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Beauty That Must Die

A Response to Michael Clune

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LET ME FIRST THANK MARK MCGURL FOR ORGANIZING THIS JOINT EVENT on my book *Dying for Time* (2012) and Michael Clune's *Writing against Time* (2013). Reading Clune's excellent and deeply original book in preparation for our exchange, I was not only delighted by the quality of his writing but also amazed by how much overlap there is between the questions we pursue, so I am really looking forward to the discussion.

I want to begin by calling attention to a striking shared feature of my book and Clune's book. We both explore the fear of the passage of time—what I call “chronophobia”—and how it permeates literary writing. Thus, both of us highlight how the writers we treat do not just fear death and the severe effects of aging but also the passing away of the particular moment or sensation that is cherished. Furthermore, both of us explore how the fear of time leads writers to try to slow down the experience of temporality, to dilate moments of time and make them more vivid. Indeed, the writers I focus on—Marcel

Proust, Virginia Woolf, Vladimir Nabokov—are all devoted to rendering the nuances and resonances of living in time. So when Proust and Woolf call for the reformation of the modern novel, it is persistently in the name of temporal life. Their experiments with narrative technique, structure, and style are not a turn away from realism but a challenge to those conventions of realism that fail to do justice to the texture of temporal experience. This project is in turn continued by Nabokov, most prominently in his last great novel *Ada*, which is explicitly devoted to what he calls “The Texture of Time.”

A key aspect here is the attempt to counteract habit, to prevent us from taking the world for granted and instead making us see the world anew, “not in the sense of revealing another world,” as Clune puts it with a succinct formulation, “but in the sense of genuinely experiencing this world” (59). Clune, however, sees this desire to slow down time as aiming at completely stopping time. One way of describing our differences, then, would be to say that we offer different diagnoses of chronophobia. Clune holds that we fear time because we want to be timeless. On this view, the tragedy of desire is that we can never have what we want. We want to be timeless but are condemned to a temporal existence. In contrast, I argue that the desire to slow down time—to linger in the quality of temporal moments—is incompatible with a desire to be timeless. We fear time because we want to live on in time. The fear of time (chronophobia) is generated by the love of temporal life (chronophilia), and one cannot even in principle disentangle the two. Rather, the fear of time is part of what animates the desire to hold onto and prolong temporal life.

To make this argument concrete, let us consider a scene from John Keats, which plays a central role in Clune’s book but also can serve to elucidate what is at stake in *Dying for Time*. In Keats’s poem “Bright Star” the speaker describes how he is resting on the chest of his beloved (“Pillow’d upon my fair love’s ripening breast”), listening to the “soft swell and fall” of her breathing. This is a scene of consummate happiness, underlined by his emphasis that he does not want anything except to be there next to her, listening to her “tender-taken breath,” pervaded by a sense of “sweet unrest.” In and through this experience of consummate happiness, he is seized by the thought that he does not want the happiness to end. He is thus seized by what I call chronophobia: the fear of the passage of time. Yet this fear is not driven by a

desire to be timeless but rather by a desire to prolong his temporal experience. In wanting to be next to her, he wants to continue being next to her, he wants the experience to be extended in time, so that their hearts can keep beating and animate their love for one another. This desire for the continuation of temporal life is incompatible with the desire for an eternal state of being. Far from fulfilling his desire to live on, a timeless state of eternity would eliminate the life he wants to maintain.

One may here ask—as I assume Clune will—why the choice between living on and eternity has to be an either/or. Clune explicitly defends a vision of timelessness where living on and being in eternity can be combined, allowing one to keep the positive qualities of life without the threat of losing them. I argue, however, that such a vision cannot be sustained, even on the level of desire. If you remove the exposure to loss, you also remove the value and intensity of the experience itself. Thus, if Keats's lover could not lose the proximity to his beloved, he would have no sense of the miracle of lying there next to her. There would be no urgency to absorb the situation, to enhance his attention to what happens, to strive to retain what he is feeling, since nothing of value could be lost.

The very attempt to dilate the experience of time—to counteract habit, to preserve and intensify the sensation of being alive—is thus intertwined with the sense of temporal finitude. What I seek to show throughout *Dying for Time* is that these two aspects cannot be separated. The sense of something being valuable or significant is inseparable from the sense that it *can* be lost. Far from devaluing temporal life, the dimension of loss is part of what makes it emerge as valuable. Thus, as I argue in my chapters on Proust, what counteracts habit—what makes us pay attention to the world rather than take it for granted—is not an experience of timelessness, as Clune suggests. Rather, the key to breaking habit in Proust is to intensify the experience of temporal finitude, since the sense of something being precious and unique is inextricable from the sense of its precarious existence. The valuation of a past experience may thus be enhanced when it is infused with the pathos of being lost, just as the value of a current experience may be enhanced by the sense that it will be lost. Indeed, in all the writers I treat, breaking with habit and seeing the world anew is inseparable from the sense that the world you see anew is finite.

It has not always been, it will not always be, and therefore it must be seized before it vanishes.

So, for example, when Clarissa Dalloway on the glorious June morning that opens *Mrs. Dalloway*, when she on that morning has the sense of how the moment is precious—how it is a unique “drop” of life, as she says—the very sense of that preciousness is linked to the sense of how the moment is already dissolving, as marked by the figure of the falling drop and the impetus to catch it. (This is Clarissa’s own image: in seeing the moment as a unique drop of life she already sees it as something that is in the process of dissolving and falling, which precipitates her desire to catch it, to hold onto it.) Similarly, when Lily Briscoe is seized by the radiance of an early morning in *To the Lighthouse*—seeing everything as though for the first time—she also has the sense of seeing it for the last time. This sense of finitude is part of what contributes to and intensifies the radiance of the moment itself. Precisely because she has the sense of how the experience is passing away, she must strain her attention to absorb it, she “must look now,” as she says, “because she will never see it again” (Woolf 1981b, 194).

