

## The Obsessions of Time

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To Rudolf Haag

When I was in high school, a favorite pastime during lectures was to detect obscene meanings in the phrases of the teacher. What we lost of latin grammar or spherical trigonometry, we gained in psychological insight. During the seminars which I hear today I again sometimes find that my mind wanders away from the manifest subject of the talk; I listen instead to the words which are stressed, to those which are mispronounced, and the obsessions of the speaker come out with compelling evidence<sup>1</sup>. In some cases of course, the speaker is aware of the second meaning of his words. There is also the very serious danger, in trying to guess someone else's unconscious thoughts, that one simply reads off one's own obsessions. Altogether I am convinced that scientific words and concepts are loaded, for many or all scientists, with subconscious meanings, which may be revealed in the "scientific dreams" which many or all of us have.

This association of parasitic notions with scientific concepts is usually rejected more or less indignantly by the conscious mind. A very different situation occurs when a scientist deliberately chooses to study a subject, like form or time, which is rather explicitly loaded with emotional meaning. The rest of this paper is dedicated to a short and modest excursion in this difficult subject.

Theophile DeDonder was the father of mathematical physics at the Free University of Brussels and, while active, he was a scientist of some distinction. I saw him however only at the end of his life, a very old man, shrivelled up, dessicated, and senile. He walked with a cane, and his tiny steps made a queer sound, tip-tip-tap, tip-tip-tap, as he progressed through the corridors of the "Faculté des Sciences." When they heard this tip-tip-tap, his younger colleagues, professors and assistants, rushed to an office, locked themselves in, and stayed very quiet. If by misfortune they were caught by the little grand old man, they would have to listen to a long talk on his theory of the shape of the liver, or his mathematical theory of music. I don't know why De Donder was interested in the

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<sup>1</sup> I had thought of giving examples, but they are somewhat unpleasant and could be traced all too easily to their authors