

From Eternity¹

I

TIME AS THE NEGATION OF ETERNITY

There is the same relation between eternity and duration as between duration and becoming. For we can say of duration that it both abolishes becoming and implies it. It abolishes it in that what endures seems to cease becoming. And it implies it since duration is a succession of moments like becoming but which instead of remaining independent of one another are integrated. The relations between duration and eternity are of the same order, for eternity seems to abolish duration and render it unnecessary since what is eternal has nothing to preserve, and it nonetheless implies it since whatever is eternal is for us also what endures forever, and no being who lives in time would know how to represent it otherwise.

At the outset it seems we are disposed to define eternity purely as the negation of time. And because we have experience of time alone we understand [how] eternity can appear not only as a mystery but as a chimera. Moreover [those who are] committed to affirming it but resign themselves to knowing and saying nothing about it and [those who] consider this eternity as the negation of every feature of reality, such as we are able to understand it, will not fear considering it as another name for “nothingness”. Yet we need to challenge these

¹ Chapter Twelve, contained in Book Four “Time and Eternity”: the final chapter in *Of Time and Eternity*.

notions that appear to contain nothing but negativity.² [Eternity is like] infinity, of which Descartes has admirably shown that the finite is merely its negation and that the fundamental affirmation of metaphysics resides precisely in [infinity's] primacy with respect to the finite, which is what is defined but can [exist] only within and in rapport with [infinity]. But whoever posits the finite does not on that account obliterate infinity. We must say on the contrary that he necessarily posits all finites³ in the same stroke, both in their actuality and their possibility. The rapport between eternity and time, which is only another expression of the rapport between the finite and infinity [*sic*]⁴, must be conceived in the same way. [. . .]

II

THE EXPERIENCE OF ETERNITY [IS] IMPLICATED IN THE EXPERIENCE OF TIME

It is important first of all not to consider eternity as beyond time, or again, not to introduce between time and eternity a break such that in order to pass from one domain to the other we would have to suppose all the constituent conditions of our existence abolished. For eternity upholds time, and time seems to negate it only because it also reveals it to us.⁵ The study of the various phases of time and the rapport which unites them has been singularly instructive in this regard. For it reveals to us not only the primacy of the present⁶ with respect to the future and the past but the impossibility of detaching the past and the future from the present [and] the necessity of defining each of them by a certain relation between two different forms of presence, i.e. between a perceived presence and an imaginary presence: such a relation changes only in direction, depending upon whether it is a question of the past or the future. But neither the perception nor the image nor the relation that unites them can be separated from a given mode of presence [without being abolished]: and these modes are distinguished from one another by the quality that defines them rather than by the presence that is common to them. [As for this common] presence, time changes nothing: it

² At the date of this work (1945) Lavelle would have known of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. It is difficult not to see his comment as pertaining to Sartre's philosophy.

³ Whatever has a finite existence.

⁴ For strict parallelism the terms in this last phrase should be reversed.

⁵ An important (if awkwardly stated) point: if eternity did not somehow interpenetrate time we would know nothing of it: time itself testifies to eternity, e.g. most obviously in "timeless moments" but (as will be seen) also in the inmost character of time's various phases.

⁶ Which Lavelle regards as the temporal mode that best conveys the sense of eternity.

is nothing more than a certain order among different modes of presence, which prevents us from realising certain co-presences.

It is true that we always oppose presence to absence but that is because we consider the standard of existence provided by perception. However this absence is itself only another presence which we define otherwise.⁷ And the distinction between these different forms of presence – rather, the transformation of one into the other – appears to be the condition of participation and the sole means we have of shaping our destiny and giving it its true meaning. For indeed it is not enough to level down into the same presence that of the [perceived] object, that of the possible and that of memory; what is important is precisely to show not only that there is an order of succession among these different modes of presence – which is time itself – but⁸ that [every] form of existence is obliged to assume them, one after another, and that we cannot separate them from each other without mutilating it. [. . .] Nothing is more important or more misunderstood than this liaison among the three phases of time, than this necessity for all forms of being to traverse the same temporal cycle in the same order, without which their essence could not be realised. There is here one law [for phenomena and existences alike] which governs pure becoming [as well as] the very exercise of freedom, owing to which we will doubtless not be surprised if the appearance of phenomena is inseparable from participation and appears as the counterpart of the free act. This analysis allows us to understand how *instead of imagining a separation between time and eternity it is on the contrary necessary to consider all temporal existence as implying a kind of circulation within eternity.*

III

THE CHOICE BETWEEN TIME AND ETERNITY⁹

Even though time and eternity alike span the entire domain of being – since we have two words and doubtless two different notions to characterise it – it is important to seek their relatedness and the [thread] that joins them. Nothing is simpler than to define each term by the negation of the other: nonetheless it is necessary to show how in a certain fashion every negation carries within it [the very thing] it denies.¹⁰ It will not do therefore to say that there are two absolutely different worlds such that we need to quit one in order to enter the other: the world of time, which is the only reality for those who [rely] solely on the

⁷ Heidegger and Sartre make this same point.

