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# Time in Our Time

Clune and Hägglund Debating at Stanford

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*This is a transcription of the discussion that followed the two talks by Michael W. Clune and Martin Hägglund, published in this issue of CR. The talks and discussion were part of an event devoted to Clune's book *Writing against Time* (2013b) and Hägglund's *Dying for Time* (2012). The event was organized and moderated by Mark McGurl and hosted by the Center for the Study of the Novel at Stanford University.*

**Michael W. Clune [MWC]:** I think the most basic difference between our works is that, when you look at time from a deconstructive or philosophical perspective, certain things look impossible, whereas when you look at time from a neuroscientific perspective—from the perspective of what we know about how subjective time actually works in the brain—these things no longer

look so impossible. Let me give you an example. You have a wonderful critique of Bergson, which from the perspective of the account of time that Derrida had access to in the sixties and seventies makes perfect sense. Part of your claim is that each moment must leave a spatial trace, since as soon as the moment comes into being it is passing away. Subjective time does not really work that way though. What we know is that in short-term memory, when one first experiences something—and I place a lot of emphasis on this since it accords with my intuition of how time works in perception—when one first experiences something, subjective time has not yet gone to work on the experience, in the sense that the brain has not yet created a representation, has not yet grasped the form and encoded it in a manner that places it in long-term memory. Therefore, what one wants, what Keats, Proust, Nabokov, and these other writers want to target, is how we can expand and linger in the moment of short-term memory before the spatialized trace happens. That seems like a technical argument, but what it makes possible is a perspective from which you can see a number of things you would not see otherwise. The first is that to (as you say) intensify the experience of time, that actually does involve countering time. We ordinarily cannot retain the intensity of our experience of temporal phenomena because the mind is automating it. So the very desire to “linger” in time in fact already and intrinsically entails the desire to counter subjective time as it is operating in the mind.

**Martin Hägglund [MH]:** Can I stop you there for a moment? I was trying to zone in on this issue toward the end of my talk and I think it encapsulates many of the significant differences between us. On the one hand, you describe perceptual experience as something that is *first* present in itself and *then* begins to pass away. On the other hand, you sometimes grant that perceptual experience starts to fade as soon as it comes into being. What I am trying to stress is that the latter—the experience of time passing away—is part of what animates perceptual experience from the beginning. The very desire to linger in the state you are describing would be inconceivable unless you already had the sense that the experience will not last. If the experience were just there, fully present—“untouched” by time—you would never be seized by the desire to try to linger in it, because there would be no sense of a passage of time that you have to resist. That’s why I would distinguish between a desire to “coun-

ter” time and a desire to defeat or eliminate time. There is a desire to prolong and intensify the experience of time—to “linger” in it—but that desire depends on the immediate apprehension that the experience is passing away and that sense is part of what animates the desire. Otherwise I cannot see how the desire to linger even gets off the ground. There is a minimal temporality at work there, which requires—in phenomenological language—a primordial retention before there is representation.

**MWC:** I see what you are saying, but I want to return to the point, which I think is a really interesting point, when you are saying that the value of temporal experience comes from a sense of its finitude. That’s a separate issue from what we are talking about now . . .

**MH:** But is it really a separate issue? I’m just trying to understand where the desire to linger would come from unless I had the sense that the experience may cease to be. If I simply existed in a state of timeless presence, I would never have any desire to linger because I would simply *be*, I would not have to work against any passage of time. That’s a tension . . .

**MWC:** I don’t see that as a tension. Take the example of Swann listening to music, which we both use in our books. He listens to a piece of music (we’ve all had this experience), it’s awesome, you hear it on the radio, it’s awesome, and then you play it a hundred times and it sucks. After you have played it a hundred times and you think “this sucks” then you want to have that first experience again. What’s contradictory about that? It’s like, “man, I wish I could go back to that first experience, I wish I could have lingered in that first experience of the song.” Neurobiologically, we know how that works. It’s too simple to say that it is already passing. In that initial moment, subjective time—as the brain is trying to grasp that object—the brain is using all sorts of resources to try to intensify our experience, our brain is working on overdrive in lots of ways in that moment. Then, very rapidly, it begins to get encoded, to get automated, and the perceptual intensity is tamped down. The latter is the operation of subjective time—another word for it is “habit.”

**MH:** But what I am contesting is not the desire to go back to a first time. What I am contesting is that it is adequate to conceptualize that desire in terms of a desire for timelessness. That’s the real issue. Again, following your own description now, why would one be trying to max out on the experience unless

one had the sense that it will not last? That's a threat that is at work in immediate experience itself. Then there's also the threat you are describing—that once I have kept it as a memory I can wear out the experience. That's another sign of finitude. But there's a more primordial finitude at work in the very apprehension of something for the first time. If that primordial finitude wasn't there, I don't see why you would ever be seized by the desire to hold onto the experience.

**Mark McGurl [MM]:** The key distinction here seems to be between the neurobiological and the philosophical. Is your point, Michael, that neurobiologically the brain is indifferent to philosophical antinomies?

**MWC:** That's why I think literature is doing a kind of philosophical work that philosophy isn't doing. Literature is really trying to think through this problem. Martin sees a paradox in me using the language of both time and timelessness—of being simultaneously in time and outside of time—but I think that language accurately captures how Proust, Nabokov, and others have developed a vocabulary for a state that would simply be invisible from the perspective of traditional philosophical categories. The way I experience something for the first time, I grant that there is time there—it's not the stasis of an object, there is motion, a kind of time—but there are all kinds of time. There's a multiplicity of times. Time from a Husserlian, phenomenological perspective works one way, time from a neurobiological perspective works a different way. This is why I strain to use this language of being simultaneously inside and outside of time, by referencing a kind of memory—a short-term memory—that is happening when we first have the experience.

