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Jonah, On Time

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Trumpeter

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People say, "time flies!" I've never seen it go by overhead. People talk about time, or, rather, assume time in their talk. Things happened yesterday. Tomorrow is planned. I don't get it. When I read Erskine Caldwell, I'm talking with the man now. When I recall my first true love, I talk with her now and I pray for her now. When I recall my aged Latin teacher who interrupted an exam to say, in English, that he had just swallowed a fly, I admire him and am amused now.

Some might say that, in fact, I have a continuity of my life from "then" to "now." But I don't experience it. I experience not a river, stream, nor even a trail of consciousness but a rosary, a string of beads at which and with which to pray. I don't leave a trail, like a comet.

I'm a sky of stars. I have a "now," a "specious present" as the pragmatist C. I. Lewis calls it; I prefer a "spacious present."

Time doesn't exist. Certainly clocks exist - I have one at home, one in my office. On these, the hands go round; they are at different positions marked by numbers. When I look up now, it says 2:04:30. When I look up now, it says 2:04:45. Fifteen seconds have passed. But I'm writing a sentence, not moving in time.

Sometimes I worry myself; I think I should find a way to talk about this. And I say, "OK, I don't see time passing, but I see different places. OK, so I can move in space." I know about the continuity of space. That makes sense. I can walk from one place to another.

But I can't get anywhere with this analogy. I can't fit myself into time as if it were a kind of space. I don't have a door into it - it doesn't seem pertinent or useful to have one.

"Well, aren't you older now than you used to be?"

Maybe. I get tired more easily "these days," I think. I don't have as smooth a skin as "I used to." I like peace and quiet more than "I once did." But no, I don't seem to be "older." I have no perception or feeling of a process called "aging" or "getting older." I'm just always right here, more than less as I "always have been."

Moravia opens a story with these thoughts:

Every middle-aged man has, inside his head, another head; his outer head has wrinkles, grey hair, decayed teeth, lustreless eyes; his inner

head, on the other hand, has remained just the same as when he was young, with thick black hair, a smooth face, white teeth, and bright eyes.

This difference in perception, a so-thought misperception in his story, is how those who would grow old dismiss what I say: you're just not noticing the reality of the situation. And I wonder, are these the signs by which I am to define myself?

These realists continue: "You'll die, you know."

Well, so they say. But, in fact, if it matters, more people are alive now than have ever died. So you won't prove it to me through numbers. But anyway, I'm not so sure. My father and mother died. But I talk with them better now and more often than when they were alive. My point? Simply that how can I say they've died when I'm closer than ever. What I love and what loves me is "outside" of time. Better said: "inside" the world. Where's "time" inside the world?

Everyone is still here if you have the door to go through.

Maybe a contrast would be helpful here. I'm not sure if I have it right, but some people say they live "in time." This seems to mean they pay more than passing attention to the clock on the wall. At 11:00 they do this - at 12:00 they do that. (So do I, by the way. If I want to catch the 11:00 ferry to Vancouver, I pay attention to the clock.) But there's more. Somehow this clock thing intrudes more deeply. There's "a time" to eat, "a time" to go to bed so you get enough sleep, "a time" for other things. It seems to wind its way into one so that "the schedule" becomes important. One regulates oneself for the schedule. One can take holidays to be less scheduled, one can take a "time out," but it's ready when one gets back. But this clock time is not "inside" the world. I do all this, but it's only on the surface of my life, it's nowhere "inside" except (of course) that it's inside just as much as the telephone is, or the automobile. But it's not one of those things I have much regret over.

Then I notice the "benchmarks" in life I have passed, or which I am approaching. The marriage, the children, the divorce, the remarriage, the promotion, the job loss(es), the success, the loss of success, of hopes, the death of parents, the movement of children, retirement. "Time marches on," and "Time conquers all" are the mottos of benchmark time. These are insinuated even more deeply, they mean more to some of us, are part of our basic plans for life. They are markers of this *tempus fugit* thing - at least in the sense of permanent loss. That's the convention with *tempus fugit* - that nothing stays the same, but it never gets better, only worse. I look at my regrets, losses, mistakes, I could have done better, if only. . . . It's hard, indeed, for me, to stay out of this kind of thing. It's very easy for me to do, "if only. . . ." I go into the melancholy and the *weltschmerz* of life easily. Then I know I am making time, but then it's

what I am doing. I recall an old saying: "If you live by the benchmark, you die by the benchmark." That's the benchmark theory: if you are those benchmarks, you die when they do.

A sense of regret and loss can pervade one's perception of daily life as well. Paul Bowles has put his finger right on it in *The Sheltering Sky*:

Because we don't know, we get to think of life as an inexhaustible well. Yet everything happens only a certain number of times, and a very small number, really. How many more times will you remember a certain afternoon of your childhood, some afternoon that's so deeply a part of your being that you can't even conceive of your life without it? Perhaps four or five times more. Perhaps not even that. How many more times will you watch the full moon rise? Perhaps twenty. And yet it all seems limitless.

This is not "inside" the world either, no matter how much one cultivates and nourishes one's regrets and losses. This is the philosophy of one who does not love. Like believers in clock time and benchmarks, it is the philosophy of one who believes in limits, who does not notice that time never runs out. It is another "surface" philosophy. The world has no limit.

My parents used to tease, "Are you making time with anyone?" not meaning sexual intercourse, nor "making out" either, but "getting somewhere" with another, stepping out with another in a serious way. Is this the first step of "stepping into the stream of history" with another, making time by making love? When I am making time I am always making it with others, in relationship with others, either building time or destroying time. In this making time lies, for me at least, despair, perpetual tiredness, living in the grey twilight of the ending day, recognition of loss as the preeminent character of life, hopelessness and helplessness. Making time looks like spending time and killing time just as it does for Moravia's character.

