

Eternity in a Moment

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Flaubert, Proust, Augustine: all of these authors describe moments that escape the normal progress of time, moments that somehow encompass other moments, moments that even encapsulate an eternity. For each author, moreover, these moments terminate a love story. Flaubert catalogues the loves of Emma Bovary; Proust, the loves of Marcel; Augustine, his own. *Madame Bovary*, *In Search of Lost Time*, the *Confessions*: these are love stories; but they are also stories about time. This is less clear in Flaubert, where love remains paramount and time appears to dilate and contract only before Emma's suicide; with Marcel and Augustine, however, time preoccupies them throughout. Theirs are equally stories about love and time. Indeed, they are about time precisely because they are about love. And they are about love precisely because they are about time. Not so with Emma Bovary. By way of contrast, then, let us begin with her.

Trained by the Romantic novels of her youth to expect from love an impossible salvation, each of her lovers disappoints her in turn: first Charles, her husband, then Rodolphe, her seducer, and finally Léon, her protégé. The climax of this love story is her disillusionment with love itself, and thus with life, since it is for love that she has lived. "Every smile conceals a yawn of boredom," she now recognizes, "every joy a curse, each pleasure its own disgust; and the sweetest kisses only leave on one's lips a hopeless longing for a higher ecstasy." (P.245) Although Emma never achieves any such higher ecstasy, she does experience an inferior variety. Sitting by chance on a park bench outside of the convent where she once read romances and first fell in love with love, she plunges involuntarily into memory to review her entire sentimental life. Despite her own

protest, this involuntary review places her current love at the same remote distance as the first months of her disappointing marriage.

Thus separated from even her immediate emotions, she experiences what seems to her like an eternity. Indeed, with every event of her emotional life, whether past or present, before her imagination at this equally remote distance, it is as if she sees her life from the perspective of a timeless eternity. In this way, writes Flaubert, an infinity of passions can be contained in a minute. While this minute lasts, Emma remains indifferent to her troubles, troubles which will soon precipitate her suicide. From the perspective of timeless eternity, presumably, her future would assume its place next to her past and present – all equally remote. When this eternal moment is over, however, she finds herself even further from her salvation than before. Now her disillusionment is total. She has nothing left to love. In the end, she can no longer love even love itself. Her suicide follows soon afterwards. One must beware of ecstasies.

But not all are so dangerous. Marcel experiences his most famous ecstasy after tasting, by chance, a Madeleine. This ecstasy also arrives involuntarily, and in a way he too is disillusioned by it. “At once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me,” he says, “its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory.” (V1,p.49) By contrast with Emma’s disillusionment, though, a disillusionment from love, out of which nothing survives but despair, Marcel’s disillusionment, which is not from love but from time, produces three marvelous feelings akin to love. For as he says:

this new sensation ... had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it *was* me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal. (V1, p.49)

Emma emerges from her ecstasy even further from salvation; Marcel's, however, brings him closer. Quite literally, it brings him a taste of divinity: he no longer feels mediocre but grand, no longer contingent but necessary, not mortal but immortal – these, of course, are the attributes of God.

And this is only the first of several such ecstasies we read throughout the novel. There were two ecstatic moments in his adolescence, we later learn. In the first, he observes the interplay of the three steeples of Martinville while riding in the bumpy carriage of Dr. Percepied. Next, in another carriage ride, there is the siren call of “certain trees along a road near Balbec,” a call which beckons him with the promise of a true life, but which he must ignore as the carriage rolls away. Much later, in the climactic scene of the novel, there are three successive ecstasies outside the party of the old Guermantes: first he steps on a paving stone that evokes the baptistery of St. Mark's in Venice, next he hears a spoon rapping a dish that recalls the clang of a hammer on the wheel of a train at Combray, and lastly he feels a starched napkin on his chin that matches exactly the feeling of a similar napkin from the hotel at Balbec.