**MH:** But I don't see anything in the account of time that you just provided that is not predicated on the necessity of what phenomenology would call "retention." That is, from the very beginning, there is short-term memory, there is a minimal work of retention even before there is any representational memory. That is not an experience of timelessness, it is a minimal temporalization at work at the heart of experience . . .

**MWC:** No, it isn't. What you are referring to as retention is actually a very complicated process of transforming a set of perceptual data into a spatial representation. Philosophy just calls that "retention" and assumes that it's going to happen automatically. We know it doesn't happen at all automati-

cally and you can *feel* it happening. And the *feeling* of that happening, the feeling of retention being formed, is the feeling of perceptual intensity on the first encounter with an object. That is the feeling of retention . . .

**MH:** But that is the feeling of the tracing of time—of holding onto what is passing away. It is not any kind of timelessness that is felt or experienced. Your own account makes clear—as Proust does in those beautiful passages that we both analyze in our books—that from the first moment of perceptual experience there is a temporal process going on and that’s why, as Proust says, the laborers of memory are already working to hold together the flow of perceptual experience. So, on Proust’s account, there is no moment before the act of something passing away and you trying to retain it. There *is* a moment before the experience has been stabilized into a representational memory—I do not contest that. But part of what animates the preceding process of “oh my God, this is amazing, I want to retain it,” part of what animates that amazement is the sense of the finitude of what I am beholding. If there wasn’t such a sense of finitude I would never be seized by the desire to hold onto the experience, I would never do everything I can to retain the experience, like Keats next to his beloved, feeling how amazing that proximity is and thereby also being scared of losing it, so doing his utmost to maintain his attention. That is where chronolibido would flow into your own account . . .

**MWC:** I love your way of putting that, Martin, and I think it is really important. Actually, no one has ever posed the question to me in that way, so I want to think about it for just a moment. On your account—and here you are in a Lucretian tradition—the value of the present is created by its temporal finitude. So on your account I love that song . . . the reason I love that song the first time is because I already know that it is beginning to slip away. And I kind of do know that, that’s why I try not to play the song a hundred times right away! Let it last a little bit longer . . .

**MH:** That’s your chronolibido flowing . . .

**MWC:** There’s definitely something to that. However, the question of value is really complicated in the tradition I am engaging. What you are describing, Martin, is an ordinary, nonpathological human psychology based on finitude. But one of the things I’m very interested in is that there is an entire psychology of timelessness, of which addiction is for me the ultimate version. Writers can

imagine psychological states—and thereby, in my view, illuminate actual pathologies—where the fact that something is going to fade is not what gives it value. It’s the reverse situation, where there is an entirely different psychological relation to the object that never fades, never gets old, never vanishes. The logic of addiction would fall under this category, and Orwell has a very different kind of ambivalence about the prospect of such a world. So the question of value gets quite complicated. I’m not simply saying that this desire is unproblematic. In fact, I think there are at least two different divergent psychologies, which are created by this issue. But I would also say, adding another topic . . .

**MH:** I don’t want lose hold of this, though, so if we can linger here a bit longer . . . My claim about value is not that you value an experience *only* because it is passing away. But the sense that it can cease to be is an *indispensable* part of what animates the desire to hold onto anything. In other words, you measure the value of something by what it would mean to lose it. You could never even sense or apprehend the value of something that you could never lose. I am not sure why you think this is a Lucretian argument. Both Lucretius and Epicurus—like most of the philosophical tradition—are denigrating the kind of desire that I am describing. They regard the desire to hold onto what is passing away as a pathetic and irrational desire. The Lucretian/Epicurean goal is, on the contrary, to attain a godlike state of enjoying pleasure in the fullness of a moment, unperturbed by the sense of temporal finitude. As Cicero so lucidly said, Epicurus’s argument is that *time does not add anything* to the experience of pleasure. The experience of pleasure is supposed to be complete in itself—that is the Epicurean/Lucretian idea. So for me that tradition is another version of the denial of chronolibido, based on the assumption that the experience of pleasure ideally is independent from the experience of time. I seek to show, on the contrary, that the experience of pleasure is inseparable from time. Time is *both* what gives life to pleasure *and* what makes it die. This is why the love of time (chronophilia) is always entangled with the fear of time (chronophobia). Starting from this coimplication, all sorts of pathologies can emerge and I trace some of them in *Dying for Time* (2012). In fact, my book ends with an analysis of the jealous pathology on display in Derrida’s *Envois*, in a very disconcerting version of chronolibido. So

it's not just a matter of a psychologically healthy relation to time . . .

**MWC:** There are pathologies on both ends.

**MH:** Absolutely.

**MM:** It might be time to open up the discussion a bit . . . Let's start with Sianne.

**Sianne Ngai [SN]:** I want to ask a question concerning how you both tackle a quite different issue: the desire for repetition. That is, the desire to do something again precisely because it is *not* intense or a moment of perceptual novelty. It's not that I want something back because I want it to be in that state forever. I just want to do it again because my sense of value and pleasure comes not from novelty but from repetition itself. So, for example, writers like Stein and Beckett, where it's a very different kind of aesthetics and part of the pleasure is not the pursuit of something new but the pleasure of experiencing exactly the same thing again. You're talking to someone who actually does listen to the same song ten times in a row and likes it. Just to put a bit of pressure on this idea that what we value aesthetically is what shocks our sensorium, the idea that such a shock is the only kind of authentic aesthetic experience, that what we value aesthetically is *the new* . . .