⁸ I have here omitted a non-parallel phrase: “not forgetting that”.

⁹ Certainly one of the most important sections in *Of Time and Eternity*. Its insights are noteworthy whether or not readers subscribe to Lavelle’s full-blown conception of time. I translate it in full.

¹⁰ See “Freedom and the Interval”, Section B.

experience of things, and the world of eternity, which drives the other into non-existence for those who [rely] solely on the testimony of pure spirit. For these two worlds are given to us at once: we cannot have the experience of time if we do not carry it back to the eternity it pre-supposes and divides, and if there is an experience of eternity we can have consciousness of it only within and by means of time.

It is [futile] to think that we can express the rapport between time and eternity by saying that eternity is a duration that neither begins nor ends. [This] is only an indirect way of considering eternity less as a negation of time than as a form of existence transcendent to time, of which we could not strictly say that it either passes or endures. It is necessary however to recognise that everything comes to pass and endures within it. But we are used to considering time as a fall: we say “to fall into time”¹¹. And it seems to us that there no longer [remains] within temporal existence anything of this eternity from which we are separated save that kind of reminiscence mentioned by Plato¹² which nourishes all the intellect’s actions. But doubtless here is [an] indication that eternity and time can be contrasted precisely because consciousness itself constantly [brings them together]. Only, this union depends on an act that is up to us to carry out and that [can] flag at any instant: then time becomes for us a chain and eternity a mirage. Nonetheless eternity assures this continuity of moments in time without which there would be no time: [likewise] time, through the intermediary of the present (which makes sense only in relation to time), allows us to have access to eternity. It is therefore not completely true to say either that we fall from eternity into time or that we quit time in order to enter eternity. Time and eternity are so tightly-joined that we cannot separate them. *But it is freedom that joins them:* and [for that reason] consciousness can sometimes forget about the eternity that founds it, as if only a world of temporal appearances [existed] for it, and sometimes have regard only for eternity, without considering that it must be manifest in time [for us] to take possession of it.

It is easy now to dispel those prejudices that [turn] eternity [into] an existence prior to time, from which time has separated us, or an existence after time that we desire one day to obtain. For time can be born only from and within eternity: before and after [occur] only in time but *there is nothing that can be called “before” or “after” in relation to time [itself]*¹³. So, far from saying that time breaks away from eternity, it is necessary to say that time itself is eternal, that it is the very means by which participation endlessly brings forth new existences within eternity. Because we are used to considering existence on the model of the object we want eternity to be the perfection of a stationary existence. [But] then, though

¹¹ The phrase is of course not common in English, though events are said to “fall on” certain dates.

¹² The reference is to Plato’s “anamnesis” or primordial recollection, i.e. remembrance of the source-condition, e.g. in *Meno* 81B-86C, *Phaedo* 72B-73D and the *Phaedrus* (246-251) charioteer allegory.

¹³ Time considered as a whole. Likewise physicists hold that nothing can be said to have transpired before the universe began, i.e. before the Big Bang.

existence can be apprehended only in the present, and though eternity is for us a flawless present, we nonetheless cannot forget that the present is also for us the site of all change, so that through a kind of reversal we more willingly imagine eternity in the form of a kind of [lost] past—precisely when change has begun for us—or in the form of a future that will abolish all change and mark the end of all our tribulations. Time would be a kind of insertion between this lost past and that hoped-for future; and it is [no small] theological problem to explain how we could have separated ourselves from eternity and how we can reconquer it. Yet this double procession itself would be unintelligible if it were not the constant means by which our being is fulfilled, i.e. “eternalised”. Time is unfolded [inside] eternity. It is through [time] that [eternity] acts, i.e. is realised. It is therefore idolatry to think that there is an eternity this or that side of time which could exclude or disown time. *Eternity is nothing if it is not for us a perpetual during*¹⁴. And we feel it [clearly] when—attempting to define this eternity from which time would have torn us, or that eternity into which it would [ultimately] re-plunge us—we realise that we do not manage to distinguish [eternity] from nothingness: [eternity] wins back existence only in the measure that we borrow from the experience of time the elements needed to form an idea of it. Our experience of time is altogether and indivisibly an experience of eternity. Eternity sustains and nourishes all that [our experience] has [in the way] of being, i.e. of actuality; and the very opposition it allows us to set up between becoming and duration allows us in the same stroke to distinguish at every instant between things that perish (and will make us perish with them, if we wish to be acquainted with them alone) and those that do not perish and with which our I becomes united as soon as it consents to be attached to them. *Eternity needs to be chosen by a free act; it must always be consented to or refused*. And whoever refuses it still borrows from it the wherewithal to trace the furrow of his own becoming within the limits that keep it confined.