The passing away of the moment is thus an inseparable part of what animates the passion for the moment. Furthermore, this passing away is inscribed in the constitution of the moment itself. Time does not overtake a present moment that is *first* given in itself and *then* ceases to be. Rather, for time to pass, the present moment must begin to pass away as soon as it comes to be. That I insist on this condition does not entail that I regard the experience of time as linear or homogeneous. On the contrary, the chapters in *Dying for Time* explore differential rhythms of temporality: the sedimentation and resuscitation of events in an individual body, the crystallization of a moment through memory and anticipation, the texture of time in a lifelong love affair, intervals of pleasure and pain, the dead time of trauma and the elation of bliss. All these rhythms are different forms of time, which cannot be reduced to a homogeneous succession. Yet they are forms *of time* because they are marked by a negativity that opens onto the past (what is *no* longer) and the future (what is *not* yet). Without such negativity nothing would come into being or pass away. It is in this sense that succession is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the experience of time. The passage of time requires not only

that every moment be superseded by another moment but also that this alteration be at work from the beginning. If the moment did not negate itself, it could never give way to another moment and there would be no time, only a presence forever remaining the same. This precarious experience of time (of ceasing to be) is not only a negative peril but also the positive possibility of coming into being. Whether in bliss or in mourning, in joy or in pain, we *live on* after a past that has ceased to be and before a future that may not come to be.

Now, Clune too is keenly aware of the negativity of time. “No sooner do we catch a glimpse of the shining colors of the world,” he writes, “than they begin to darken,” and he keeps returning to what he describes as the “incessant erasure of perceptual life” (3). Yet, Clune portrays time as *only* a negative condition, thereby eliding the fact that time is *also* the positive possibility of coming into being and living on. Indeed, Clune claims that perceptual life is *first* untouched by time, present in itself, and only subsequently begins to disappear. “The first time we see something,” he writes, “its surface is fresh and vivid. And then it begins to disappear” (89). Even more emphatically, he claims that the first time we encounter something in a vivid perception, we glimpse “the splendor of eternal life, of unfaded color, unerasable sensation” (4). Given Clune’s own account of the incessant erasure of perceptual life, it is hard to see how this could be the case. What we see is never eternal or timeless but in the process of passing away. Therefore, it has to be sustained by memory and anticipation (or retention and protention, to use the technical phenomenological vocabulary). As Clune himself points out, perception is not just raw sensation “but sensation filtered through a set of capacities, memories, associations, and desires” (24). This means that perception is never timeless but always already temporalized. And this temporalization is not just what “poisons” or “kills” perception—as Clune has it—but also what animates perception and gives it a lifetime to begin with. The colors we see are never unfading but in the process of coming to be and ceasing to be. Moreover—and this is the chronolibidinal point—the fading of the colors is *part of what makes them glow*. This is perhaps most evident when we see something we cherish for the last time and the experience is all the more radiant, all the more intense, because we are on the verge of losing what we love. Yet the sense of temporal finitude is at work already the first time we see something that we cherish. If

we are seized by the colors of the world, the fading of the colors is part of what makes them absorbing—part of what compels us to pay attention to their qualities—and makes us linger over their beauty.

Let me elucidate this last point by considering Immanuel Kant’s account of the experience of beauty, which plays a central role in Clune’s book. For Clune, Kant’s account in the *Critique of Judgment* is an exemplary articulation of the attempt to “defeat time” through aesthetic experience, whereas I would argue that Kant demonstrates the intrinsic relation between the experience of time and the experience of beauty. As Clune rightly emphasizes, the crucial question here concerns the pleasure we take in the experience of the beautiful. According to Kant, when we experience something beautiful the pleasure we feel makes us want to prolong the experience, to maintain ourselves in the state of pleasure. However, like Keats’s lover in the presence of his beloved, the pleasure we feel is not a timeless or instantaneous sensation but a state in which we want to “linger” (*weilen*). This desire to linger—to keep ourselves in the state of pleasure—presupposes a sense of how the state is passing away; otherwise we would never strive to maintain it. As Kant puts it, the feeling of pleasure has a “causality in itself, namely that of maintaining the state . . . without further aim” (1987, 68; translation modified). What is truly remarkable here is that Kant does not say that we want to overcome the state of lingering in favor of an absolute, timeless fulfillment. Rather, temporality is intrinsic to the fulfillment of pleasure itself. We do not want to simply “be” in a state of pleasure that is exempt from loss; we want to “linger” in a state of pleasure that is animated by the resistance to its own passing away. This is why the experience of the beautiful—with the pleasure that attends it—increases what Kant calls the “feeling of life” (*Lebensgefühl*). We are captivated, not by the tranquility of timeless possession but by the feeling of life—of animation—that emerges from trying to retain what is passing away. If you removed this passing away and the attendant relation to loss—in short, if you removed time—you would remove the vitality itself. This is why beauty, as Keats said, is always a “Beauty that must die.” If the experience of beauty and pleasure could not be lost, there would be no “vital interest” in maintaining it. Such is the chronolibido that flows through Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* and that I would like to infuse in Clune’s beautiful book as well.



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