**MH:** That is actually a question I too wanted to pose to Michael, and repetition does play an important part in my book. For me, the reason why repetition can have a value in itself is because of the intrinsic relation between time and desire. If it's the case that something being desirable hinges on its relation to time, then precisely by repeating something—by stressing its repetitive temporality—that's part of how something can become more valuable or desirable. So my model does *not* assume that we necessarily desire novelty. In relation to Michael's arguments, I was trying to show how my model accounts for the desire for novelty, but it also lays claim to account for the desire for repetition. The latter is actually a more straightforward example of chronobido: in the case of a desire for repetition it is very clear that time is part of the very thing that you want, since without time you have no repetition. I'm saying that holds *even* when you apparently want just one moment, but it becomes more amplified and clear in the case of an explicit desire for repetition. So, I take repetition to be my ally here . . .

**MWC:** Yes, repetition would be your ally here. And it's a great question, which allows me to make a large-scale point. The tradition I'm interested in and the



works I'm interested in are trying to do something that is really hard. Repetition is really easy to do. If I happen to like listening to the same song a hundred times—and sometimes I do like that, sometimes I totally like that, it's comforting and so forth—there is no problem in doing that, whereas novelty can be excruciating. In fact, one of the neuroscientists I've been working with has a very compelling account of schizophrenia as a condition characterized by permanent novelty. And I have no problem with the idea that most people most of the time love repetition. But the tradition I'm engaging is *not* interested in repetition, because repetition is *easy*. Instead, it is interested in doing something that is really hard, if not impossible: annulling time within time. That is, to keep an object in that initial state of perception, to go back to that object and have it always be new. What that means—if I go back to the same object and it is always new—what that means is that subjective time is now malfunctioning in my brain, it is no longer working the way it should. It is the persistence of subjective novelty across many instances of the same object. That's why it becomes such a totem for post-Romantic writing, a symbol for what writing can do. Martin writes very beautifully and very accurately about how many of the authors he studies are just interested in capturing the pathos of temporal experience, they just want to show what happens in everyday life. The writers I'm interested in are *not* interested in showing what happens in everyday life but in trying to project states in which something impossible or something unnatural could take place. That's why none of these works—at least in their philosophically interesting aspects—present themselves as objects of experience; they present themselves in the *ekphrastic* mode. They are trying to create blueprints for more truly effective works of art, which would do something like rendering objects novel across repeated encounters. And the claim I make for criticism is that by attending to that kind of thinking, that kind of work, we can learn something new, something that other disciplines do not necessarily know, which I think is an urgent critical task. It's a sociology of knowledge task for us today, to make those connections. That is why I think this tradition—that aspect of this tradition—is so important. But I don't think that *all* we care about is something new and shocking, I don't think that's the case. That's why moving is such a drag. I move to a new place and I wish I could just press a button to have six months of habit *collapse* on the walls, so that I

don't have to look at them all the time. I don't at all think such a desire is out of bounds, it's just not *conceptually* interesting, for this tradition and for criticism right now, in the way that the task of annulling time within time is conceptually interesting.

**MH:** Can we stay in that room for a moment, the room as it is experienced before habit has descended on it? One of the great things with Michael's book is that it seeks out these questions, providing very rich and nuanced ways of thinking about them. What I want to put pressure on, though, is again how we should understand the dynamic of the desire to retain time in that way—to retain the experience of time before its edge is dulled by habit. Among the many helpful moves that Michael is making, I do *not* think it is a helpful move to talk about this desire as a desire for timelessness or eternity. Proust is a great example of why. When Marcel is moving and comes to a new room—in a scene that I dwell on in *Dying for Time*—the novelty is on the one hand terrifying, and he can long for habit as something that is going to deaden and dull his perceptual vivacity. On the other hand, when he is in the mood of *resisting* the transformation of a vivid, shocking experience into comfortable habit—which is the mood that would interest Michael—then the desire he is seized by is the desire to retain an affective disposition that he is on the verge of losing and therefore all the more attached to. So the very desire to keep the particular state is itself inflected by a sense of its precarity and finitude. Without that sense (the sense that it has not always been and will not always be), the experience would not have the intensity that it has. Not for reasons of empirical limitations but for *categorical* reasons—the very animation of the desire to keep something requires the sense that you can lose what you want to keep.

**MWC:** You've got to push that really far to make that work for you, though. For your argument to work, the value of novelty and the first-time experience has to not just be *partly* created by finitude but it has to be *100 percent* created by finitude, for you to make the claim that it's a truly impossible object. Let's say that only part of the desire depends on a knowledge of finitude. Then those other aspects of that experience—the *delight* in perception, the *vividness* of perception, the pure, basic experiential elements—you can have a desire to preserve that, which is then not parasitic on a sense of its fleetingness. You can

probably argue your claim, but in my view you really have to push it all the way and then I think it becomes slightly less plausible.

**MH:** That's why I stressed early on that the very perceptual vivacity you want to preserve is already in the process of passing away. And that's why I emphasized that there is no feeling of timelessness. Finitude is intrinsic to every aspect of experience and finitude is inseparable from what animates your desire to pay attention to a given experience, to linger in it.

**MM:** Let's open it up . . .

**Claire Jarvis [CJ]:** Actually, we're going to stay in that same room, because I had a question similar to Sianne's—not about novelty but about its flip side: habit. Habit seems to be a bad guy for both of you, so when you were both talking about Proust I was thinking about someone he really admired and who was all about habit: Ruskin. Ruskin's idea of habit is that it actually helps you to see. If you can learn the form—if you can see with your eye and learn the form—that allows you to create art. So what I want to know is how the formal qualities of the texts that you are reading—Martin focusing on an epiphanic everyday, Michael on a post-Romantic, revolutionary mode—how these two different archives work formally with the anti-habit mode. If you're not interested in habit, why are you interested in the texts that you are interested in, pushing against the habitual and representational?