We therefore choose at each instant between eternity and time. We draw near eternity at each instant. And for that [reason] time and eternity are inseparable. It is, dare we say, by means of the temporal that we penetrate the non-temporal at every instant. And in each thing there is a face turned toward becoming and a face turned toward eternity. So eternity is not a world apart, and everything in the world can serve to reveal it to us. If the intersection of time and eternity is realised in the instant we can say that the instant is effectively the privileged site where our freedom is exercised since within it we can choose between becoming, where material things are endlessly carried away, or eternity, where spirit endlessly illumines us, sustains us, inspires us and gives meaning to

¹⁴ The word in question, *pendant*, signifies “hanging” or “pending” as an adjective, “pendant” as a noun and “during” as a preposition. I assume the author is using the preposition as a noun: hence “whiling”. Interestingly Martin Heidegger, in his 1955-56 lecture series published in *Der Satz vom Grund*, speaks of being—as well as of humankind’s proper comportment toward it—as a *whiling*. In very many respects *Der Satz vom Grund* provides a provocative complement and counterpoint to Lavelle’s philosophy.

all the moments of becoming. For that [reason] as well there is nothing more ambiguous than the rule that commands us to live in the instant: for that can mean either having regard only for what passes or never being separate from this eternal act – forever the same and forever new – which we rediscover throughout all that passes.¹⁵ In the consciousness of this act resides the experience we have of eternity: we are then beyond becoming in the midst of becoming itself (which we do not try to hold back) and beyond duration in the midst of duration (which we constantly engender). We do not let ourselves be diverted either by the past or the future, which separate us from the present solely because we regret that the first is no longer a sensible presence and that the second has not yet become [one]; however we then rightly become the unhappy slaves of becoming, not only by forever taking leave of existence such as it is given to us but by indefinitely breaking that current rapport between existence and eternity which allows us at each instant to constitute the one while participating in the other. But we need to make a different use of the past and future: the instant is precisely the point where they are combined with each other. And this juncture itself allows us to [shed] a new light on the rapport between time and eternity.

IV

THE RAPPORT BETWEEN ETERNITY AND THE VARIOUS PHASES OF TIME

Eternity is contemporaneous with all times. Moreover it seems we cannot consider any of time's phases without discovering a kind of echo of eternity. We should not be surprised that the past enjoys a certain privilege in this regard: for it seems we are inclined to define eternity as that which has always been. We cannot be mistaken that the past expresses this idea of completion or accomplishment about which we can change nothing and for which being is [the same as] being known – which exhibits the essential features of eternity for most [people]. Eternity would be like an immense completed past revealed to us only by degrees so that the future would be for us only a trick of perspective and the result of our finitude. It often happens that the objections we direct against eternity precisely bear upon such a conception in which the future is excluded, or at least loses its independence with respect to the past and is subordinated to it, while it always seems to precede and to produce it¹⁶.

But we will say that the future reveals to us another aspect of eternity, to which one can try to reduce it as well. For eternity cannot in any way be

¹⁵ See Section V of "Presence Regained" for an early statement of this same idea.

¹⁶ At least in Lavelle's "order of existence". See "The Sense of Time", section VII.

considered something ready-made. *It never had a present with regard to which it could be considered as being past.* [From the perspective] of every being that lives in time [eternity] is that which infinitely surpasses it yet from which it constantly draws the condition of its own development. For [such a being] eternity is a limitless possibility to which it is always unequal. And it can imagine [eternity] only in the direction of the future as a kind of finishing-up of time. Only, eternity is not this adjourned future; for it can be such only for us: it is that future considered as already present, doubtless not in the given that it will one day be for us but in the very act that founds our participation and [in] the very power we have of one day converting it into a given.