As with Emma seeing the wall of her old convent, and as with Marcel's own most famous ecstasy upon tasting the Madeleine, these further ecstasies arise by chance and the senses. In his childhood the result is simply a mysterious happiness, the brief glimpse of a true life. Until the end of the novel, however, he has no idea how to secure this life and its happiness. Then, when three such experiences occur one after the other, and the Guermantes' butler detains him in the vestibule long enough to force him to overcome his innate laziness and probe their causes, all is finally ready for him to understand their mystery. After all, his powers of introspection have been sharpened by years of illness

and idleness. Moreover, like Emma, whose romantic disappointments brought her to her own, inferior ecstasy, Marcel's disappointing series of loves for Gilberte, the Duchess of Guermantes, and Albertine have all whetted his appetite for another, this time genuine salvation. With devotion and resolve, therefore, he takes his seat in the vestibule and plunges into himself.

In brief, these are his findings. To begin with, each such moment evokes an involuntary memory by means of a chance stimulus from the senses. Unlike voluntary memories -- which present the past as the intellect now conceives, and thus necessarily falsifies, it -- involuntary memories present the past unvarnished by the intellect; the past they present is the past as it really felt when it was felt. In his ecstasies, therefore, a present sense-stimulus returns him involuntarily to a moment in the past when he felt precisely the same sensation. Keeping the present and the past simultaneously in mind, an analogy is thereby made between them. Each appears with an equal vivacity. Since there is no point in time which is equidistant from both past and present, past and present should be equally vivacious only from a point outside of time, in a timeless eternity. Marcel's ecstasies seem to place him in this timeless point several times, and thereby seem to render time illusory.

Feeling himself outside of time, then, at least for these chance moments, it is no surprise that he ceases to feel mediocre, contingent, and mortal. After all, death and contingent events require time. In eternity there can be no change, and thus no death; there is only immortality and the necessity of unchanging being; needless to say, neither is mediocre. In her own ecstasy, remember, Emma achieved an indifference to her troubles that resembled this escape. But her ecstasy proved fruitless because it

disillusioned her from love altogether. It exposed her former loves as frauds but substituted for them no further object worthy of renewed love. The ensuing vacuum propelled her toward suicide. Marcel's ecstasies, by contrast, have the opposite effect: they *swell* his appetite for life. He sees through the illusion of time, and everything he loved within it, but he is also filled with a new love – a love for whatever it is that exists outside of time.

Preaching this apparently new gospel, he insists that our love “must . . . detach itself from individuals, so that we can comprehend and restore it to its generality and give this love, the understanding of this love, to all, to the universal spirit” (p.933). This story of love's detachment from individuals, and especially material beings, and its redirection toward something more general, something spiritual is, of course, much older than Proust. In Plato's *Symposium*, the mantic Diotima introduces Socrates to the ladder of love that takes the true lover:

always upwards for the sake of the beautiful itself, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs: from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, and from customs to learning beautiful things, and from these lessons he arrives in the end at this lesson, which is learning of this very Beauty. (211c)

This very Beauty, otherwise known as the Idea of Beauty in Platonic metaphysics, resurfaces by the very same name in Marcel's own metaphysics of love:

every individual who makes us suffer can be attached to a divinity of which he or she is a mere fragmentary reflection, the lowest step in the ascent that leads to it, a divinity or an Idea (*l'Idée*) which, if we turn to contemplate it, immediately gives us joy instead of the pain which we were feeling before.” (V3, p.935)

But the only such source of joy we know from the novel is the experience of extra-temporal ecstasy, the experience that eventually turns Marcel's heart from the love of women to the universal spirit.

Metaphorical or not, this universal spirit must be something outside of time, since it is there and there alone that Marcel finds his fulfillment. Involuntary memories bring him into contact with it, as we have seen, but these are fleeting irruptions, chance events, fugitive, and therefore unreliable. How then can he secure and immobilize them? How can he make reliable contact with his fulfillment? Where can he find a more reliable source of this "celestial nourishment"?

