Poulet Coleman *Studies in* HUMAN TIME

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HUMAN TIME

* *by* GEORGES POULET

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✻ *Translator's Preface*

Too rarely in the history of critical literature a thinker of such force of mind emerges that his work seems bound to be translated. Georges Poulet is such a thinker. His books have won swift recognition in France. The first volume of his *Études sur le temps humain,* here translated, was awarded in 1950 the *Prix Sainte-Beuve;* the second volume, entitled *La distance intérieure,* was awarded in 1952 both the *Grand Prix de la Critique littéraire* and the French Academy's *Prix Durchon* in philosophy. But more than that, though partly because of it, his thought continues to win the earnest attention and the gratitude of a widening audience, quick to esteem critical powers of a high order.

For although it is hard to put Georges Poulet in a category, he is a critic, a philosophical literary critic whose approach to literary art is new in the history of criticism. He reads French literature for us, from Montaigne to Proust, in the light of man's changing concepts of mortal time. He has seen that one of man's main preoccupations in literature is the problem of time and the nontemporal: how to deal with it; and how to express it. The author conceives the essential effort of the critic to be that of discerning the total meaning of a writer's work by paying attention to his sense of man's temporality and place. Once this is understood, in relation to all other human activity, then the philosophic temper of the literature of a time is seen as vitally determining the way life will take. The work of an artist can be penetrated and can penetrate us, unhindered, only if we are led to a view of the center of it, where the generative power is imparted. Without this second sight, works of art can hardly be seen or known at all.

But Georges Poulet has first viewed the work as a whole, and he has urged that the individual parts of a writer's work cannot be deeply understood in isolation. Only a concern with the totality

of the work can reveal its fixed or shifting center. A main motivation, at that center, is seen to be man's singular interest in the disposition of ideas in the spaces of his mind: in his dread of time; or his pleasure in duration. That is not to say that Poulet is not a close reader of individual texts. Few are as astute at examining a poem, a play, or a novel as he is. Inductive philosophic criticism cannot be based on anything else; when it draws generalities, it draws them out of particulars. Its job is to interpret what is perhaps already appreciated or enjoyed, but up to the point of the maximum enjoyment or profit. And a critic in the true sense must be a linguist and equipped, as Georges Poulet is, not only with analytical astuteness and a poetic responsiveness to what is beautiful, but with a knowledge of other languages and literatures beyond his own.

Ideas about time have changed. In his Introduction, the author traces the course of such ideas through the medium of the writers of France, from the Middle Ages to the present. The depth and concentration of this passage, with its underpinning of theology, philosophy, and scientific theory, should not discourage the reader who, despite his pleasure in the brilliant figures, finds some of the abstractness difficult. Whether or not he is at home in French literature, the work will soon become plainer to him as he goes along.

The method of centrality is the search for meaning and for the sources of spiritual strength. If pieces of literature are only the echoes of resolutions, nevertheless they are splendid echoes, and all we have. For Georges Poulet, nothing is more precious than what man has thought; in these pages, horror and joy over the varying modes of the concept of time are seen to confer a timelessness that art can express, for it guarantees the future of an idea, from across the past, and thereby enlarges our present. If man's anguish over human time, as over human love, is today central to his present being and endeavor, then works of literature may furnish the illumination of its purpose. The uncommon illumination of this moving book consists in the reflection that strikes and the radiance that is seen finally to emanate from a core of darkness. To read it is to participate in a spiritual experience.

The author's suppression of his interesting chapter on Théophile Gautier has for one thing permitted the inclusion, at the end, of

his commentary on several American writers seen, if only briefly, in their temporal and interior spatial dimensions.

The translator expresses thanks to the author for his faithful and indispensable collaboration. Any modifications of the original text had his approval. Without his corrections and suggestions, this translation would not have been possible.

