequence. So, it is necessary to conceive a second kind of time,  $T_2$ , that is a kind of moving timelessness. This is the “readiness” of the signifying chain to transform itself — by means of a *defect*, a gap, an omission, an absence, a negation. This gap has two manifestations, an “internal gap” that can, in story terms, be expressed as a transaction, passage, or transformation (death, rebirth, collapse), and an “external gap” that is a space able to accommodate a “world within a world,” an alternative place to develop a “site of exception” within space-time defined by “detached virtualities” — time travel, the double, story in the story, contamination of reality by dreams or fiction.”



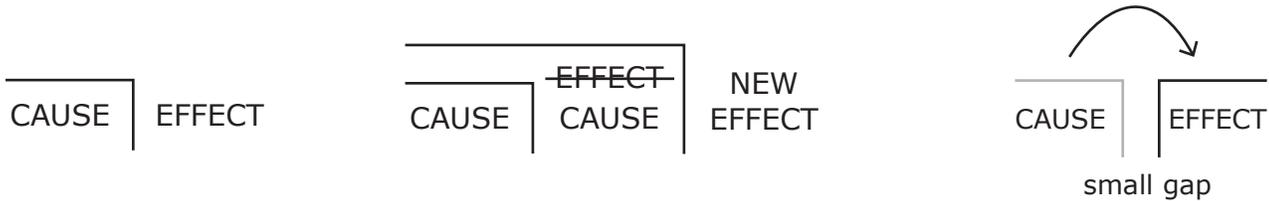
THE VERNON HOTEL's symmetry sets up the “break-point” for the chiasmic transfer of the key signal against the background of foot traffic in the hall outside the vestibule. The priest notices the different pace of the squeaky shoes, always slow when travelling from the dining room to the kitchen, always fast in the reverse direction. He deduces the key clues of the mystery story. ONE man, a stranger to both waiters and guests, must appear to be a waiter to the guests and a guest to the waiters. This is accomplished by his quickness or slowness, because everyone is dressed in black formal wear. His vestibule has a right-angled functionality: he listens to the evidence and then turns to apprehend the thief about to descend the entry stair.

THE PRIEST's own movement is a turn, from the slow accumulation of evidence and deduction of the crime, to the fast apprehension of the thief as he comes to collect his coat. Father Brown is a “pivot function,” appropriate in the sense that priests, like the Greek god Hermes, are responsible for conducting souls to the underworld. Another of Hermes' attributes is a god of thieves, and here the two functions are represented in a modern mystery story. Like every artist however, Brown uses slow preparation to allow for a fast conclusion, proving the ancient motto *festina lente* (make haste slowly).

4 / Can this descriptive account be reverse-engineered to create a method? Poe seems to say “yes, emphatically!” The sorites model focuses on the “atoms” of the art object, whether it's an episode or description in a novel or a detail of a building or movement in a dance. Each atom will be followed by another, and another, and another ... The collection will amount to nothing more than that until the moment arrives when “the pile becomes a pile,” so to speak — i.e. when the story becomes a story, the building becomes architecture, the movements become a dance. That moment converts time, but this is not a reversal or corruption of forward-moving linear time. It is a realization that *a back-flow time has been in operation all the time*.

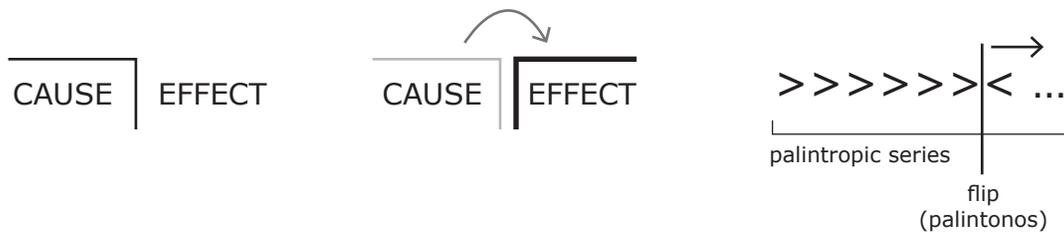
Poe chose this Ahah! moment for the reader; other artists let the reader construct their own, but make careful plans to insure that the reader doesn't wait too long or make a premature guess. Poe's moment is the point in the story “The Purloined Letter” where the commissioner hands over the reward check to Dupin for solving the mystery of the hidden letter. As an exchange, it is literally on one level what it is on the poetic level — a movement from one modality to another. The point, wherever it is actually, is poetically a mid-point. It is the official middle between predicaters and predicateds, causes and effects switched to effects revealing new causes. The fold/bend creates a *stage*, however, and it is important that the artwork build this as something concrete: a place that can be represented, shaped, experienced — something really durable.

