

**Timelessness in a Reversed Narrative Act : The quest
for Eternity in Baxter's *First Light***

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to explain Charles Baxter's reversed narrative act in his novel *First Light*. It finds that the act generates a sense of timelessness in the reader's experience of the text. This sense corresponds to another concern in the novel with the theme of human longing for an eternal state of being. Characters in the novel express such longing in backward movements of minds in time, akin to the novel's reversed narrative act. They derive satisfaction for their longing through union with permanent objects in their lives. And the novel finds its satisfaction in union with the first light of human birth. This form of satisfaction negates the possible religious implications that the characters' quest for eternity carries in the novel.

Charles Baxter's novel *First Light* begins with the present lives of its two main characters, Hugh and Dorsey, moves backward in time to reveal significant moments in their past and ends at Dorsey's birth, with Hugh as a small boy witnessing his sister's arrival into the world.¹ The unfolding of events in their lives meticulously falls into the reversed time sequence of the novel. The reunion of the brother and sister on the fourth of July is followed, in the next chapter, by a description of Dorsey's trip with her husband Simon and her son Noah, from

Buffalo, New York, to Five Oaks, Michigan, to celebrate the national day. Her suggestion of this visit comes in a later chapter and falls into a second part of the novel that describes Dorsey's life in Buffalo in the same backward manner. The narration of her move from San Francisco to Buffalo comes after the revelation of her life in this latter city. Following this narration, an elaborate description of her delivery of her son Noah in a San Francisco hospital appears. The story of the conception of Noah comes next in a section that narrates her life in San Francisco and her infatuation with Carlo Pavorese, the father of her child. The last part of the novel relates Dorsey's and Hugh's earlier lives in their parents' house in the same backward manner. This part begins with Dorsey's graduation from high school; moves back through her high school years, which correspond to Hugh's college years; through her childhood, which corresponds to Hugh's high school years; and reaches back to her birth, which corresponds to Hugh's early childhood.

For this reversed movement of his novel, Baxter gives justification in an epigraph to the work. Quoting Kierkegaard, he explains: "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forward."

In their assessment of the novel, critics and reviewers refer to the theme of familial love and alienation in the brother and sister's relationship, a theme that reflects, they assert, a kind of experience not unusual in everyday's life. Michiko Kaktutani comments on the novel as a "remarkably supple novel that gleams with the smoky chiaroscuro of familial love." Another reviewer claims that "Baxter reveals the experience that put such a distance between Hugh and Dorsey, and

the ties of imperfect love that bind them together.”² And Paul Auster asserts that “gradually we begin to understand that Baxter is telling our own story, that this is how our lives are formed within us.”³

In the presence of such assessment that claims and demonstrates familiarity with the novel’s theme in daily life experience, we begin to wonder how literally we can take Baxter’s justification of the reversed time sequence of his novel. Is the life story of Hugh and Dorsey, despite its common nature, impossible to understand without the reversed movement of the novel? If the case is so, then how did we manage an understanding of straightforward novels in the past? And, are all novels of the future to be written in reversed time sequence? Or, is there a special kind of understanding that this novel calls for and makes possible through its reversed narration of events?

Of one fact we can be certain. The novel’s objective cannot be an understanding of ordinary events as they normally fall into straightforward time sequence. Neither the common nature of the theme nor the technical strategy that manifests it, call for, or make possible, such objective. Familiarity with the theme in daily experience facilitates understanding of, and perhaps identification with, the characters’ experience, regardless of which way the novel is read. The reversed time sequence of the novel, on the other hand, distracts the reader’s attention from what happens first and what comes next. It destroys the sense of sequence in the experience of reading the novel. The reader’s attention turns to events as they occur out of the temporal context. The novel engages its reader in a sense of the timelessness of its events .

This sense of timelessness is part of the novel's preoccupation with the theme of human longing for an eternal state of being. The novel's technical strategy makes such theme possible. Released from the sense of time sequence, through the novel's reversed narrative act, events in the novel gain force in their line of psychological revelation.⁴ They lay out for inspection and participation, more forcefully now than ever, the inner lives of the characters. Their lives reveal dissatisfaction with temporality and a longing for an eternal state of being. Significantly, these feelings express themselves in backward movements of minds in time, akin to the novel's own move. Hugh and Dorsey best demonstrate these feelings and moves.

Although he rejects his sister's invitation to imaginatively travel back in historic time to the Big Bang, Hugh shows interest in making backward moves on a more personal level. His sister's fanciful proposal surfaces in her words: "Imagine going back to the first second of the Big Bang. To the first fraction of a fraction of a second. Imagine getting on a time machine and seeing space contract. Imagine time reversed." To this invitation Hugh responds: "I don't have to - I live here" (12). However, when Simon asks him about his parents, Hugh begins by talking about their death and then he moves backward in time to reveal significant moments in their lives. To Simon's ridicule of this habit, Hugh responds in a manner that shows attachment to backward movements in time. Simon voices his ridicule in the question: "Why is it when you ask people about somebody's life, they tell you how the person died?" And Hugh's embracing of backward moves in time surfaces in his answer: "You start with the last things first. . . . You start

with the period instead of the capital letter. That way you' re always sure how everything ends" (109).