**MH:** My response will be similar to what I said in response to Sianne. My argument overall seeks to take into account why habit—like repetition—is both good and bad, why it can be experienced as both a chance and a threat. In the context of this debate, I was trying to show why—even in the cases that Michael highlights, when you have a seemingly pure desire for novelty—I was trying to show why and how the dynamic of chronolibido is at work even there. For the larger conversation about Proust, I would argue that habit plays an essential and indispensable part. One of the reasons why involuntary memory is so important for Proust is because it shows that you need *both* habit *and* retrieval, both forgetting and memory, to have the effect you want. As Proust writes, it is *thanks to forgetting* that you can have the break and irruption of involuntary memory. You can't have one without the other. So, for me, that whole interplay between the necessity of habit and the necessity of breaking habit is part of the inherently conflictual dynamic that I am tracing in Proust.

**CJ:** So in your view repetition is *impossible*, not easy, right? One can actually never get to the repetition . . .

**MH:** Yes, although it depends on how you conceptualize repetition. That's part of how I read involuntary memory: what makes it rejuvenating and resuscitating depends on forgetting, on the interval of time, the time in between. So in contrast to how Michael claims that we have the strongest experience the first time, and then it becomes dull, in Proust it's actually the case that the first time you don't see anything, it is only the second time that you see what you saw, thanks to the interval of time. That's an important part of how I read involuntary memory in *Dying for Time*. So, for me, habit is both good and bad.

**MWC:** It's a great question and I should say that it is Shklovsky who is the pure anti-habit guy . . .

**MH:** But he's also a hero of your book, no?

**MWC:** Well, he is, but I do try to nuance it, because of one issue, which you just described in relation to Proust. Proust captures the issue amazingly well, he is completely right about this. There has to be a tension between novelty and familiarity for the experiential intensity to jump off. There is in fact no problem with creating something that you will never, ever get used to: it's called noise. You will just experience it as noise, it will be so random that you could listen to it a million times and you will never get used to it. But there's no perceptual intensity there because there is nothing for your brain to grasp onto. What you need is a relation, a tension, between the familiar and the new, for that intensity to happen. The paradox is that it is always moving, in ordinary experience it's always moving toward total familiarity. As I'm experiencing that sweet spot it is never standing still, it is always moving toward a greater familiarity. So the impossible project for Proust is then to keep the experience in that sweet spot, which creates the entire paradox. He can't resolve this paradox with Swann. The passage with Swann listening to Vinteuil's sonata is the most brilliant description of the phenomenology of listening ever created, because it really gets this paradox, it gets the whole thing with the subterranean memory happening as he is listening, and all the rest. In fact, Proust is so smart about the paradox that he has to go to an entirely

different mode—the empathetic mode, the identificatory mode—with the late septet, to get to “the fountain of youth.”

**MH:** What is striking, though—and I think this was brought out by Claire’s question—is that your account tends to be unidirectional. The passage of time is always described by you in terms of a deadening and loss of vivacity, whereas what you see in Proust is that it is precisely through the interval of time that something can become more intense. All the examples of perceptual vivacity you give assume that the experience is strongest *the first time*, and then it gets weaker. But as I pointed out in my response paper, the most intuitive experience we have of perceptual vivacity and intensity is when we see something we love *for the last time*. When it is on the verge of being lost, it appears as all the more precious and as something I have to hold onto all the more. For me, that mechanism elucidates a chronolibido that is at work already the first time. What makes your libido flow toward something is inseparable from the sense that it *can* be lost. That’s why the experience can be intensified in moments of actual loss, but the relation to loss is at work virtually in your experience from the beginning.

**MWC:** I don’t at all doubt that we have intense experiences when we are looking at something that we are going to lose.

**MH:** But why is that on your account?

**MWC:** Well, it’s a different mechanism. And just to stick with Proust, because Proust is such a rich mine here. Proust has almost every different perspective on this issue. I actually don’t deny, Martin, that you are right about *some* of Proust . . .

**MH:** That’s the greatest backhanded compliment I’ve received in a while :).

**MWC:** But I also think that there are other parts of Proust. I do think he is totally interested in the pathos experience you are describing, as well as the *semantic* experience, which is something we haven’t talked about: the pleasure of reading a novel as a semantic experience that unfolds over time, grows richer over time, and so forth. But what I’m interested in in my book is just a very simple thing: the experience of that surface. When Proust talks about the “fountain of youth,” creating a fountain of youth, I think you’re right, Martin, that when I talk about it as timelessness it can be confusing because one could think that what I mean is the stasis of classical immortality. “Permanent

novelty” would be a better term (Proust 2001, 728), or “fountain of youth,” to use Proust’s phrase. That is something he focuses on in intermittent parts of his book and the question for me would be: what is the relation of those moments to the larger moments of the book—the Madeleine moment, the moments that Martin is interested in. On my account, when Proust is talking about those moments, it is ekphrastic in the sense that he knows that this is something that his novel is not going to be able to do. No reader is going to get to the experience of youth as he imagines Vinteuil will do. So those ekphrastic moments are moments when he is projecting an ideal sort of art form, and he is measuring the distance between what his art form can actually do and what it is straining to do. That’s why he doesn’t pick a novel when he writes about the fountain of youth, he instead writes about an imaginary Vinteuil septet.

**MH:** The same Vinteuil septet actually plays an important part in my conclusion to *Dying for Time* (Hägglund 2012, 146–55). My conclusion opens with Swann hearing Vinteuil’s sonata, and then we transition to Marcel hearing the septet many years later. On the one hand, Marcel claims that the septet points toward “pure joy.” On the other hand, he observes that there is “a pain in the smile of the phrase,” a pain that animates the septet throughout. On one level Proust describes it as though the drama of desire is that we want pure joy and the tragedy is supposedly that we can never have it. But what emerges beneath that conception, I argue, is actually a deeper tragedy, namely, that *pain and loss are part of what we desire*. That’s what the experience of the Vinteuil septet discloses.

