

# Losing Track of Time

*Jonathan Greenberg*

My Year of Rest and Relaxation

Whenever I woke up, night or day, I'd shuffle through the bright marble foyer of my building and go up the block and around the corner where there was a bodega that never closed.<sup>1</sup>

For a long time I used to go to bed early.<sup>2</sup>

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The first of these sentences begins Ottessa Moshfegh's 2018 novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*; the second, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. More accurately, the second sentence begins C. K. Scott Moncrieff's translation of Proust, whose French reads, "Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure." D. J. Enright emends the translation to "I would go to bed"; Lydia Davis and Google Translate opt for "I went to bed." What the translators famously wrestle with is how to render Proust's ungrammatical combination of the completed action of the

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That is Wells's unnamed "Time Traveler," a late-Victorian inventor possessed, however foolishly, of his age's confidence in science and optimism about the fu-

ly compressed as *The Year of the Dog*, identifies a timespan in the middle ranges. A year is a period over which interest or excitement in a topic or a story can be sustained. The author, I suspect, had in the back of her mind the popular food memoir *The Year of the Pig* (2009), a title that itself riffs on the Peter Weir film *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982). Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) may be lurking there too, and perhaps another memoir of travel and lifestyle, Peter Mayle's *The Year of the Flood* (1989). Of course, none of these titles, other than Moshfegh's, actually belongs to a year, yet

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ward the creation of a work of art. A brief prehibernation job in a Soho gallery, taken on for no other purpose than “to pass the time,” exposes the contemporary art world as shallow, voyeuristic, and gimmicky:

On a low pedestal in the corner, a small sculpture by the Brahams Brothers— a pair of toy monkeys made using human pubic hair. Each monkey had a little erection poking out of its fur. The penises were made of white titanium and had cameras in them positioned to take crotch shots of the viewer. The images were downloaded to a Web site. A specific password to log in to see the crotch shots cost a hundred dollars. The monkeys themselves cost a quarter million for the pair. (39)

Moshfegh’s narrator is no Lily Briscoe, and this book seems unlikely to end with an affirmation that she has had her vision.

And what about social ambition, the “dominant dynamic of plot,” the “force that drives the protagonist forward” in so many nineteenth-century novels?<sup>17</sup> It is reduced to the contemporary discourse of self-care and self-help, which feebly disguises a consumerist agenda. Reva, a viewer of *Sex and Drugs and Money* and reader of *Sex and Drugs and Money*, speaks like “a Hallmark card” (165) and offers pop-psychology slogans that urge accommodation to a worthless society: “Take some time off and think about your next move. Oprah says we women rush into decisions because we don’t have faith that something better will come along. And that’s how we get stuck in dissatisfying careers and marriages.” To which the narrator responds, “I’m not making a career move” (55). For her, it’s not the move but the whole game that’s the problem. Reva, bound by the norms and narratives of her gender and class, can only counsel a restorative break in the action— rest and relaxation— but cannot envision an end to action itself. At one point Reva leaves a note that reads, “Today is the first day of the rest of your life! xoxo.” The narrator wants none of it:

I had no idea what I’d said to inspire Reva to leave me such a patronizing note of encouragement. Maybe I’d made a pact with her in my blackout: “Let’s be happy! Let’s live every day like it’s our last!” Barf. (240)

The slogans of self-care— and, with them, any larger, memoir-ish plotline of self-realization that they suggest— are dismissed as hollow and commercial. This novel has no more interest in advancing a career than in arranging a marriage.

**T**he critic Robert Douglas-Fairhurst tells us that “a question at the heart of all picaresque fiction” is the one asked by Dickens’s Mr. Pickwick: “Where shall we go to next?”<sup>18</sup> Henry Fielding, in his own picaresque, *Tom Jones*, makes explicit the analogy between reading and the adventure of travel, praising the gaps between chapters in his book as a source of cognitive restoration. Chapter breaks are, in his conceit, sites for rest and relaxation: “those little Spaces between our Chapters may be looked upon as an Inn or Resting-Place,