Hence it seems that the very arguments upon which are based the identification of eternity with the past, defined according to its perfect immutability, or with the future, defined according to its infinite fecundity, (as well as the criticisms that prevent us from accepting [these arguments on the grounds that] the past follows a given presence or that the future anticipates it) should also invite us to consider eternity as inseparable from the present. Unfortunately it so happens that though this thesis finds a certain audience it is because there is for us, in the present, a reality that no one casts in doubt, which is that of the object, so that one gladly imagines eternity as an infinite object that is neither divided nor slips away. But we should not be surprised that this same thesis immediately appears chimerical precisely because the essence of the object is to be an appearance that exists only for us, in such a fashion that it must constantly be detached from us, in space as well as in time, so as not to be confused with us. There we are cast into a phenomenality, completely external and transitory, that is the very reverse of eternity.

Only, the word “presence” does not uniquely characterise the presence of the object. Rather, there is presence of the object only through *an act of presence to self, of which we can say that it is the veritable mediation between time and eternity.*¹⁷ The pre-eminence of the present in relation to the two other phases of time, the necessity of considering them as being derived from it through a kind of disjunction, the impossibility of considering them independently of presence, or as anything other than two of its modes—[these realisations] naturally lead consciousness to accept a kind of affinity among being, presence and eternity. We know that absence is for us like nothingness; and we do not ask ourselves whether it is not sometimes the condition of a more perfect spiritual presence than the simple presence of things.¹⁸ We never think that the latter might be for us a sign of our limitation and infirmity, [as well as] a simple means of obtaining the other. Hence when we speak of an eternal presence it often seems to us that it

¹⁷ Presence to self—presumably identical with engagement in the instant—at once occasions a genuine experience of (temporal) objects and a conscious connection with the eternal act. It could be said that before this there are no real objects—only a blind confluence with activities and things—and no eternal (i.e. internal) dimension.

¹⁸ Heidegger’s 1943 “Postscript” to his 1929 essay “What is Metaphysics?” makes the same point.

is similar to [a] sensible presence we go on desiring when we do not have it, or regretting when we no longer have it. The future and the past, which are the marks of absence, would then be abolished. But it is clear that such a conception is unintelligible because sensible presence has meaning solely between the future from which it emerges and the past that shelters it. On the other hand it is not by abolishing time, [or] that profound revelation which bears upon the nature of being [as] possibility or memory, that we will be able to raise ourselves from temporal being to eternal being. The celebrated formula

And the solitary present at [its, his, her] feet reposes¹⁹

is thus full of uncertainty for it suggests the idea of a given presence rather than of a presence we give ourselves. We seem to forget—to the profit of the present thing—the very act that renders it present to us. We gain nothing however if we imagine a spiritual presence in the guise of an infinite memory or an infinite possibility. For none of the forms of presence can be eliminated: they are all of-a-piece with one another and can be conceived only in their mutual rapport. Will we say that we can no longer draw any line of demarcation between the various orders of presence within the eternal presence? But then it is to be feared that such a presence is purely abstract and impoverishes reality such as it is offered to us in time, rather than enriches it.

No other recourse remains for us than to contemplate the present in its most acute form, i.e. in the instant, which we very well know always plays a double role. For it is firstly the passage that turns everything into a phenomenon and introduces it into becoming: and for that [reason] there is, so we believe, an infinite plurality of instants defined—it is true—less by the passage than by the terms of passage. But [the instant] is also the very act that makes the passage forever current regardless of the terms that pass. Now this act is always identical. It expresses [being's rapport with] the limited and imperfect forms that have a momentary coexistence with it, whence they endlessly chase one another, at least if we consider only the order of their becoming without caring to know whether this act sustains their possibility before they are realised and their image after they have disappeared. [In other words] this act is contemporaneous with all time's phases, not because it annihilates them to the benefit of one of them but because, in offering itself for participation, it is divided in such a fashion as to allow for the contrast between the possible and the realised and for the indefinite conversion of one into the other. *For that [reason] the source of participation, before time appears, is the eternal instant; and as soon as participation has begun the instant is*

¹⁹ I am unfamiliar with this “celebrated formula”. Lacking a context I cannot translate it more exactly.

where our own act is exerted, engendering time through the conversion of the possible into the realised.