**MWC:** You leave out the fountain of youth in that account, though.

**MH:** But it would seem that your reading of the fountain of youth is aligned with an idealized conception of “pure joy” . . .

**MWC:** No, it isn’t. The fountain of youth is not aligned with the idea of “pure joy.” Proust knows that the experience of novelty is not one of pure joy. In fact, what is remarkable about the fountain of youth is the complete bracketing of affective specificity to that moment. Who knows how Vinteuil feels? It’s certainly not good all the time. The whole point is that it’s going to be new. *New* is the value term there, not joy.

**MH:** OK, but on that account the fountain of youth is a figure of rejuvenation. And what I am trying to show is that rejuvenation in Proust is an effect of time.

Part of the reason why the experience of involuntary memory is rejuvenating is because it gives you a sense of the unbridgeable distance between what is and what is no longer, between the present and the past. You would have no sense of rejuvenation without that sense of temporal difference. So I don't see why we should conceptualize the effect of the fountain of youth in terms of eternity or timelessness. Rejuvenation itself depends on a temporal rhythm of death and life that in Proust happens across a lifetime. That is one of the reasons why the experience of involuntary memory will turn out to be so important for Marcel. He will go around thinking that his life has been all the same and all dull. Then all of a sudden, one of his past selves is resuscitated and in the contrast between who he is now and who he was in the past, he starts to feel the enormous passage of time, and the difference that time makes. That experience of time is an essential part of what makes him feel reborn and rejuvenated, even though it is painful.

**Alex Woloch:** I could listen to you talk forever, but I want to ask a question. These are just some words that struck me in your accounts: “radiance,” “intensity,” “splendor,” “pleasure,” “vivacity.” These words struck me because at the Center for the Study of the Novel I don't think those words circulate very often. So that leads me to two questions. A continuity between your two books—beyond the obvious shared interest in time—is a commitment to aesthetics or the aesthetic. I feel like we are in a generally anti-aesthetic period in literary criticism (despite Sianne just winning the top Modern Language Association prize for *Our Aesthetic Categories* [2012]). So I want to invite you to reflect on the extent to which your two books are animated by an interest in aesthetics and, if so, why it has to take this route through time. The more specific elaboration of that question concerns the novel as a genre, since—except for possibly “pleasure”—the terms that struck me in your accounts (“radiance,” “intensity,” “vivacity,” and so on) are not terms we would usually associate with the novel as a genre. I know that both of you do not just focus on the novel, but there are major detours through that form, which on one level can seem quite counterintuitive.

**MWC:** Yes, while Martin and I have here been playing up our differences for the purposes of debate, when I read his book I was really struck by how we are both concerned with aesthetics and the aesthetic. And I think that there is the

beginning of a return to the aesthetic in literary criticism, partly for sociology of knowledge reasons. There was a generation—my teachers in graduate school—if you asked them “why should we study literature in college?” they would have no answer. In fact, they may have been compelled to say: “Don’t study this stuff, it’s implicated in power,” and so on. So I think there is that sociology of knowledge component to what is happening now. But I also think that there is a return to the aesthetic among contemporary writers. Speaking as someone who is both a critic and a creative writer, the mode I’m analyzing in relation to the Vinteuil septet—the empathetic mode—is one that I find in a number of contemporary writers, some of which I am associated with. And it has really led me to challenge my sense that the empathetic mode is *only* a blueprint for the novel. There are a set of novels that have come out in the last decade—by Ben Lerner, Tao Lin, Knausgaard, and others—that are designed to put you in the author’s sensorium. This empathetic mode is becoming prevalent, whether under the heading of memoir or novel. When you read these books, you feel like you are in the brain of the protagonist. With Tao’s (2013) book in particular, I was reading it this summer and it was a really weird experience. I would be reading it and feel “this is awesome, I can be out of my dull zone, walking around seeing the world through this guy’s head.” So that particular mode of the aesthetic is really where the novel is at the moment. For better or for worse—I have conflicted feelings about it and I think Martin does too.

**MH:** Returning to the starting point of Alex’s question: my book is written with an intense awareness of the anti-aesthetic paradigms of contemporary literary scholarship, particularly the way it has inflected the study of the modernist novel. The assumption has largely been that when it comes to the major metaphysical and aesthetic questions, we know what modernism is about. And supposedly the canonical accounts of these questions are adequate. So the focus has been turned elsewhere and I should say that there has been great work done through this turn: concerning the impact of technology on literary form in Proust, for example, or the vicissitudes of sexuality in the modernist novel. But what I am trying to perform is a return to the most canonical questions. I want to read the canonical works, ask the canonical questions, and engage the canonical scholarship, precisely to show why I don’t think the



canonical accounts are expressive of what actually generates the aesthetic and affective pathos of these works. So I am trying to reinvigorate that discussion. And the motivation for this project is very simple: these are the questions I most care about, the reason I spend time with these authors, and the available accounts are just not adequate to what I think is powerful in how they are exploring the experience of time and desire. So, trying to do justice to that, I have to produce a different framework for thinking about these questions and that's what I am doing in the book. That's my personal motivation. But institutionally, I'm a pluralist, I have no problem with people's attention and interests also turning elsewhere. What I have a problem with is the assumption that the canonical questions are settled and that, for example, we have an adequate account of the phenomenology of time in modernism, which I don't think we do. My problem with the canonical scholarship is not the questions that are asked but the answers that are given, and those are some of the debates I want to revisit.