In G. K. Chesterton's short story, “The Queer Feet,” a set of chiralistic squeaking shoes alerts a Catholic priest filling out a death certificate for an Italian waiter, who has just died in the vestibule of an exclusive London men's club, that there is a thief present. Because both waiters and guests are dressed in tuxedos, the thief, in his own formal wear, can walk with a group of guests and be seen by the waiters as a guest, or walk as a waiter and be seen by guests (who do not recognize him as one of their own). The priest deduces, after a number of “predications” that the fast squeeks signal the walk of a waiter and slow squeeks say “I'm a guest.” Fast/slow are chiralistic, but the identical shoes suggest the twin pair: a “monster,” a waiter-guest — someone able to be completely invisible thanks to this chiasmic/chiralistic structure. The priest, at mid-point, is able to use the occulted space of the vestibule as a detection room and, when the waiter-guest-thief comes to collect his coat and escape with the stolen silver service, stop him in his tracks. The ending (the thief will have to ask for his coat) is already worked out at the beginning (the priest is given the cloakroom to write up the death certificate).



5 / The idea of a “chain of signifiers” is based on the idea of a causal chain, so any signifying chain should be compared to an effect that, once created, becomes a cause for another set of effects. This logic depends on a uniform direction of time, from past to future. An effect is by definition “what follows” a cause. However this rule has important implications (and exceptions) as we shall see later. If we represent a cause and effect with a single bracket (above), the conversion of an effect into a new cause is a double bracket.

Chains aim to provide continuity. Although there is a “reverse predication” with every conversion of an effect to a cause, this “flip” of the bracket is “occulted.” There is a space between the effect as an effect and its function as a cause, mainly due to the fact that effects are multiple and causes are singular, to preserve the arrow of time. The gap is related to the frailty of this arrow of time because the gaps constitute a “time that is outside of time,” a time that, like the negation of effect as it converts to cause, is a reversal. This becomes a key clue in the relation of palatropic relations (causes to effects) to palintonic relations (relation of multiplicity to singularity). While “palatropic time” sees time as a line with points marking specific events, palintonic time sees time as a sliding converter, structured by the conversion of effects into causes with new effects. Each conversion point creates a turbulence, a potential back-flow, a forward rush of the past across a future. While palatropic time conceives that there must exist atoms or instants, palintonic time sees such instants as landscape or openings, where “anything is possible,” thanks to the exchanges between the “spatial” storage of memory and the “temporal” modality of delivery through memory. It is thus possible to have a memory of something that never existed before, or to see memory as primarily collective rather than individual, as the palentropic model demands.