where [the reader] may stop and take a Glass or any other Refreshment as it pleases him.”<sup>19</sup> But a handful of chapter breaks notwithstanding, *W* takes no such pleasure in either forward motion or refreshment. It is the very opposite of the Pickwickian picaresque. Shortly before the narrator’s hibernation begins, some interns at the Soho gallery ask her Pickwick’s very question: what to do next. “What next?” she thinks. “I couldn’t imagine” (42). There is in this book no next move, no next episode. The story never gets up from the space between life chapters, never moves on from its comfortable Resting-Place. The gallery job is worthwhile solely because it allows the narrator to take furtive naps in a supply closet, where she experiences the very best kind of sleep, a “black emptiness, an infinite space of nothingness” (39). This is a cognitive obliteration akin to what Proust’s speaker describes in his opening pages as the “abyss of not-being,” the *néant* that Roger Shattuck grandly describes as a state of being “abandoned to the point of elimination from the universe.”<sup>20</sup> And like Proust’s narrator emerging from his *néant*, Moshfegh’s finds coming to consciousness to be an agonizing reconstruction of the cosmos. She, however, makes clear that she’d be just as happy not to see the universe restored: “My entire life flashed before my eyes in the worst way possible, my mind refilling itself with all my lame memories, every little thing that had brought me to where I was” (40).

The future appears foreclosed, then, but Moshfegh’s character is still burdened with a past: those lame but deeply rooted memories that, upon waking, spontaneously regenerate to fill her mind. She wants to lose track of these past experiences every bit as much as she wants to fend off the necessity of any action that will bring on the future. Yet much of the novel consists of her recitation of the very memories she scorns. In fact, in the unfolding of these prehibernation memories, the alert reader might notice a slippage or authorial sleight of hand: this narrative is not a present-tense diary or, like Molly Bloom’s interior monologue, a real-time unspooling of thought, and so (if we give the matter much thought) we narrafrack onarr rratithe





The punitive and sadistic mother figure resurfaces in another involuntary memory of humiliation, this one suffered at the hands of a college art history teacher. In the memory, the narrator arrives to class late, having broken the heel of an expensive pair of “black suede stiletto boots.” The instructor punishes her—ostensibly for her tardiness but actually for her beauty—by having her “stand at the front of the classroom” with her “left foot arched like a Barbie’s” to be critiqued by her classmates as “a performance piece.” The well-trained Columbia undergrads determine that the narrator has been “broken by the male gaze” as the narrator passes the time by contemplating time, listening to the clock ticking and observing the cycle of the seasons through the window as yellow leaves fall to the sidewalk (189).

If the feminist art teacher reembodies the unloving mother, Whoopi Goldberg, the narrator’s favorite movie star, provides the nurturing maternal presence that the birth mother failed to offer. Goldberg is a benevolent if uncomfortably racialized mammy figure who, the narrator says, “took care of me after my mother

hover between wisdom and platitude; this novel certainly gives us grounds to believe that life in the “modern age,” exposed as “gauche and ridiculous” by Whoopi Goldberg and Ottessa Moshfegh alike, is unnatural and unhealthy. What cultural

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sleep, the narrator manages to travel to Long Island for Reva's mother's funeral and even musters a few weak gestures of concern. After the funeral, she gradually comes to miss her friend, her "whiny, moronic analgesic" (205) who, she realizes, is at least as effective as a pill for muting pain. Satire, whether it takes the stance of misanthropy ("I hated talking to people") or the catascopia of Whoopi Goldberg (laughing at "the whole production"), typically responds to the world with judgment and critique, leaving antagonisms unresolved and concluding with a retreat from the social itself (Swift's Gulliver to his stables, Austen's Mr. Bennet to his library). The broader, more encompassing perspectives of the novel, in contrast, have typically been seen to produce a "comedy of forgiveness," generating plots that reconcile antagonisms and illustrate a character's growth.<sup>30</sup> For this reason, the beginnings of the narrator's ethical engagement with Reva also suggests the beginnings of her own psychological healing. During the trip to Long Island, she tries to encounter her grief even as she characterizes it through the (satirized) discourse of pop psychology: "I couldn't cry. None of that penetrated deep enough to press whatever button controlled my 'outpouring of sorrow'" (145).

Thus, the restoration of libido enlivens the plot, the ethical recognition of Reva warms the heart, the effort to confront loss cracks the satirical veneer of the prose. But at the same time, these signs of progress threaten to make this quirky anti-novel into something decidedly more conventional, to resolve a situation we have come to value for being unresolvable. In the paradoxical logic of the novel's premise, the unconscious restarting of the plot also constitutes a reentry into time and an accommodation to "the whole production" of late capitalist social life. It is as though we were seeing *Bartleby* take up his pen and resume his work as a scrivener. The narrator's gestures of compassion and self-reflection, however feeble, undercut her rejection of narratives of healing and the insipid culture from which they spring.