**MM:** Just to follow up on Alex's question a bit more. Is there any place for what we might call narrative understanding in your accounts? It really can seem incidental—especially in your case, Michael—that these works happen to be novels. Is there anything else that the long form brings that is in any way relevant to your projects, other than this sense of “the moment”? Where does narrative understanding come in to the whole discussion?

**MWC:** For me, what is great about the novel form are two things. The novels have the ekphrastic moment where they imagine the work, but even more importantly the narrative form is where the different kinds of psychological relations to that moment can get played out. So you can see in Orwell, for example, the running through of the whole fantasy of what would happen if art came true. If the rule of art was the rule of the world and it would turn out that I hate it. That entire psychological drama is where the depth emerges. For me, the real depth and interest is not in the moment of novelty itself but in the various psychological relations that one sets up toward it and the various kinds of artistic and aesthetic relations that writers like Nabokov will have toward representing that moment of novelty. Nabokov will set up this idea of an incredible image that never fades, but since his work can never reach that moment he pathologizes it instead, he pathologizes the hell out of it. Those

kinds of psychological relations and dramas are what the narrative form can make visible. Proust can obviously do that in a thousand different ways. But even in much more focused and narrow narratives, as with Orwell and Nabokov, that is where the depth comes from. It comes from setting up the ekphrastic possibility of attaining permanent novelty and then setting in train or imagining an entire psychology or an entire politics that would arrange itself around this possibility. I think that sort of depth is what you need the novel for.

**SN:** Can I just jump in here, because what you just said is linked to a question I had. You keep talking about the “ekphrastic” moment in the tradition that you are exploring and that is really striking. You are both interested in aesthetic experience, but it really seems as if the model for that, in Michael Clune’s case, is a visual work of art. So even when we are talking about the novel, it seems as though, in Michael’s case, that discussion is predicated on the idea that the ideal art object is a visual one. So I think you have different models of the aesthetic. Martin’s is more novelistic, because the words we use to describe aesthetic novelistic experience have duration encoded in them, whereas Michael’s is more visual, which is why the ekphrasis becomes important for you.

**MWC:** That’s absolutely right. That’s why the ekphrastic is so important to me. The novels do not present themselves as the object, only ekphrastically. But again, what is making me question this division are these novels from the last few years, which are really trying to operate in the empathetic mode. But in general, I think you are right, and I think it’s different for Martin.

**MH:** Sianne added some important dimensions to the discussion, so I will try to answer both hers and Mark’s question. With regard to the latter, there *are* formal properties of the novel—and certain things that happen with the form of the novel—that are very important for my argument and I will try to say something specific about that. But to first pick up on what Sianne was saying: it is true that the form of the novel more explicitly has to take into account the time factor, it makes temporality more explicit than when you have an aesthetic based on the image. My claim, though, is that the actual difference here is only a difference of degree. There has been a tendency to conceptualize the experience of the image or of music in nontemporal terms, but I would argue

that those terms are actually inadequate to describe the experience in question. In all these cases (novel, image, music) you will find the coimplication of time and space that I am spelling out in terms of the structure of the trace. What's interesting with the form of the novel is that it amplifies the temporal dimension because the timescale of the novel is different. But again, that is a difference of degree vis-à-vis the temporality of poetic address, the temporality of musical experience, and even the temporality of apprehending a painting. Even though we tend to think of a painting as a spatial simultaneity, you can only apprehend it by temporalizing it.

That said, one arc of my book (and here I come back to answer Mark's question) tries to follow what happens with the narration of time in the novel on a formal level. That is why I think Nabokov's *Ada* is such a great and important book. What Nabokov does in *Ada* is something that, as far as I can see, is formally unprecedented in terms of the narration of time. For example, in the case of Proust, we know that Proust the author was revising *In Search of Lost Time* up until his death and he died before it was finished. But there is no analogous process of that happening to Marcel as the fictional narrator of the book we are reading. We do not know where Marcel (within the frame of the fiction) is writing the book, how long it takes, if he has to make many revisions, and so on. It is as if the act of narration does not take any time. In fact, Genette says—in his study of narrative discourse (1983)—that the most unchallenged convention of narrative fictions is that the act of narration does not take any time. Genette says that this holds for the case of Marcel too. I think Genette is ultimately wrong about the case of Marcel—there are discreet signs of his act of narration taking time—but what happens in *Ada* is that the temporality of narration (with all its difficulties) becomes massively explicit. What's the frame of *Ada*? There is Van and Ada writing their autobiography together. They are two crazy egomaniacs, which is why the book can also be so disgusting, and it becomes more disgusting because they cannot stop writing. We know that they write the book over a 20-year period and what happens during that period affects the narration, up until the very end, and their revisions appear across the book. So, for example, on page 75 in a book of more than 500 pages, you find the last words Van ever wrote, an addition that he was writing as he was dying and that has been inserted by the editor. Moreover, even the

syntax of the writing will sometimes be syncopated by the pain of their last illness or the injection of morphine. So the act of narration becomes a drama in itself because it takes time and depends on the life of a mortal being. If you are going to take seriously the genre of fictional autobiography—if you are going to take seriously what is involved in narrating your life—you have to reckon with that problem. It's implicit in Proust, but it becomes explicit in Nabokov. Actually, I think what Nabokov does formally with the problem of narrative time in *Ada* is something that no one else had come close to doing before him. Genette says that the only one who has taken into account the temporality of narration is Tristram Shandy, since he acknowledges that it takes him a year to describe one day of his life and that he accordingly has fallen 364 days behind in the project of narrating his life. But in *Ada* that whole problem is tackled on numerous levels and that is a central point of my Nabokov chapter. So there are such formal aspects that become important for my arguments, even though the notion of time that I am pursuing is one that I think can also be expressive of the temporality of poetry, music, or the image. But the form of the novel does certain things to amplify the condition of temporality, making it more vivid, and I think that formally *Ada* is extremely innovative in that way . . .

