

INTEGRATING FINITUDE: THE EXPERIENCE OF TIME IN PROUST AND EINSTEIN

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Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

T. S. Eliot, "The Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,"
1915

Everywhere, this second has already been replaced by another second, in a sequence frozen forever. Such a view appeared all the more convincing with the establishment of Standard Time at the turn of the century—all around the globe time was coordinated.¹ From an unused future, existence moves universally towards a shadowy past and ultimately dissolves in the darkness of the forgotten.

In the era that established Standard Time, the work of a novelist, Marcel Proust, and a physicist, Albert Einstein, liberated time from its foreordained tracks. After an active social life in the Parisian salons, Proust, in 1909, began his novel, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and devoted the rest of his life to its writing. In 1905, the unknown Einstein, working in the Swiss Patent Office, published a short paper, "On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies," which initiated the special theory of relativity. Although Proust was aware of Einstein's theories, which gained popularity in France after the First World War, they did not exercise a direct influence on him for the following reasons: 1. he conceived his work before they were popularized; 2. in spite of his admiration for Einstein, he found the language of his theories too unfamiliar.² Affinity, rather than influence, defines the relation between these two thinkers.

For both Proust and Einstein, time does

not flow in a neutral course but depends on the experiencer. Here, experience means more than just what is empirically present to the perception; it refers to the way man situates himself in the world. Keeping this distinction in mind, the present study pursues the question: how, in the work of Proust and Einstein, does one experience time? While Proust's novel describes qualities of time—the past, present, and future, as related in memory, Einstein's theory delimits quantities of time as measured by a clock. Nevertheless, both present time as an experience of finitude, a finitude which integrates the experiencer in his history and world.

In the long tradition of the quest theme in Western literature, Proust entitles his work, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which one critic translates, freely but significantly, as *Quest of Time Lost*.³ Proust once told an interviewer that, "we have both plane and solid geometry—geometry in two-dimensional and three-dimensional space. Well, for me the novel means not just plane (or plain) psychology but psychology in time. It is this invisible substance of time that I have tried to isolate."⁴ Proust's quest unfolds within three perspectives: those of the protagonist, narrator, and author. Suffering, changing, and growing, the protagonist, called Marcel, has an immediate interaction with the present. The narrator recounts the

growth of Marcel. Throughout the narrative, he observes him moving in the past like a man watching at night the light which left a star years ago. In the last volume, the narrator and his former self, Marcel, merge. The author, Proust, describes Marcel's movement towards the narrator, and then, their merging at the moment when he can pronounce the quest successful.

All three, Marcel, the narrator, and Proust, encounter time through memory. The importance of memory becomes evident in the English title of the novel, *Remembrance of Things Past*. Neglect of memory and the different kinds of memory affect the experience of time. Thus, unaware of its power, Marcel feels imprisoned in time: he lives the hours, days, and years, as they come and pass by, leaving him with a sense of emptiness and waste. But in certain unexpected moments, through the grace of involuntary memory, he relives past events as if they were taking place in the present. When he realizes the significance of these moments, he reaches the insight which the narrator has: now, both have the same experience of time. Although Proust depreciates voluntary memory in favor of involuntary memory, to create a novel of such structural magnitude requires both kinds.⁵ The quest which starts with remembering ends with creation.

Time is regained in the creative act. Marcel relives the past as an actuality within the context of the present—this relation between the past and present endows both with a new meaning, for, to use the words of T. S. Eliot, "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past."⁶ This active experience of the past in the present influences Marcel's future. Discovering his vocation, to be the artist who writes down his quest, he takes hold of the future. Created by his past, the artist recreates this past. His work of art grounds the shifting perspectives of the past, present, and future.

Unlike Proust, Einstein, the physicist,

defines time with a measuring instrument. For this purpose, an object with a rhythmic motion may serve as a kind of clock. From this viewpoint, the human body contains many clocks such as the one established by the heart beat. In the famous example of the time traveller who journeys in space at high speed, he returns to find his world has grown much older than he did. One may speak, in this context, of the human body or a clock interchangeably: the relativity of time affects both in a similar way. However, the present study, because it deals with experience, will refer to a human observer and not a clock.

Time, argues Einstein, depends on the observer measuring it. For an illustration, he stages a scene with three observers: the first one stands on a railway embankment; the second is inside a very long moving train; the third, whom Einstein does not mention, is the physicist himself who observes the other two.⁷ The observer on the embankment, with whom the reader identifies, sees a flash of lightning at each end of the train *at the same time*. He supposes that if the observer in the train faced him at exactly the same point when he saw the lightning, then, the observer in the train too should be able to see both flashes *at the same time*. The observer-physicist finds fault with this supposition: for him, the two observers measure time differently because they have different frames of reference.

What the observer on the embankment overlooks is motion: "we cannot attach any *absolute* significance to the concept of simultaneity, but that two events which, viewed from a system of co-ordinates, are simultaneous, can no longer be looked upon as simultaneous events when envisaged from a system which is in motion relatively to that system."⁸ Since the universe has no absolute fixed point, one always needs a frame of reference: "Every reference-body (co-ordinate system) has its own particular time; unless we are told the reference-body to which the statement of time refers, there is no meaning in a statement of time of an

event.”⁹ Thus, the physicist has to define the frame of reference of every observer.