The simultaneous rejection of, and attachment to, backward movement in time does not present a contradiction in Hugh's attitude. The first is a sign of his fear of mutability and the second of his attempt to control the passage of time. Mutability becomes forcefully evident through a backward movement in time that takes him as far back in history as the Big Bang. It generates in Hugh a sense of his own temporality in the infinity of historic time. On the other hand, his assurance of how things end allows him to exercise control on time. Once he is in control of any further progress of time (for his parents are now dead), Hugh he can comfortably look backward to time's manifestation in various events. As he adopts a Keatsian autumnal attitude toward finality, Hugh need not fear mutability.⁵

Yet Hugh's fear of mutability is an obsession that he attempts to exorcise in various other ways. "Thinking of Dorsey up there in her old room, Hugh imagines time moving backward. It's an unpleasant thought, and he shivers in the heat" (14). To counteract this overwhelming and horrifying force of mutability, Hugh employs two strategies. First, he attempts to "record the passage of time through his life." Second, he "surrounds himself with the works of his own hands" (93). Helping his wife start a garden, he can always find out "how far he has traveled in time away from its beginning" (95). Hugh controls time by keeping track of its progress through his life. Significantly, the act of time computation becomes possible through objects of his own making; he "alters his house room by room" in order to achieve that (93). The process of time recording involves a

demonstration of personal power and an exercise in self-assertion. In the middle of a powerful sense of self, mutability ceases to be terrifying.

Despite his fear of mutability, Hugh manages to enjoy eternity in one of its earthly, descendent forms --the ocean.⁶ The ocean presents to Hugh's perception a comprehensive, impersonal and infinite presence. He calls the waves "reliable and infinite." They also "don't give a damn," a description reminiscent of Shelley's definition of the transcendental side of "Power" in "Mont Blanc."⁷ And when the waves "come in, time politely stops" (99). To this psychological enjoyment of the eternity of the ocean, the novel has a material affirmation; Hugh's watch stops and when he inquires from a nearby lady about the time, she proves equally ignorant of its passage (100).

Hugh enjoys this earthly form of eternity presented to his senses and indulges himself in it; "he can feel the waves taking him over, lulling him" to eternal sleep (100). "He feels unable to control the dangerous contentment he suddenly feels." And in a characteristically Wordsworthian manner, "he unbuttons his shirt, letting the sun and sea air touch him impersonally."⁸ And he even expresses a Keatsian death wish in the presence of eternal forces when he wants to "dive into the water, into the undertow. The waves pound in his ears."⁹ Hugh wishes to die and block out the world of mutability at this precious moment of eternity in his life. In the middle of these feelings, his "home improvements" strike him as "luckless empty things" (99). In the presence of eternal forces, he does not need to counteract the passage of time.

If the ocean fulfils Hugh's quest for an eternal state of being, the stars become Dorsey's means of achieving it. In a backward movement of mind, identical with the novel's reversed narrative act, Dorsey expresses her longing for eternity, a longing that the stars will ultimately satisfy. Standing at the far end of her imaginary trip to the Big Bang, the stars will become Dorsey's means of fulfilling her quest for eternity.

Dorsey's imaginative proposal to her brother to travel back to the Big Bang is by no means exclusively motivated by scientific interests. The scientific motive surfaces when she explains her preoccupation with the Big Bang as part of a work project:

If you take the usual calculations related to the Big Bang, you discover that there's just enough density in the universe to make it closed, to stop the expansion of space. . . . Anyway, the problem is, if you estimate density with the galaxies that are currently observed, you're missing eighty percent of the mass that's supposed to be there. . . .That's what missing mass is. . . . That's what I am working on. (11)

Yet the proposal for this backward movement has a human longing for eternity behind it. Commenting on her career as an astrophysicist, Dorsey says: "I became a physicist so that I'd be free of this. . . . I thought it would take me away from the earth, and for a while, it did" (117). Her desire to free herself from earthly shackles is inherent in Dorsey's imaginative aspiration to travel back to the Big Bang.