In art. After all, he says, "nothing resembled more closely than some such phrase of Vinteuil the peculiar pleasure which I had felt at certain moments in my life." (V3, p.381) Vinteuil thus seems to sit upon the chief tripod of this temple, art, but there are also minor priests and priestesses: Elstir, Berma, even Bergotte. The artist, then, becomes an oracle, and his art a portal to the world outside of time. Indeed, Marcel calls art "the true last judgment" (V3, p.914), and proclaims it our entry into "eternal life" (V3, p.1095). For art is "the conversion of impressions of material nature into their spiritual equivalent," and it works like involuntary memories, which superimpose two material impressions and thereby exalt the mind of their beholder into a spiritual ecstasy. As with involuntary memories, moreover, works of art do this by revealing analogies -- what Baudelaire called *correspondances*. The artist discovers them, experiencing a first ecstasy, and then presents them to his public, the perceptive of whom follow him through the narrow gate of his art to a second ecstasy, the glimpse of eternity. In this way, writes Proust, "truth -- and life too -- can be attained by us only when, by comparing a quality

common to two sensations, we succeed in extracting their common essence and reuniting them to each other, liberated from the contingencies of time, within a metaphor.” (V3, p.925)

While Vinteuil, a composer, seems at first to sit on the chief tripod, in the end we learn that Marcel himself, the narrator, has been sitting there all along. For he is a writer, master of metaphors, present at all of his novel’s moments: from the beginning, in the narration of his own childhood, at the end, when the once-future has brought him old age, and at every moment in between. He is present to the past, present to the present, and present to the future – each moment is equidistant from his pen. By writing his autobiography, then, he is able to survey each moment of his life from the same point – outside of time, the time of the novel, the time of his own creation. For the very act of writing makes him a creator, and the creator stands outside the time of his creation. When the writer writes of his own life, in a way he escapes the time this life; if he succeeds, and writes well, he reliably secures the fugitive happiness and the true life of his chance ecstasies.

All along, the religious language has been inescapable: creator and creation, immortality and necessity, judgment and eternity, the ascent of love from material to spiritual. In fact, Marcel finds his salvation first in the manner of St. Paul on the road to Damascus, that is to say, by ecstatic glimpses, and then later by his self-imposed isolation and ascetic discipline as a writer, in other words in the manner of St. Antony atop his mountain in Egypt. Despite these similarities to Paul and Antony, however, the irresistible analogue is St. Augustine. After all, Augustine is the author of an autobiography of equally ferocious self-analysis. He too recounts a roughly Platonic story

of love's ascent. And from him as well we receive an extended meditation on time and its illusion. Indeed, all three -- psychoanalysis, love, and time -- are interwoven in the *Confessions* much as they are in Proust.

His mother and father, he says to his God, were "the two from whose bodies you formed me in the limits of time." (I,6) Consequently, his first objects of love are also in time: "I badly wanted to love something," he says; "To love and to have my love returned was my heart's desire, and it would be all the sweeter if I could also enjoy the body of the one who loved me." (III,1). Climbing the ladder erected in Plato's *Symposium*, then, Augustine begins at the very bottom, with the love of bodies. This love cannot satisfy him because bodies are in time, they decay: "I lived in misery," he writes, "like every man whose soul is tethered by the love of things that cannot last and then is agonized to lose them." (IV,6)

Moving up past the rung of bodies, though, he alights on souls and their thoughts. His first love at this stage is Cicero, whose *Hortensius* inspires him to study philosophy. Later he comes the Manichees. While never fully subscribing to their doctrines, he flirts with them for years, until at last he can confront Dr. Faustus, that most famous charlatan of all time, whose failure to answer his questions prove Manicheanism to be the ephemeral construction of flawed humans bound in corrupting time.

His heart is yearning for eternity, and, like Marcel, before grasping it firmly he catches mere glimpses of it:

Eternal truth, true love, beloved Eternity – all this, my God, you are, and it is you that I sigh by night and day. When first I knew you, you raised me up so that I could see that there was something to be seen, but also that I was not yet able to see it. ... Your light shone upon me in its brilliance, and I thrilled with love and dread alike. ... It was as though I were in a land where all is different from your

own and I heard your voice from on high, saying, 'I am the food of full-grown men. Grow and you shall feed on me. But you shall not change me into your own substance, as you do with the food of your body. Instead, you shall be changed into me.'" (VII,10)

This ecstasy recalls Marcel's in a number of ways. There is the intimation of more beyond, even as the presence thrills with love; there is the voice that beckons, summoning the mystic to a true life; and most curiously of all, there is this feeling of consumption. With an obvious reference to the eucharist, celestial nourishment is not consumed by Augustine, it consumes him. In Marcel's case, similarly, his ecstasy fills him with the precious essence of love, but, as he wrote, "this essence was not in me," as if it were consumed; rather, "it *was* me," as though it were consuming him. (VI, p.49) Recognizing how fortuitous and fugitive were his own ecstasies, Marcel sought a more reliable and secure escape from time in art. Augustine, now made eager now by a glimpse of eternity, likewise seeks to secure it for himself.