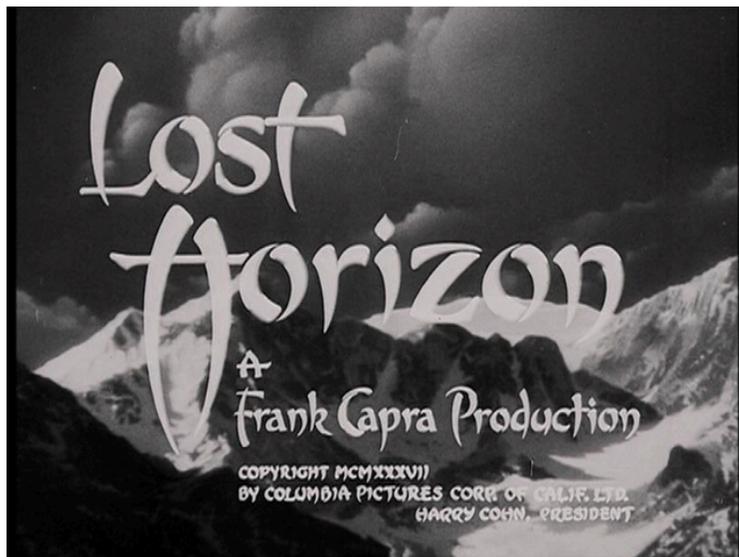


6 / Palintropos alternates between two polarized conditions. These can be cause/effect, good/bad, cold/hot — whatever is counted as a “binary signifier,” where each term’s definition is relative to the other, and where opposition itself is built in to each term with or without the literal presence of the other. For example, a garden implicitly contains and is conditioned by the idea of the weed, while the idea of the weed did not exist before the garden made it into an undesirable plant. The stand-alone attribute of weed, “undesirable,” requires an additional but concealed specification, “because gardens now exist.”

If the palintropic “series” (effects converted into causes) eliminates the passivity of effects in the conversion of effects to causes, what happens to this passivity? Linear time ( $T_1$ ) “forgets about it.” Each conversion eclipses and replaces the other, just as each event in a story creates a presence that overwrites the past. The structure of palintonic time, ( $T_2$ ), however, shows how this eclipse, which takes place in the “flip” between effect and cause, conserves the lost effect. Between the two states of the predication of cause by effect, > and <, there is

a short delay that we represent graphically as a gap. This could be described as being neither cause nor effect. In fact, many languages have a “middle voice” that is neither active nor passive but simply existential: the cup broke, it is raining, etc. In other words, there is no agency, no action flying like an arrow from a cause to a recipient effect, no victims, no heroes, no winners, no losers. It suggests the kind of balance of forces idealized by the Tao Te Ching, the ancient Chinese text written around 6 BCE, This “timeless” gap moves along the signifying chain, converting effects to causes, but it itself is changeless, causeless, and without any permanent effects. Instead of causal actions, palintonos is an “active tension” that spatializes what is normally temporal. In this, palintonos begins to sound like visual arts that, instead of “freezing a moment in time” in an attempt to mimic the photograph, cut into time with an “active stasis,” a dynamic but suspended moment.

The forward motion of palintonos creates the palintropic series: successions, wars, narratives, etc.; but palintonos itself is changeless. It accumulates the occulted contents of each conversion, preserves them, orders them. When Lewis Carroll’s sorites begins with “the only animals in this house are cats,” the palintonic reality is that there are other animals living elsewhere, and that some of them might have succeeded in chasing out the cats ... or that the cats might some day leave the house. In other words, one “story” creates an infinite multiplicity of other possible stories, an “affordance” that is not destroyed by the one story that actually occurs.<sup>1</sup> These other stories in fact are superior to the one that happened, in that, thanks to negation they are preserved. Thanks to “not happening,” they both “didn’t happen” and “have not yet happened.” The temporal ridge moving along the palintropic chain doesn’t distinguish between past and future. Its “now” is oblivious to the palintonic surplus it “sublates” (Hegel’s term for this). Although the line of  $T_1$ , dotted with points defining the past in terms of linear positions, seems stable, its materiality is indebted to the absence of the events which might have happened but did not. Its positive existence depends on this negative surplus, but in a sense, the negative surplus is more permanent, more resilient, more potential than what “really happened.” And, its form of time, spatial rather than linear, allows for time travel in all directions. In a sense, it is possible to say that it is the travel that determines the dimensionality of the space of palintonos, that no space exists without the intention to move within it.



Palintonic time, imagined as a negative world of eternal presences, filled with objects that are subjectively motivated, which respond “as if by magic” to wishes and desires, would sound like a convenient outlandish fiction, were it not for the fact that, in the arts, it has been represented so often, and so completely and accurately. Without any “philosophic intentions,” artists, it seems, have understood fully the physics and theology of this “in between space” of palintonos,  $T_2$ . It is not a positive time that art confirms, but a time created out of a negation, a time that both exists, since it is the active function of conversion that produces the palintropic chains of signifiers; and a time that

“does not exist” but for the negational existence that has, thanks to occultation, preserved its potentiality forever.