**MWC:** What about Beckett, his *Molloy*?

**MH:** Yes, there are traces of it in Beckett, as there are in Proust too. We can discern, for example, that when Marcel (as the fictional narrator of the book we are reading), when he narrates certain parts of the book his mother is alive, whereas at other, later moments, she has already died. So we know that things happen to Marcel as he is narrating; we are not presented with the fiction that the act of narration is timeless—that's why Genette is wrong about Proust. And you can see that temporality of narration in Beckett as well. But it does not move into the foreground the way it does in *Ada*. Even the book itself, written by Van and Ada who want to control everything, ends up being edited after their death by a petty guy who is cutting out things from the book, manipulating the text, and so on. The entire drama of what it means to create a material object that is supposed to preserve time, all of that moves into the form of the novel itself. So, while there are predecessors to what Nabokov is doing, the difference of degree in the way he pursues the problem is pretty remarkable . . .

**Paula Moya:** First of all, I just want to thank you both so much for your work. I found it immensely interesting and stimulating. I am thoroughly convinced, Martin, by your basic premise that part of the reason we feel a sense of loss at all is precisely because we understand ourselves as temporal beings. At the same time, since I am convinced by so much of what you say, I am of course sitting here trying to think of when this model does *not* work: what are the exceptions, or how do I in some cases understand time differently? And I was thinking about a novel that I use to teach about time in narrative. This is a novel by Toni Cade Bambara called *The Salt Eaters* (1992). It's a wonderful novel, where the story time is about 30 minutes. And there's an important phrase in the novel about "time opening up to take us inside." My point is that loss as a motivating force is not what's going on in the sort of dilation of time that occurs in this novel. There are other things going on that motivate and explain that slowing down of time or the opening up of time. One of those, I think, is the sense that you can have different perceptions, at different scales, and that if you slow things down you see differently. This is where I think I pick up on some of what Michael is saying. The other way in which *The Salt Eaters* deals with time in a very interesting way is that there are a lot of moments of simultaneity. The motivation there is a desire to link the different characters in time, to create a web of connections among them. So one question is: do you agree with me that loss seems to structure the arguments here today and do you ever look elsewhere to understand humans' relation to time, other than through that sense of loss?

**MH:** This is an important question and in answering it I want to return to a point that I touched on in my talk. While loss is central to my account, I do emphasize and explore differential *rhythms* of temporality. Those rhythms can vary widely and you can have dilations of time that are much *less* predicated on the sense of imminent loss than others. My claim, though, is that for anything to be temporal at all there has to be at least a minimal relation to loss. What characterizes something as temporal is that in coming to be it is also ceasing to be. So both those aspects of coming to be and ceasing to be are always at work. They can be *temporalized* differently and they can follow different rhythms, and I seek to take into account the specificity of those differences of rhythm. But the common denominator for all rhythms of time is

the minimal relation to coming to be and ceasing to be, which can become the really painful affective experience of loss as one modality, but also the slowing of time in a dilation. So I'm spelling out the minimal structural condition of time and then I'm showing how that can be temporalized in various ways. Not everything that is ceasing to be is taken up by you affectively as an experience of loss, but in being temporal you cannot be *immune* from loss. So at least in a minimal fashion the relation to loss would be at work and inform the dynamic of any dilation of time.

**MWC:** This is a point where Martin and I profoundly disagree. I just don't think it works like that. I think that the account of time Martin just gave makes sense if you have access to a philosophical tradition that stopped in 1980. But if we understand how neurobiological time works, Paula is completely right, in that moment of dilation of time I do not think—and I do not think there is any evidence—that the moment, the affect or feeling of appreciation for that moment, is predicated on loss. I think the phrase Paula used, that we enter *into* time, is a wonderful one. Entering into that space-time of dilation—*preserving* that dilation—is what the authors I study aim at. I think that for Martin to be right, it would have to be all about that I'm going to lose it, that it's coming into being and passing away. But the way time works in the brain, it's really compartmentalized in very different structures. It seems that we are getting back to the beginning of our discussion here . . .

**MH:** Yes, and as I've said before, for the notion of *preservation* to make any sense there has to be some minimal relation to loss. Just as the passage from Proust, which you yourself appeal to, shows the minimal work of retention to be at work beneath the supposedly completely instantaneous experience. For it to be a question of *preservation*, there has to be a relation to something ceasing to be . . .

**MWC:** Look, you can *want* something that you don't have. And that wanting is not secretly a desire for more time, it can in fact be a desire to stay in that dilation.

**MH:** But isn't staying in the dilation itself a form of having more time?

**MWC:** From a certain perspective, but on that scale all forms of subjective time collapse and look the same. When you get closer to it, I think things look different.

**MH:** If the dilation is not a matter of more time—if more time doesn't add anything to the dilation—then what is the difference between a dilation and just a punctual instant?

**MWC:** The difference in a dilation is that everything feels different, everything feels more intense, and time actually slows, it slows dramatically.

