

Past, Present, Proust

In an extract from the Centenary Monograph produced by the Academy's Philosophy Section, The Arguments of Time, edited by Dr Jeremy Butterfield FBA, Professor Gregory Currie considers whether fiction can tell us anything about time. His chapter is entitled 'A Literary Philosophy of Time?' and here he takes a case study from Proust.

The work most often cited as a source of literary ideas about time is Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. In the final volume, Marcel, reclusive, disillusioned with literature and with life, visits the house of the Duke de Guermantes. As he arrives, his mood is lifted by a series of apparently trivial experiences – the impression of a paving stone beneath his foot, a sound, the touch of a napkins – on which he reflects while waiting to join the company. These experiences, like his earlier taste of the cake dipped in tea, bring a joyful indifference to the vicissitudes of fate and reveal themselves as recollections of past places and events. An involuntary memory, quite unlike the lifeless photographic recollections we actively summon, has recreated the past *in* the present; so Marcel concludes. From this he draws three further consequences, ethical, metaphysical and aesthetic. The first is that if we think life trivial, we judge it so on the evidence of active memory, which 'preserves nothing of life', whereas we should use the evidence of 'life itself', namely that provided by involuntary memory. The second is that such moments disclose the existence of a timeless essence which each one of us possesses and which experiences the fusion of temporal moments from outside time. The third is that such experiences, because they bring the past to life, allow an otherwise impossible but aesthetically desirable combination. For in such a case imagination, which is otherwise bound to absent things, can combine with a lively impression of the presentness of what is in fact past.

These, anyway, are Marcel's conclusions. But Marcel is a creature of fiction, and it is strictly speaking true only that it is fictional that he draws these conclusions. What are we supposed to take from this? Perhaps we should see in this episode an invitation to reflect on our own experience of

memory, and perhaps to enter imaginatively into Marcel's experience, thereby gaining an experience like his. And then the question would be: do we find in this reflective-cum-imaginative projection grounds for accepting Marcel's conclusions? Let's take a closer look at the second of the three philosophical conclusions that Marcel draws, the one about time: that involuntary memory discloses the existence of a timeless essence which each one of us possesses and which experiences the fusion of temporal moments outside time. It is by some distance the least plausible of his conclusions. It is antecedently improbable, since the weight of evidence (especially the evidence we *now* have) tells us that we are biological beings wholly part of the natural, temporal order. It suffers from at least the suspicion of incoherence, because this atemporal being (or atemporal part of Marcel's being) seems to be capable of acting *at a particular moment*, the time immediately before Marcel's entry to the Guermantes mansion. And the experience that Marcel bases his conclusion on is in fact very poor support for that conclusion. What, for example, makes Marcel so sure that the experience is that of a fusion of past and present in a timeless being, rather than merely the activation in the present of a memory trace – certainly a very lively one – of a past event? It's not just that Marcel's memory might be deceptive; I hope we all accept that memory can be vivid but illusory. Rather, there just doesn't seem to *be* anything in the memory experience itself that Marcel describes which would suggest the outlandish metaphysics he subscribes to. As an example of the philosophy of time in a literary context, this is disappointing.

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