Within each frame of reference, time flows uniformly because all that exists within that frame undergoes the same degree of change in time. In the case of the time traveller, he and those he left on earth do not perceive the difference in their aging rate until they meet. Within the frame of reference of the ordinary observer on earth, a frame defined for practical reasons as the same for the whole planet, he can be deceived into believing that his experience of time refers to the ticking of his watch which must be uniform for everyone and everything. He values this measurement as reality and dismisses as subjective lived time (*temps vécu*), that primordial experience which precedes measurement.¹⁰

Einstein does not deal with lived time either; he too wants to measure, so to speak, an objective time, albeit a time that depends on a frame of reference. Nevertheless, for him, experience can play a role. At the age of sixteen, he wondered about the paradoxical experience of how light would look to him if he travelled with it at the same speed. The older Einstein concludes that “in this paradox the germ of the special relativity theory is already contained.”¹¹ That a scientist formulates his conception in an abstract theory does not mean that it did not find its source in a representational, even if imaginary, construction.

Experience conceals as well as reveals time. Einstein usually illustrates his theories with representational constructions to show how experience may be deceptive; but then, in explaining the reason behind the illusion, the experience becomes illuminating. In the example under discussion, the observer, from his limited perspective on the embankment, supposes that his counterpart in the train sees the two flashes of lightning at the same time. Actually, the latter, because he is moving towards one flash and away from the other, sees the first flash and then the second. For the observer on the embank-

ment to realize his mistake, he has to adopt the perspective of different frames of reference: his own and that of the train. This, of course, is what the observer-physicist does except that he seems to be nowhere and everywhere. How does he experience time? He can situate himself within the frame of reference of any observer, measuring time as his own but also relative to another frame of reference. If the universe were empty except for one observer, clearly, he could not notice any change in the flow of time. Measuring time in Einstein's theory is a participatory activity which joins interdependent perspectives.

For Proust and Einstein, man experiences time as the horizon of his finitude. In order to be aware of this finitude, he must have opened to him the possibility of seeing through it. The perspectives of Marcel and the narrator parallel that of the observer in the train and the one on the embankment: Proust structures his novel through the viewpoints of Marcel and the narrator; Einstein accounts in his theory for both observers. For the novelist and the physicist the experience of time does not annihilate the finitude of perspectives in one absolute flux but integrates them. Proust becomes the subject and author of his own life. He traces in thousands of pages the labor under finitude. Indeed, finitude dominates his work and life: he died before finishing the last volume, *Time Regained*. But he regains time, not just because, in the usual way, an artist seals his life in a work that may immortalize him, but more suggestively, because the life which the novel depicts discloses a vocation that changes that very life and makes the novel itself possible. The novel points to the integration of a fragmented self in a self-determined history.

Einstein's physicist dwells in an ordered finitude. Time does not stand over against him as an object but pertains to the process of observation itself. Nevertheless, he can measure the time of another observer, systematically. From within his perspective,

he realizes that the other observer must see one, then, another flash of lightning. Einstein's theory insists on the observer's perspective, not as a contingent limit, but as a limit binding him to the world.

Both the writer and the scientist encounter in time their integrated finitude. Man belongs to a frame of reference from which he can never escape. Yet, from within this frame, he integrates himself in his history and world. He recognizes that his mode of existing is temporalized.

NOTES

¹ On the establishment of Standard Time, see Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 11-15.

² For a detailed discussion of the question of influence, see John D. Erickson, "The Proust-Einstein Relation: A Study in Relative Point of View" in *Marcel Proust: A Critical Panorama*, ed. Larkin B. Price (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1973), pp. 247-76.

³ Robert Champigny, "Proust, Bergson and Other Philosophers," in *Proust: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. René Girard (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 123.

⁴ Roger Shattuck provides the complete text of the interview, in English, in the appendix to his *Marcel Proust* (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), p. 169.

⁵ See Shattuck, pp. 119-24.

⁶ T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in *The Great Critics: An Anthology of Literary Criticism*, 3rd ed., eds. James H. Smith and Edd W. Parks (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1967), p. 715.

⁷ *Relativity: The Special and the General Theory, A Popular Exposition*, trans. Robert W. Lawson (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1961), pp. 25-7.

⁸ Albert Einstein, "On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies" in *The Principle of Relativity: A Collection of Original Memoirs on the Special and General theory of Relativity* by H. A. Lorentz, A. Einstein, H. Minkowski and H. Weyl, trans. W. Perrett and G. B. Jeffery (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1923), pp. 42-3.

⁹ *Relativity*, p. 26.

¹⁰ On how one learns to live time as defined by a clock, see Leroy Troutner, "Time and Education" in *Existentialism and Phenomenology in Education: Collected Essays*, ed. David E. Denton (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1974), pp. 159-81.

¹¹ "Autobiographical Notes" in *Albert Einstein: Philosopher-Scientist*, ed. Paul A. Schilpp (Evanston, Illinois: The Library of Living Philosophers, Inc., 1949), p. 53.