**MH:** It slows, but it doesn't stop, that's my point.

**Blakey Vermeule:** This has been great, and I just want to add a friendly amendment to Michael's account of the neurobiological view of time, which as you know is very much a work in progress. But one fundamental feature of it—as far as I understand—is that it is clearly postdictive. As Michael correctly pointed out, time is a confabulation and depends on synthesizing different inputs happening all across the brain, entering them essentially into a story. So when you say, Michael, that there is nothing in the neurobiological account of time that is predicated on loss, you are absolutely right. On the other hand, there is something very powerful in the neurobiological account of time that is predicated on narrative. And I take it that is partly why this tradition that you are talking about has so many different offshoots. There is a Romantic version, concerning “spots of time,” there is a Jamesonian version, the schizophrenic infant who stands outside of or before time, there is also a Borgesian version, and so on. There are so many different types of theoretical interventions that imagine this kind of subjective experience of timelessness precisely because it is not always already lost, but because it is always already made into a story. The other friendly amendment I would make is that there is a neurobiological feature of repetition and time, where it seems that the more you experience something the shorter the duration of it feels. (Unfortunately, in my experience, this does not apply to faculty meetings. But for everything else in life, this seems to be the case.) So there's some actual feature of repetition that has the subjective quality of shortening the experience of duration.

**MWC:** Both of those amendments are really fantastic, and I thank you for them. You're right, the neuroscientific exploration of time is a moving field, and figuring out what's going on is really difficult. The best account of it is by David Eagleman (2008), who did one of those great review essays of all the different studies. His claim is that the reason why those repeated instances take less time is because you have automated the experience, your brain has

automated it and set up a representation, you can put it on autopilot. So the first time I walk into my office feels a lot slower than the 150th time, when I don't even actually *see* anything in a real way—it's recognition as opposed to perception. Those are two different kinds of mental activity that correspond to two different experiences of time. Your point about narrativization is also a great one and it's something I will think more about. I don't have a quick answer, but I will continue to think about it.

**MH:** The question for me, in relation to the neurobiological accounts of time offered by Blakey and Michael, would be the following: why does there have to be a synthesis in the first place? There is only a need for synthesis if something is in the process of passing away and has to be retained. All the various forms of synthesis that neuroscience describes are predicated on that fact: that there is a temporal process of coming to be and ceasing to be, otherwise you would not need to synthesize anything in the first place. And that's also why there is a minimal narrativization at work from the beginning. It is because your experience is passing away that you need short-term memory and long-term memory. These processes can take place at longer or shorter durations, but if you don't have a minimal memory you don't even have a perception. And of course, if you only have a short-term memory that can give you all sorts of pathologies, but those pathologies are differences of degree within the condition of temporal experience. That's why I think it's simply not the right way to *conceptualize* the neurobiological findings—or the analyses of pathologies—in terms of timelessness versus time. They all describe different ways of temporalizing the fundamental, ineluctable relation to coming to be and ceasing to be, which precipitates any form of synthesis, however complex or rudimentary it may be in neurobiological terms.

**MWC:** Well, I'm all about pathologies. If you are trying to do something that's impossible with time, one of the things these writers focus on are pathological temporal states—states in which time happens abnormally.

**MH:** But they are still temporal states, yes? And if so, what makes them temporal?

**MWC:** Of course they are temporal. I would never say that anything is not temporal.

**MH:** So why do you use the term “timeless” then?



**MWC:** It's both in time and out of time—it's that simultaneity. But let me elaborate what I was going to say. In short-term memory, there is no sense of loss. Oliver Sacks (2008), the great compiler of bizarre and fascinating pathologies, talks about a composer who lost his long-term memory completely. He had no sense of loss. But he could still play and understand and remember melodies. He had a condition that Proust's Swann would really like to catch, in a certain way. When the melody is in the short-term memory it is both simultaneous and successive at once. Because you experience the melody both as a set of notes and as a single whole—in one moment. That's the fusion of timelessness and time, stasis and motion. The problem is, once the melody enters long-term memory, then succession and simultaneity begin to separate out. But if you can actually keep it in the short-term memory, that's what you want to do. So then I talk about Keats, who imagines an Apollo's song in *Hyperion*, a song that would last forever, an immortal song (Clune 2013b, 4–5, 42–55). To make a long story short, musicians will often use what musicologists call “performance nuances,” little variations in performing music that will cause phrases to stick in short-term memory and not move into long-term memory. So that's an example of using pathology to learn something about possibilities for transforming the human sense of time that we didn't already know. The other pathology I write a lot about is addiction, and I use the example of amphetamines (cf. Clune 2013a). My interest in addiction is not what happens when you take the drug but rather how the image of the drug appears to the addict, which in my view has a state of permanent novelty. If you had a pack of cigarettes here, it would be fresh and intense for me, it would be like I had never seen it before. And art wants to catch that disease.

**MH:** But Michael, let me just boil it down to a very simple conceptual question: why do you need a short-term memory unless the perceptual experience is already passing away? If the experience was truly instantaneous and timeless, you would not need any short-term memory—the experience would just *be* there. So why do you need short-term memory even for the seemingly immediate states that you describe? On your own account, they all require short-term memory. Doesn't that testify to the fact that the experience is not *first* untouched by time and *then* starts to fade but rather is passing away from the beginning? That's why you need a short-term memory.

**MWC:** Well, this is again the difference between objective and subjective time. The way the mind processes time—it's both simultaneous and successive in short-term memory. I know it's a hard thing to grasp, but that is just the way it is.

**MH:** But the way to understand succession and simultaneity, I argue, is in terms of the structure of the trace, which can take into account their coimplication. To take that into account, however, you have to grant that an ineluctable aspect of the coimplication is the process of ceasing to be that makes any pure simultaneity impossible and requires retention. There is a necessary dialectical relation between impression and retention. But you seem to think that in some ideal sphere the dialectics could be severed, so that you would only have the impression and not the retention.

**MWC:** I think that ideal sphere is the sphere these post-Romantic works operate in. They are trying to create situations in which the retention is not brought to completion. But you have made me realize that I regret using the word “timeless.” In subsequent editions, I will excise that term and replace it with “permanent novelty.” Because it is time, objectively it is time, but subjective time works in very strange ways, ways that, in my view, these artists are particularly attuned to.



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