Meditation upon his paradoxes of time would seem sufficient to liberate anyone from its illusion. Simply put, he observes that the past and the future have no reality, since quite literally they are not – the past exists no longer, the future not yet. The present alone, then, would seem to exist. But does it have any duration? If not, then it too is not, it too does not exist. So it must have duration. If so, however, it will have within it a beginning, a middle, and an end, like all durations, which is to say a past, a present, and a future, at least from the perspective of the middle. But these pasts and futures within the duration of the present in turn are equally illusory; they too are not – the one no longer exists, the other does not yet. Which leaves us with the middle, another present, either with or without duration, and we are off on an infinite regress.

Aside from vertigo, the best this paradox can give us is a sense of disillusionment with time. Like Emma on her park bench, we might lose our loves, since they become as illusory as the time in which they at least *appear* to exist. By itself, then, this paradox gives us nothing new to love. Our hearts remain restless, begins Augustine, until they rest in you. Disillusionment with time, and time-bound loves, then, merely clears the way for his genuine love of an extra-temporal being, God. So Augustine's heart remained restless until it rested in the Catholic Church. For according to Catholic theology, God is not only the ultimate object of love, He and His heavenly kingdom exist outside of time. As Augustine exults, "In you 'today' never comes to an end." (I,6)

To this extent, then, Augustine's climb up the ladder of love resembles Marcel's. Marcel, remember, directed his love from women in time to the universal spirit, a vague mystery outside of time; likewise, Augustine now directs his love from creatures in time to their Creator outside of it. However, according to Catholic theology this Creator is also the Creator of time itself. To this further extent, then, Augustine climbs one rung higher than Marcel. For the extra-temporal mystery that captures Marcel's heart remains detached from both time and the temporal world his own body inhabits.

By contrast, Augustine believes his Beloved created and continues to sustain by love this very same world. "In you 'today' never comes to an end," he writes, but continues: "and yet our 'today' does come to an end in you, because time, as well as everything else, exists in you." By loving God, and becoming consumed by him, therefore, Augustine does not so much escape time as possess it: "a man who has faith in you," he observes, "owns all the wealth of the world." (V,4)

What about Marcel? He certainly gains mastery over the time of his novel, and this becomes a mastery over the time of his own life, inasmuch as the novel is an autobiography. As if this were not enough for an embodied person, though, he seeks an *incarnate* mastery over his own life by loving yet another woman. This avatar of Time is Mlle de Saint Loup, the sixteen-year-old girl whose very birth fuses the two ways with which his life began. "Time," he writes, "colourless and inapprehensible Time, so that I was almost able to see it and touch it, had materialized itself in this girl, moulding her into a masterpiece." (V3,p.1088).

Augustine, by contrast, gains mastery over *all* time. His paradoxes remind him of all time's illusions, and his prayers direct his heart toward their Author. Speaking of others' neglect of prayer, for instance, he laments:

If only their minds could be seized and held steady, they would be still for a while, and, for that short moment, they would glimpse the splendour of eternity which is for ever still. They would contrast it with time, which is never still, and find that it is not comparable. (XI,11)

He apparently achieved this stillness, not only in solitary contemplation, but also in pious conversation with his mother, St. Monica (IX,10). But despite these heroic spiritual achievements, like Marcel he too remains embodied and accordingly seeks an *incarnate* mastery over time -- by loving not a sixteen-year-old girl, but instead the incarnate Christ. This Christ is paradoxically both conceived in time and the extra-temporal creator of time. In the midst of this paradox, however, by loving and consuming Him bodily in the eucharist, Augustine does not so much escape time as possess it in mystical union with his God. Body and soul together, he is drawn up into the divine love. In his own way,

then, he demonstrates the truth of Marcel's maxim: "Love is space and time made perceptible to the heart." (V3, p.392)

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