In reality neither the past nor the future is properly in time: but the instant of eternity in which consciousness effects their dissociation is the same as the instant of participation in which it effects their transmutation; and time is nothing more than the double effect of this dissociation and transmutation. It is therefore not surprising that we reduce time to a series of instants if we contemplate the states that pass through [the instant] one after another, and not the unique act which gives them their actuality. *This very ambiguity of the instant, defined at once by a temporal relation and by a trans-temporal act, creates the liaison between time and eternity.* But it would be an error to think that the act itself can be engaged in time, though it necessarily drives back into time—into before and after—all the states that limit it, [which] the condition of a participatory being requires [the being] to actualise one after the other.

V

CREATIVE ETERNITY, OR TIME FOREVER REBORN

The link we have just established between time and eternity—which obliges us to consider eternity not as time negated but as time's very source, as a present that instead of excluding the past and future allows them to be contrasted and joined at the level of participation—delivers us from [the] idea of a stationary eternity deprived of all connection with time so that a mysterious fall would [have to] be invoked in order to explain the transition from eternity to time, and a mysterious deliverance in order to explain the return from time to eternity²⁰. But if [a] lost eternity is [what] we need to regain we can ask ourselves what [purpose] our sojourn in time has managed to serve, what transgression in eternity made us to lose it, [and] what merit is acquired in time that can redeem us from time.²¹ Additionally we cannot discern within this eternity from which time is absent [anything that might serve as] the basis for whatever differentiation. For it seems to us that time's nature is precisely to liberate all individual existence, to grant it a certain independence with respect to the total being, to allow it to give itself its own being through a process of auto-realisation.

²⁰ The Fall and our possible salvation from it are of course central Christian tenets—about which this Christian philosopher expresses doubts! The following authorial note makes amends by recasting Christian dogma in a present-centered framework.

²¹ Author's note: "We understand without difficulty that it is necessary to express the connection between time and eternity in the language of time. But no one doubts that here is a veritable contradiction and that Adam's fault and the act of redemption begin again in each man and at every instant."

The notion of creation therefore can be dissociated from time only with difficulty. But if eternity, instead of being considered time's negation, calls for time as the condition without which it would be an eternity of death and not an eternity of life, [and] if time, from its side, implies [eternity] through the role it requires us to give the present, which not only contains all time's phases but actualises their transmutation through an act which in its turn participates in the eternity of the pure act—then *through time eternity shows us its properly creative function*. It is said of time that it is at once destroyer, preserver and creator of all-that-is; but it is destroyer only when reduced to becoming and separated from eternity; it is preserver in that it replaces becoming with duration, through which eternity gathers the totality of becoming into itself so to speak; and it is creative in that eternity constantly contributes to the present, without [the latter] managing to equal it.

Hence the affinity between eternity and the infinite. Not that eternity can be confounded with the infinity of time; because time is not infinite but merely indefinite. Eternity is therefore neither the totality of time nor time's negation but time forever reborn—not exactly its perpetual starting-over but the omnipresent source of this starting-over. Eternity is the origin of the indefiniteness of space as well as that of time; and these two are inseparable. [. . .]

[. . .] So we can indeed define time [as] the genesis of everything but we will then have to say that eternity itself is the genesis of time. It is beyond [the created world] only because it constantly produces it. Consequently it is always identical and always new. It is neither an immense time that enfolds all times nor that immutability of being which precedes creation and into which it is resolved. It is that indivisible point from which creation constantly gushes forth [. . .].

VIII

DEATH AND RESURRECTION²²

To hope that we might one day prevent [becoming] from fleeing us is to be still attached to becoming. For it precisely *must*²³ flee us so we [can] discover,

²² Author's note: "Sections VIII and IX of the present chapter are in no way intended to give a visionary description of the I's condition after death. What will come after death cannot be for us the object of any experience since it is an absolute 'after' that is the 'after' of all experience. If there is an experience of eternity it is therefore realised in the course of our lives. Now, what we have tried to show is that each term engaged in becoming is bound to die so as to be resurrected in a spiritual form and that the nature of spirit is to do away with the difference between past and future so as to disclose to us an eternal reality that imparts to itself an inexhaustible [momentum]. Moreover no one doubts that eternity enfolds time in its entirety so that each instant of time should allow us to penetrate [eternity] if we stop attaching ourselves to what perishes in order to cleave purely to the act that survives and '*essentialises*' it so to speak."

²³ My italics.

or give ourselves, that spiritual inwardness which raises us above phenomenality. Becoming is inseparable from all participatory existence, i.e. from our own existence: it is the means by which it is constituted, which permits it to be actualised, to undergo the effects of its action and to enter into rapport with all other modes of participated existence. But if it is becoming it is [such] in order to testify that it cannot be confused with our being itself: since it only ever applies to the phenomenon it demonstrates rather clearly that [we here have to do with] a being that is only for [the sake of] another²⁴, that has no existence by itself; and if it constantly passes, constantly draws away from me, it is in order to turn me from the temptation to confuse myself with it.