It's true, I think, that in the timeless world I sometimes inhabit, little petting, little intercourse, little adherence to the usual methods of making interpersonal history which I "used to" think were important, even vital, occur.

Where is this "time," this orientation to future and past, to things not here? Well, damned if I know. I can't find it. It doesn't seem to have much to do with the way the sun changes daily, or the way the winter seems to arrive after summer. It doesn't seem to have much to do with an intimate kinship (if one has it) with Baba Yaga. One has a heart connection with places, people, ideas, events. Whatever that means, it isn't in time. What I love, and what loves me - we are all inside it.

Living on the inside, no time passes. I don't mean, as Moravia might, that I don't notice its passage and ravages. It's not a matter of misperception. I mean,

time isn't. Inside the world is like inside the forest. It's all now. Taking a walk in the forest, making love in the forest, one is surrounded by the whole forest. Just so, the world. All the souls inhabit the world.

I can tell you a story about this, a whale story. Imagine yourself as a whale for a moment. At dawn, with an easy flick of your tail, you come to the surface to leap and look for the particles.

What particles come my way, I can eat. I breach into a misty pool that breathes up and breathes down. I float - another speckle in the misty world. I taste the love of the water. At night I ride in the boundary between the warm and the cool as it undulates up and down. I balance at the boundary and gently rise up and descend with the undulations of the wave. I move with the boundary and dream of the world the way it was and dream of the world the way it will be. Nothing is lost. I travel with the boundary and I feel the cold currents on my belly and the warmer waters on my back. I let myself be, I stay out of my way.

We live in a pod, my friends and I. When we lie on the surface, I see them spread out around me even though it is dark. I see them spread out around me, I hear them nudging and squealing and squeaking their way in and out of the cold water below the boundary and up and down. I hear them collecting and dispersing, coming up, going down, sometimes I am a part and sometimes I balance here and listen. Sometimes I can see them - we are a pack. We are the same pack as those in the sky who move and collect, disperse, go up and go down. We are a part of that pack, they are a part of us.

I do this every night. I turn my eye and I wonder at the deeps where even I do not go, I wonder at the cold depths and what might live down there. I see the lights, I see lights, I see lights everywhere in the night, the lights swarm and the lights come and go, slow and fast, they come up in a swarm and they go down in a throng, they come up, separate and disperse, they collect and they go down. I see the lights in the sea everywhere. Around me constantly there are lights.

And I live fully in the belly of God. I live quickly in the belly of God. I live directly in the dream of God's mind, I am a speckled particle in God's mind, just as the lights below me are luminous particles in the sea that come and go in the great dream of the sea, the great, the breathing dream of the sea.

Sometimes at night I lie on the surface of the swarming sea and I wonder what are the lights in the sky: the lights that resolutely turn across the whole sky or streak in an instant the same distance. And I know I live completely in the belly of God, in the dream of God, in the sea of God, in the breath of God, I live quickly here and I am taken care of. I balance on the surface or on the boundary and what comes, comes and what does not come, does not come.

Betimes at night I will sink to the surface and there I see the infinity of lights

on either side of me, the lights below, the lights above. Who knows which is below and which is above? In the middle of the ocean at night with no moon I float on the surface and see the same thing that I see if I were afloat on the boundary. I float on the surface of the sky and see the sea above me full of lights. The lights fall and rise, and streak across - the . . . the darkness. And what are they? What are those lights above, below, around, in any direction surrounding, what are those lights?

Quite simply, those are the lights of those who are there. Those lights shine from the beings who sink and fall, who swarm, disperse, and collect - those lights spangle from the beings with whom I live, with whom I have concourse. Those lights spring from the others who live in God's mind and God's belly, in God's breath, in God's sea. Those are the lights of everyone who lives.

Just as at night I lie upon the luminescent surface of the sky and feel God breathe, up and down, up and down, in and out, in and out, I breathe with God, I become one with God - just as I do, others share this sea with me, this vast ocean of living, the beings above, the beings below, they are not different, they are everywhere. We are everywhere. We, the shining being of God, we are God's being. We, who think God: without us there is no God, without the lights, without the breathing, without the resting in God's belly, there is no God. We make God. We live in God. We are God.

The sea is teeming. Imagine it! - full. Of us, of those smaller, of those larger. Imagine the sea, full. Imagine the sea around us, full, full of lights, full of lights, full of lights, imagine the lights go on forever, and on forever. Imagine yourself one of those lights, just one, one of the small ones, imagine resting here in the middle of the sea with me, swarming, collecting, and dispersing - breathing with the ocean, breathing in the ocean, breathing the ocean in to you, imagine living here with me, breathing. Imagine yourself here with the others, one of the lights that you see everywhere above and below, one of the sparkles that never end, the sparkles that fall to the depths, the sparkles that fall from the heights into the depths, from the top of the sea to the top of the sky, the sparkles that are everywhere, that come up and go down, that collect and disperse, imagine yourself here tonight with the moon, with the pack, with the lights, with all of us, one of us. Who are just like you, who are you. Imagine joining us. Come, can you imagine? Come. Come be part of us, belong with us, who live in the midst of God.

The moral?

Who would notice death? Rather, where is any death? God would not, could not, excommunicate us. Where is God? Right now. Always.

Who am "I"? "I" am not in time. There is no time "in" which to be. But there is the world to be in - a vast, present presence that breathes us all in and out. The same birds fly overhead in augury.

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