For this reason, the concluding movements of the novel generate a measure of friction, a sense that the reader must suddenly shift gears and accede not simply to a plot but to a comic rather than a tragic or satiric one, accepting a narrative of rebirth, regeneration, and reconciliation. This final phase begins with the narrator's effort to double down on the abolition of plot, to undertake a new, more intensive stage of hibernation that will be exactly one hundred and twenty days long: a "solution to my problems," she says, that "landed in my mind like a hawk on a cliff" (254). The VCR broken, her possessions given away, her cell phone thrown into the East River, the narrator enlists a conceptual artist from the SoHo gallery as a "jailkeeper" (254) to prevent her from interrupting her slumbers by venturing out into the world. Yet this suppression of plot is intended to serve its rebirth: "I could sleep myself into a new life" (260). The doubling down on hibernation only intensifies the paradox of the plotless novel, generating a will-she-or-won't-she suspense worthy of the third act of a Hollywood film. Symptomatically, the nov-

el begins to mark its sections with a rigorous tracking of time, down to dates on the calendar: February 19, February 25, May 28. And the hibernation proves truly therapeutic. The narrator realizes “that this was the end of something” (274), wakes up “on June 1, 2001,” and understands that she is “alive” (276). She even picks up DeLillo’s *Underworld* and reads it “cover to cover” (278).

The intrapsychic resolution enables an existential insight about the nature of time. During a visit to the Met in September, staring at a still life, the narrator grasps that she is now able to contemplate her own future:

The notion of my future suddenly snapped into focus: it didn’t exist yet. I was making it, standing there, breathing, fixing the air around my body with stillness, trying to capture something— a thought, I guess— as though such a thing were possible, as though I believed in the delusion described in those paintings— that time could be contained, held captive. (286)

She reaches out and touches the painting, “simply to prove to myself that there was no God stalking my soul. Time was not immemorial. Things were just *there*” (286– 287). I read this insight— a revelation of meaning, to use Brooks’s phrase— as an acceptance of her own limited existence in time, an understanding that “still life” is possible only in art. (Even the paintings themselves are “just things, objects, withering toward their own inevitable demise” [285].) The recognition of temporal limitation is also an affirmation of the openness of the future.

Whether this insight resolves or dodges the crisis that launched the year of rest and relaxation is hard to say. It appears that in *Underworld*, what novels do, *Underworld* does what novels do. Being an antinovel turns out to be another way of being a novel. In seeking to lose track of time, the novel attunes us to our being in time; in depriving character of action, it reveals each person’s being as continuous with (yet not identical to) her lame memories and her not-yet-existent future.

**I**n any case, no definitive judgment can be rendered without consideration of the final brief chapter, which re-immerses narrator and reader in the larger world of historical time. On September 11, the narrator watches, records, and re-watches the horrifying scene during which she believes she sees Reva leap from the North Tower: “There she is, a human being, diving into the unknown, and she wide awake” (289). An individual act of courage in facing death returns us to the idea from the novel’s opening that “things were always happening in New York.” World events, having crept into the novel only through the white noise of decontextualized news snippets, finally come to the fore. Here Moshfegh seems to borrow not from Proust or Joyce but from Mann, whose *Confessions of Felix Krull* ends abruptly when Hans Castorp, after seven years of rest and relaxation, is awakened by the start of World War I: “That historical thunder-peal, of which we speak with bated

breath, made the foundations of the earth to shake; but for us it was the shock that fired the mine beneath the magic mountain and set our sleeper ungently outside the gates.”<sup>31</sup> The war for Mann is a moment of historical rupture, Genette’s “singular” writ large. It decisively cleaves the past from the present, sealing Cas-torp’s story hermetically in the past while leaving his future poignantly uncertain.

September 11, 2001, a date on the calendar remembered for its uniquely confused temporality of events watched and rewatched, has come to represent in the popular imagination a similar rupture, the restarting of history after the supposed “end of history” achieved by the Western triumph in the Cold War. This popular narrative— 9/11 as the end of the end of history— took on, as we know, a moralistic and politically reactionary coloring as the attacks became a “wake-up call” to a sleeping and complacent nation. But this novel’s insistence, perhaps in spite of itself, on the inevitability of plot and the continuing antagonisms of world-historical conflict is not itself a reactionary gesture. In fact, as a product of the Trump years, the novel’s recognition of the persistence of historical change might instead be seen as a comment on our current moment’s surge of populist authoritarianisms and the stressing of democratic society, as though it is reminding us that we cannot take liberal progress for granted. Likewise, its almost quaint recall of the early, low-tech years of the Internet creates a temporal double vision in which the absence of now-ubiquitous smartphones, streaming video, and social media remind us that our narrator’s story has now happened. The “now” of the novel is past. A novel about rejecting plot somehow found a plot. But while novels end, history continues. Things were happening in New York City; they always are. In the words of the whiny, moronic, analgesic Reva, “Things are moving forward. I guess time is like that— it just keeps going.”

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