However I cannot be content with a purely negative attitude where becoming is concerned, for becoming constitutes the material of my experience: through it the world's richness is expressed; [it] constantly nourishes my participatory activity, measures its level, constantly supplies it with new objects [and] ultimately builds up a common world of manifestation where beings enter into rapport with one another by way of their mutual limitation. But this world that dies at each instant is also resurrected at each instant: for the spirit²⁵ gives it a sense of duration only by transforming it into its own substance so to speak. As long as we can dispose things, [as long] as we take a sensible pleasure [in doing so], we are incapable of discovering their essence and penetrating their meaning. For that [to occur] they must cease to be [merely] things for us.²⁶ [The same is true] of events and even of persons, who often acquire spiritual reality for us only at the moment their corporal presence is undone. [As] it happens we are quickly distracted from this spiritual presence for our attention does not bend back toward our inwardness²⁷ for very long: it constantly seeks some new body to settle upon. But [there is] always a moment of lucidity and inner purity when the things that have disappeared, the beings who have died, [rekindle] within us an almost supernatural light. Hence we see that *the banishment of the sensible appears as the very condition of spiritual existence*.

Thus is disclosed to us the true end²⁸ of the body. For [without its existence] we would be reduced to the sterile efforts of a purely subjective imagination. But it is also necessary that nothing [finally] remains of it so that the act through which we make it live again, within us, [can] unveil to us the full import of which it was the bearer. Nonetheless becoming has a fecund character within us precisely on the condition that we do not regret [its fading] at each instant: indeed it must slip away in order to become a revelation of the real and of ourselves. No one will dare maintain that this transformation of becoming

²⁴ A public datum that can be observed by anyone, not only by another person but also oneself.

²⁵ Or mind.

²⁶ In the interest of clarity I have softened the author's phrasing with the word "merely". But his own "hard" speaking should not be overlooked: there can be no "things" in intimate experience.

²⁷ Literally, intimacy.

²⁸ Both as purpose and as destination. The author's word is in fact "*destination*".

impoverishes it: because duration—of which we can say equally that it permits [becoming] to subsist in time (if we want there to be a spiritual life in time) and that it rips it from time (if time appears inseparable from material becoming)—does not have as a toll a kind of schematisation of memory that becomes at length first a knowing and soon after a name. That is true only for those who consider memory itself a thing, a given submitted to the law of wear and tear. But memory eminently resides in the act of a thinking which the object's presence blinded so to speak, while furnishing it however with matter it could not do without. This act is now liberated; [which] is also why it not only allows everything that perception implicitly contained to be raised to the light of consciousness but [. . .]²⁹ constantly adds to it; for it turns it into the object of an analysis and of a creative interpretation that never end. Such is the true role we must give time which, in duration, does not merely preserve what has been but spiritualises it, i.e. converts it into an act that has no terminus, or again, that, carrying infinity within it, “*infinitises*”³⁰ every object it is applied to.³¹

But there is more: in this sort of deepening of the past, memory is progressively purified.³² Little by little it loses contact with individual event. It is stripped of whatever gave it a contingent character, whatever still bound it to becoming, whatever was perishable in it. And in the same stroke it leaves behind all trace of exteriority, it is gradually reduced to its pure inwardness. Thus through a kind of noteworthy transmutation: *in the measure that we become equal to ourselves the memory of the various events of our life, throughout which it was formed, dims and disappears*; as recompense we have an infinitely acute awareness of our being's constitutive properties which the role of those events was precisely to reveal to us and to render ours. In the same fashion things must disappear from our gaze for [them to be converted] for us into ideas. *Becoming is [the] death of all instants but also [the] resurrection of all instants*—granted, in a new and purely spiritual world where there are for us no longer any phenomena or events but only the realisation of an essence that is constituted in time and that possesses itself in duration. Thus, after having shown that time is needed for the incarnation of the possible, we can say that the possible is disincarnated in duration, or again, that it has traversed and surpassed material actualisation in order to receive a spiritual actualisation. Such is the metaphysical significance of memory, for which memory of the event is merely a first phase.³³

²⁹ I have deleted a phrase referring to a chapter on the past not included in these translations.

³⁰ My italics and quotation marks.