In the 1937 film, *Lost Horizon*, based on James Hilton’s novel, survivors of a plane crash in the high Himalayas find the concealed entrance to a temperate, peaceable theocracy whose residents live long healthy lives

<sup>2</sup> This preservation of unused options was called *tuchē* by Aristotle; we will encounter it later in relation to “exaptation,” the creation of alternative states and potentialities, ready to be brought into actuality “at a moment’s notice. *Tuchē* is accompanied by *automaton*, both chance and mechanized necessity (e.g. models of Fate).

in perfect happiness. Only the newcomers are unsettled, and the film focuses on how they might be domesticated to this new timeless way of life. Other fictions of palintonos idealize the theme of “perfect balance” but it is clear that utopias fail by converting palintonic time into a version of palintropic time. It would be more accurate to say that all utopias are dystopias because they fail to recognize the implications of palintonos’s negational being. Palintonos, like Hegel’s Absolute, is a “negation of a negation,” a retroactive realization that the gap never existed in the first place, that palintropic time is in fact the imposter who appears to be real thanks to a substitution of signs for things, disguises that costume the Real of process as a “reality” of objects, persons, and events.

How can palintonos, whose primary trait is to resist symbolization, be symbolized? Both the arts and the sciences have regarded this as their central problem. In the sciences, the result has been quantum physics and the invention of fictions such as quarks to get around the problem that the observer inevitably constructs the observed. There is no reality, such as Schroedinger’s cat, who is alive before being spied on, it is the spying that creates the cat, once living now dead.

The key lies in the nature of sorites, the sequence of elements, each one of which conceals a hidden chirality and a hidden, dynamic gap. As the list of conditions grows, from houses containing cats only to night-prowling animals who love the moon, the “heaviness” of the list grows to the point where its occulted components seem to “wish to be born.” And, then, we discover that all kangaroos are to be avoided! This fact was “there all the time,” even, we might say, in the first statement, before we learned that there were kangaroos or that they were unloved. This is the “last grain of sand” that is “still a pile” in the lore of the sorites. This is the “atom” that is not just the whole molecule but the whole universe of molecules, thanks to the inability to say at which point grains falling on the ground become a pile of sand. The “whole” of the palintropic story is its “not-whole” aspect, its coming-to-being through negation, where negation preserves “what didn’t happen,” endowing on this non-existence more power than simple reality: the power of a Real, that doesn’t “exist” but, rather, “insists.”

At the same time that this Real resists representation, it seems to be at the heart of all representation traditions, which in the desire to symbolize the ineffable infinite, construct “work-around” narratives and visual devices. Thus, in the “death dream” device, we see what non-existence is like; in the technique of the “defective narrator,” the audience sees a reality that the diagetic voice specifies only through his own ignorance or inattention. In other words, art and poetry use the frame/screen to reproduce conditions of negation that approximate the actual dialectic between palintropic and palintonic time. The irony of palintropic time’s succession of conversions becomes the irony of frames within frames, the painter representing himself representing himself representing himself, ... etc. The emblem of these frame parodies is the portrayal of linear succession as a series of nested frames, whose (fictional) “final frame” reveals that it is “nothing but” the discarded contents of the first frame.

The nested frames with a return to origins takes multiple forms: the labyrinth, the Uroboros, the cave of Odysseus’s Cyclops, Hades, Borges’ “Garden of the Forking Paths,” Eden — all “sites of exception” where time is reversed and at the same time suspended, or where the future is a magic gateway to the beginning of time. What these time machines all lack is simultaneously what they all contain, an ability to enact what they pretend to be, a means of doing what they are talking about, once the “reader” (our name for the audience, as an individual) realizes that the “about” is what is actually happening, in her reading (the reader is at this point feminine), as a materialization, a birth, a body.  $T_2$  (literally) forever!