BALTIMORE, JANUARY, 1956 *Elliott Coleman*

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INTRODUCTION

I

For the Christian of the Middle Ages the sense of his existence did not precede a sense of his continuance. He did not have first to discover himself existing in a present moment in order next to conceive himself as existing in time. For him, on the contrary, to feel that he existed was to feel himself *to be:* neither changing nor becoming nor in any way succeeding himself; it was simply to feel that he was and that he endured. There was no real distinction for him between existence and duration. And there was no essential difference between individual moments of duration. A human being as such, and as long as he was such, could never cease to be what he really was.

From this point of view nothing distinguished man from inferior or superior beings who below him and above him constituted creation. From top to bottom in the scale of existence everything was possessed of an intrinsic continuity; all being abided as it was. The world was a world of abiding things.

But it was a world of abiding things which did not abide of themselves. If from being nothing they came to be something, if from the possible they passed to the actual, if their existence remained contingent and dependent, that was because such existences were created existences. In one sense they were being created every moment; not that God was obliged each moment to create them anew, but rather that in all the range of their existence, by the same act of will, the Creator caused them to be and to endure.

> Creation and preservation are an indivisible action; thence the absolute unity of this action and the fact that its maintenance proceeds not by a succession nor by a continuation, strictly speaking, but rather by the permanency of a single indivisible action.[1]

Nor was it in terms of independent and successive instants that the relation between creatures and Creator was conceived.[2] It was

not because God kept adding moments to their existence that this existence was lengthened. It was because an aptitude for being preserved corresponded in all the moments of created existence to the preserving act itself.

> The preservation of a thing is not produced by God as by a total cause; it requires on the part of the creature an aptitude for preservation, a preservative capacity, so to speak.[3]

The being of the creature, it is true, tended always toward nothingness; but it tended in that direction with only one part of itself. With another part it tended to continue being what it was by reason of the principles of its existence. Its tendency toward nothingness (*habitudo ad nihil*) was compensated for by an opposite tendency, the tendency toward the first cause (*habitudo ad causam primam*).[4] This habit, this mode of being was in the highest degree a mode of abiding. To tend Godward meant never to cease to possess one's aptitude for receiving one's existence from God.

The Christian of the Middle Ages felt essentially, then, that he was a man who endured. Nevertheless, within him and around him, he was unable to keep from seeing change. If he felt sure of his own permanence he was at the same time constrained to notice a profound lack of permanence. Paradoxically, he felt himself to be a permanent being and a transient being, a being who never changed and a being who always changed.

In order to understand what time meant to men of the Middle Ages, we must strip ourselves of our modern conceptions and of our knowledge of ancient conceptions. Time was for them neither a sort of substitute for space nor a formal condition of thought. If they accepted the famous definition of Aristotle—time is the number of motion—they gave it a very different meaning from that of its author. To change was to pass from potentiality to actuality. But this transition had nothing about it necessarily temporal. By virtue of the Christian doctrine of omnipotence, it could have a temporal quality only if there were some cause which did not allow the immediate transformation by divine action of the potentiality into the act. And this cause which required that time be involved in the change was a certain defect of matter:

> Succession in the formation of things is due to a defect in matter, which originally is not fitly disposed to receive form; but when it is so disposed, it receives form instantaneously.[5]

From this point of view, matter was nothing other than a resistance which, manifesting itself in the substance of a thing, hindered that thing from assuming instantly the fullness of being which its form would confer upon it; a resistance which introduced distance and tardiness, multiplicity and delay, where everything, it seemed, should have happened simultaneously and at once. *Tempus facit distare.*[6]

The remoteness and plurality, however, which thus insinuated themselves into being, and so established time in being, did not constitute a negation of being. On the contrary, this kind of duration was upheld by a double continuity: the permanent continuity of substantial form; and the successive continuity of change.