³¹ A difficult paragraph. The author appears to be describing a process whereby worldly experience is taken inside and matured in reflection. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) frequently speaks of such an internalisation, e.g. in his *Duino Elegies*, particularly the ninth.

³² A distinctly contemplative character informs what follows: the author seems to describe the stages of a deepening meditation in which worldly details are left behind.

³³ As I understand this my growing familiarity with life (more exactly *my* life) finally goes beyond the memories of particular events. Such particulars fade as their essence grows clearer. The point of my worldly sojourn seems to be to discover my own essence—which includes and gives way to a truth that

But we can say that this sort of transmutation of the material into the spiritual [is complete] only when the duration towards which becoming has led us orients itself toward eternity. For we can only [assume] that duration is turned first of all toward the past, though it constantly seems to add to what the past has already given us. Also, the world of duration is a world where we still remain tied to determination, though what we discover by way of it is essence itself. Living essence, to be sure, inseparable from the act which produces it, without [our ever managing] either to explore all its content or exhaust all [its] meaning. There is within it, as we have seen, an infinity which obviously proceeds from that very act which creates it yet goes beyond it, and of which we can say that it makes of each particular essence an original essence in which the totality of being is enfolded. Now, in the rapport between each essence and the pure act—considered in its absolute efficacy, always on offer for participation—resides the passage from duration to eternity. Here, we go beyond duration in the same fashion that duration goes beyond becoming. Just as in [the case of] essence, [where] the particular events throughout which it was constituted seem to be abolished, [so too] particular essences appear to be abolished in the act from which they derive, where they are nonetheless introduced as the shadow of a purely spiritual object.

But here we abandon the created plane in order elevate ourselves to the creating plane. At the height of its perfection the creative act ignores its creation. How could it be otherwise, since creation appears as such only to a being who receives it, to whom it is a spectacle and who carries a passivity that renders him unequal to the activity in which he participates but is obliged to undergo? Note that each time the act we accomplish is somewhat pure, [whether] it is a question of artistic or moral creation, it too ignores the effects it produces, which is not to say that they are unimportant or lacking perfection. But we take possession of it only in a second step, which will always be necessary so that we can on the one hand distinguish this act from the impulses with which it risks being confused and on the other hand link its intermittences to each other. Which would permit [us] to construct both a theory of inspiration and a theory of grace. Thus we see without difficulty how becoming puts us into relation with nature and things, how duration puts us into relation with ourselves and [other] particular consciousnesses, [and] how eternity puts us into relation with God.

surpasses me. An ancient Gnostic text titled “The Hymn of the Pearl” speaks in a similar vein of a heavenly spirit sent down into the world in order to recover a lost gem which turns out to be his very soul.

IX

THE TIME OF ETERNITY³⁴

Outside of its rapport with eternity time cannot even be conceived. It is not only that [eternity] is time negated, or even that it is time surpassed; it is not only that time is a fall within [the context of] eternity, or that eternity [is] a conquest of time: it is that there is a veritable symbiosis between time and eternity. Indeed, just as time exists only by way of eternity, which is always present to it, eternity in its turn exists only by way of time, which is its creative efficacy. But it is not enough to consider eternity as a source and time as its efflux. We must say that the I draws its future from eternity in order to regain it one day by means of a past that will have become its own. When we speak of passing from time to eternity, what could anyone carry into eternity but himself such as time has made him?

However it would be a grave error to think that eternity is, for each of us, nothing more than the contemplation of his own past, even if we add to it the suffering or joy that can accompany that [new] light in which we suddenly behold it.³⁵ We have enquired to find out whether the past [is] abolished in eternity (but then this means that everything is brought to nought for the particular being) or whether the future [is abolished there] (but then the hereafter-finished being [that has] become purely a spectator of itself has lived and consequently ceased to live). Eternity cannot be merely the abolition of phenomenality, i.e. of that instant in which the indefinite conversion of the future into the past is brought about. Consequently the future and the past must be recovered. What does that mean? Not that the future is abolished, at least [with respect to] the very principle that generates it, if it is true that the relation between the finite being and the infinite act in which it participates can never be broken: finite being can never be closed in its own sufficiency without in the

³⁴ Final section of Lavelle's book on time and eternity. The section's title suggests that if eternity is inseparable from time the reverse must be true as well. The principal question for some readers will be whether the purity and independence of the primary sphere (which the author has taken so much care to preserve) can survive the introduction of time. The answer seems to be that time, considered in its essence, is already eternity itself. That leaves the question of what eternity gains from its connection with time. As far as I can judge it principally gains *us* as its manifold individual expressions.

³⁵ A crucial point. From the tenor of previous paragraphs it might be assumed that the *The Dialectic of the Eternal Present* has come to rest in a permanent contemplation of the *past!* The same impression might be given by many assertions in *Of the Human Soul*.

same stroke ceasing to be. If it could be [closed in itself] it would never have begun to be; and if in completing [its being] it suddenly broke away from [the] origin that sustained it [throughout] its entire development it would consume itself in radical imperfection. But the past [too] cannot be negated – not for [the] completely formal reason that it has become fixed but [because] it has become indiscernible from that act which establishes us in being, which measures our personal participation in being and to which it supplies a limitation that determines it and a matter it constantly transforms. From this we see how the abolition of phenomenality which we rightly call death allows our future and our past to come together and acquire a new significance. For we know that our past presently becomes the future of our thinking, a future that is never exhausted. This future constitutes the perspective we have on eternity and prevents our personal life from being swallowed by it, as the pantheists believe.

But it is in eternity alone that [the future] reveals to us its full meaning [by becoming] no longer a prospect we have on ourselves but a prospect we have on God; and we understand without difficulty that this vision, instead of being [frozen], is indefinitely renewed. Here the rapport between the finite and the infinite suddenly acquires an ontological density. Do we perhaps need to say that this experience is not completely unknown to us, if it is true that there are moments in our life [when] phenomena recede and our spiritual future [becomes] the meaning we seek to give our past? Can we want that past to go on accumulating indefinitely [when] it can grow indefinitely deeper? [The past] *grants our particular being a window onto the infinity of pure being*. It is important only that, in allowing all of this past which constituted the matter of becoming to be lost, we [try], through this loss itself, to regain by way of an asceticism that reveals to us our true wealth this essence of ourselves (and correlatively, of beings and things) which becoming shrouded and dissimulated. When we say “*exprimur nos aeternos esse*”³⁶ we speak of the experience of an essence which is our true name in God, which we find always identical with itself, which the accidents of temporal life constantly bring us near and distance us from: but if being is act there must be for us [an] identity between encountering [essence] and creating it.

These observations tend to demonstrate, on the one hand, that time cannot be considered as the fallacious image of a [frozen] eternity from which we aspire to deliver ourselves in order to substitute reality for image but that it is the sole pathway we have into eternity, and on the other hand, that time is not absent from eternity and that we meet it there again, though transfigured so to speak. To wish to identify [eternity] with a perception that lasts forever is to degrade immortality and detach it from eternity. It is to confound eternity with [a] spatiality divorced from becoming, whereas spatiality is only a transitory symbol of eternity in pure phenomenality; [it is] to want to [freeze] our essence, such as it

³⁶ “Experience our eternal being.” The word *esse* (being) is the root of the word *essence*.

has been formed in our past, in God so as to make of it a simple idea [in] the divine intelligence. For we are a liberty that eternally wants the life it has made and has never [succeeded in exhausting]. Not only were we merely an eternal possibility before the temporal order furnished us with a means of actualising it but the instant which ensured the cut [between] past and future only ever granted it the actuality of an evanescent thing: [the] actuality of the body in which it had to be incarnated but which itself has not ceased to perish. Yet it is a question of actualising ourselves as spiritual being, which can only take place with the body's destruction, when we have made of [the] possibility it has allowed us to realise a possibility that is ours and that indeed is us, that we have taken to ourselves and that henceforth manifests its own creative power in a sort of equivalence – regained at last – between our being and itself.

Also it is not a question of obtaining the longest experience of life but only the most profound: a brief moment can decide our entire life for all eternity. There are in existence many hollow intervals and we are always in search of those decisive moments in which we shatter the veneer of appearances and suddenly have the immediate revelation of ourselves. *The instant of eternity is like a time that would never grow faint, in which the identical would always be new.* It is the infinite enacted within the finite. Consequently we understand without difficulty that there is for us nothing but the present, though [the following] presences are all different from one other: [the] presence of the possible, [the] presence of the object, [the] presence of memory, [the] presence of the idea, [the] presence of the subject to himself [and the] presence of God. Time and participation alike derive from the conversion of one of these forms of presence into another. Through this we participate in that eternal act which is exerted in the undividedness of the instant, of which we must say that it is always regained, either in [the] instant of becoming where the future (which borrows its apparent multiplicity from becoming) is changed into the past or in that instant of the free act which itself seems to traverse the length of becoming but which [on every occasion] constitutes a new opening on the same eternity.