First of all, time was not a mode of duration absolutely different from permanence. It was only permanence incomplete, still in the process of achievement, and guided toward completion by the forms inherent in being. But if these forms existed and endured, it was through following the conditions of existence and duration appropriate to being. God, the preserver of being, was by the same token preserver of the principle of the actions of being.[7] Thus, far from resulting in occasionalism, continued creation confirmed the lasting efficacy of the second causes. Being was made capable of action. But this capacity was not in time; it was in permanency. It was the permanent form that established the possibility of existence and action.

But in order for this action to become act and for this existence to become time, it was necessary not merely that they should be possible. In order to wedge themselves into actual time, they still had need of fresh help from God. All *becoming* in the natural order, as in the spiritual order, required a determination direct from God.[8] Thus the divine operation founded time not only upon the permanence which made it possible but also upon the actuality which made it necessary and real—actuality which could be instantaneous, but which, when it was temporal, proceeded with the continuity of an uninterrupted movement toward an end.

Thus sustained by the permanent continuity of substantial form, the moving continuity of time unrolled itself, so mobile and so fluid that it was impossible to distinguish consecutive moments. No doubt, such fluidity implied a part of nonbeing. But what distinguished this time from Heraclitan time or even Platonic time—time

of pure mobility—was that it was a movement toward an end. The finality of the movement gave it in return something that transcended its materiality. Even in his body the Christian of the Middle Ages felt a continuous orientation toward a spiritual perfection. Time had a direction. Time finally carried the Christian toward God.

On the other hand the temporality of the body implied as a consequence the temporality of the spirit. Incessantly the Christian felt time as a flood which, overflowing his flesh, penetrated his soul. For his soul was first of all the form and consciousness of his body. Each act of his sensitive, cognitive, or voluntary being appeared to him to be necessarily impregnated with time. Nothing rose up in his mind which had not previously been experienced as a corporeal image situated in space and moving in time. Long before Locke, the medieval thinker had discovered that the mere succession of his thoughts could give him the idea of time.[9] But for him this succession took place in a human soul in accordance with a continuity profoundly different from the pure volubility of Lockean time. Only angelic thought could pass from idea to idea and from instant to instant without a temporal medium to support the passage and join them. To this discontinuous angelic time (strangely similar to that which was to be the time of Descartes) there was opposed the continuity of human time. In mind as in body, in order to shift from one position to another, man was necessarily obliged to use the medium of continuous time.

All, therefore, that was naturally spontaneous and instantaneous in spiritual life—the act of comprehending, the act of feeling, the act of willing or of enjoying—all of this was being achieved in man only through time, only with the help of time, only as if borne by time toward its completion.[10] But in proportion as this act was brought close to its point of perfection, in proportion as it approached its own completion in time, it tended to release itself from time. At the very moment it attained its fullness, all its temporality disappeared. It was brought to perfection in an instant which transcended time and which, as long as it lasted, lasted within a duration that was permanent:

> This happens when all the operations of the soul resolve themselves into the pure contemplation of intelligible truth. In such an operation no error is possible, even as there is no error in the understanding of

> first principles which we know by simple intuition. It is then only . . . that the soul *attains a uniformity which is like that of the angels;* having arrived at this stage, the soul lays all things aside that it may continue in the contemplation of God alone.[11]

For the man of the Middle Ages, then, there was not one duration only. There were *durations,* ranked one above another,[12] and not only in the universality of the exterior world but within himself, in his own nature, in his own human existence.

In his nature, but also in his supernature; in his *being,* but also in his *well-being.* For the man of the Middle Ages did not feel that he had a purely natural existence. He felt that beyond this he existed supernaturally. To his existence as a fallen creature, grace superadded an existence of regeneration. And in this regenerative order of existence, which depended more intimately upon God than the other did, there was repeated the same combination of continuities. Perseverance in well-being, the permanence of supernatural duration in the human state, was assured by a supporting power which could be called the preservation and continuous creation of grace.[13] And just as on the natural plane there responded to the continual action of the Creator the continuous presence of forms and natural virtues in the creature, so on the supernatural plane there responded to the continuous action of sanctifying grace what Saint Bonaventure calls the permanent *habitus* that dwells in the sanctified being.[14] This *habitus* made man capable of doing good. But for such possible actions to become actual and to be performed in time, it was necessary that divine aid operate anew. This was accomplished by actual grace, the efficacy of which exerted itself not upon the permanent substance of the being but upon the vicissitudes of its existence engaged in time.

Thus was completed the architecture of medieval duration. As can be seen, everything rested upon two principles: the continuous creation which established the permanence of the creature and of his substantial activity; and the divine concourse which allowed him to realize himself in time.

II

In short, the intuition by which the Scholastics came to apprehend the action of God in his creatures presented this action to them as

one which created and incessantly sustained all coexisting orders of duration; and at the same time it represented all creatures as disposed by their substantial form to receive the particular order proper to them.

But by the end of the Middle Ages other conceptions had gained ascendancy. Transforming in identity the analogical resemblance between the generation of the Word and the creation of the world, Eckhart had based all duration upon a moment eternally repeated in which the genesis of God and that of the world were simultaneously effected by the interaction of the one upon the other. Abolishing in his turn all permanent forms whatsoever and depriving each creature of any aptitude for a duration of its own, William of Ockham could recognize divine preservation in nothing else but the inscrutable act by which in each moment of time God made each creature anew.

Thus by the time of the Renaissance the whole hierarchy of forms which in the eyes of the Middle Ages constituted the permanent structure of the world had disappeared. In a universe which now seemed entirely subject to vicissitude, there remained only a double awareness of the vicissitude itself and the cosmic force which produced it. From that moment the character of human duration changed profoundly. God no longer appeared to be the transcendent cause which from without preserved his creatures and their own individual and continuing existences; God seemed rather the indwelling power that from within tirelessly sustained and prolonged the universal motion by which things and beings accomplished their temporal destiny. No longer creations of permanence, no longer degrees of duration, but rather from top to bottom in the universal scale a transforming and vivifying force which sustained the universe but which sustained it only in its becoming:

> Thus the great universal mass
> Would see its discordant members die,
> Had it not within itself a spirit,
> Everywhere infused, which agitates and moves it . . .[15]
>
> Thou art the source and happy origin of all,
> The unity, sole principle of the machine,
> Of each of its effects the fertile cause,
> Fifth essence, chain divine

Embracing, holding all, restorer of things
Vicissitude would terminate in changing.[16]

Who has not faith in new exchanges
Of body for strange body
In the womb of the great universe?
Who does not recognize the work
Contrived by Nature here below
As beautiful only in ever-changing? [17]

So the world was no longer anything more than an immense organism, a gigantic network of interchanges and reciprocal influences which was animated, which was guided interiorly in its cyclical development by a force everywhere the same and perpetually diversified, that could be called indiscriminately God, or Nature, or the Soul of the World, or Love.

This being so, how would it still be possible to maintain in its pristine clarity the distinction Christianity had insisted upon making between the creative act and the created thing? "For God everywhere, in every thing, propagates himself," says Ronsard.[18] Creative causality had become immanent in the universe. Instead of imposing upon nothingness the reality of existence, it seemed now to emanate from all reality and to radiate from every creature: "Daemons, distributors of reborning lives . . ." [19] "for nothing abides in anything except it love and be loved." [20] Cause and effect coalesced in the same *fieri*. Essentially each being appeared to be no longer a created being which constantly received its existence from outside, but rather an autonomous activity which found in itself the inexhaustible resources to engender its continuance by a diversity of motion.

For just as God in varying exerts
His diverse power, Himself single and one,
And is admirable in this great Universe
For the variety of His diverse effects:
So a single soul, image most small
Of the image of God, imitates the Almighty
With subtle artifice, and shows to us
In the soul's diversity its deity.[21]

Therefore for the man of the Renaissance, time had come to have an entirely different meaning from that which it had for the