Yet the desire has a preternatural side to it. Working on an arithmetic problem one day, Dorsey imaginatively sets on the desired move:

in Dorsey's mind--she is leaning back, her eyes are closed--
the universe has returned to the first tenth of a nanosecond. .
. . At such times Dorsey does not feel like herself: she is an
electromagnetic conglomerate of atoms that have combined
to figure out where they have been and what has happened in
the universe to bring them to this point. I am, Dorsey thinks,
formed from the ashes of long dead stars, and I want to know
what I was. (73)

To conceive that she was formed from the ashes of dead stars does not satisfy Dorsey's longing for eternity. Hers is a Wordsworthian aspiration that seeks satisfaction in transcendental realms of being.¹⁰ Her identification with the ashes of dead stars falls short of leading her beyond the sensory world into Wordsworth's "imperial palace," his source of perceptual "glory" and "celestial light" on earth.¹¹ Therefore, she strives to trace her own essence back to its earliest form, a possibly immaterial form that can only originate in a transcendental realm of being.

The novel hints at the possibility of such realm's existence on other occasions. Hugh's father tells him once:

Everything on earth is what it is and something else.
Everything gives off a signal. Most people never hear any of
it. Their ears are closed. You have to listen with your whole
body, everything in your soul. . . . You can break your soul

trying to hear. But some people have a talent. . . . It's like music, but it isn't, it's an overtone. . . . Dosey hears it. (241)

Dorsey demonstrates this power for super-sensory communication twice in the novel. Once, when she was a child watching a horse in the middle of a thunderstorm:

The pinto raises its head to the rain, and, as Dorsey watches she feels an instant of physical itching all over her body, no more than a split second, a force-field sensation inside her, working its way out, and in that instant the horse is hit by lightning. (244)

Dorsey has a spiritual presentiment of the horse's upcoming death. Although she feels it physically, such presentiment could not have become possible unless Dorsey's immaterial essence could communicate with the overtone given off by the horse. Such communication can only occur on a transcendental plain. Once she has a footing on such plain, Dorsey can intuit its hidden knowledge of future events.

As an adult Dorsey demonstrates this same ability for transcendental communication once more. Stricken by fever while she was pregnant, Dorsey has a presentiment of an event that is to occur to her brother in the not -so- near future:

She is dozing her way through a thin, superficial dream state that is remarkable at first only for the clarity of its details. She sees a color television bolted to a table and wallpaper with a Venetian canal motif: it's motel wallpaper, naturally, and in

turning around, she sees her brother in the motel room's bed dozing next to a woman with short brown hair, and, in repose, a kind face: a Girl Scout leader's face. The woman is not Hugh's wife. (176)

Years later, the event virtually takes place with correspondence to the basic details in the reverie. Waiting for the "brown-haired, brown-eyed woman" in the motel room, Hugh "stares at the wallpaper, which depicts a Venetian canal, complete with gondola and gondolier" (53).

Significantly, the novel also grants the ability for transcendental communication to another character in the novel beside Dorsey, an event that endorses its hint to the possible presence of a transcendental realm of being. Contrary to his father's calculation, Hugh can also intuit the transcendental and its sources of hidden knowledge. Hugh has presentiment of the danger that surrounds his sister as a result of her infatuation with Carlo Pavorese. Intoxicated in the middle of a night, he calls her in San Francisco from Five Oaks and reveals his concern at what he feels is happening to her:

I see this person. I look out of the corner of my eye and there he is. Tall dark and handsome. Or ugly. Who knows. Anyway I had this, I guess you could call it a dream, and there was this guy with you. . . . May be he has bad teeth. (145)

Although she contradicts the vision at the time, Dorsey admits to its accuracy later on: "You said that I was seeing somebody who had bad teeth and was maybe tall. I swear I don't know how you knew" (127).

Dorsey's backward movement in time to the Big Bang is a quest of such transcendental realm of being as she and Hugh occasionally, tantalizingly and impermanently intuit. However, because her quest remains unfulfilled, Dorsey satisfies herself in union with the stars.

The stars are associated in Simon's experience with an eternal form of existence:

Well, folks, there're some people lost on the freeway, and a few cars sideswiped and demolished, but up there in the skies the stars are moving in those old-fashioned zodiacs . . . cars pitchin' forward, and cars lost, and cars goin' to Illinois and not meanin' to return and never comin' back, but it's all out of your hands . . . and the old stars'll just keep turnin', rain or no rain.

(116)

In the middle of the mutability of human life and the natural world, the stars remain permanent in their regular galactical moves and recurrent appearance in the sky.

With the stars becoming the closest possible form to eternity, Dorsey imaginatively unites herself with them. The union occurs as she was giving birth to her son, Noah. While still in labor, Dorsey experiences the stars moving, tantalizingly, back and forth. Moments of intense labor pain generate feelings of high consciousness of time in Dorsey's being: "Dorsey is full of time. Squeezed into the next contraction, she becomes a narrowing gate where the past and future are meeting. Time is flowing down the walls of the universe into her and then flowing out of her back through her vagina before it streams into the void." At such

moments of high temporality the "stars move backwards for a millisecond" (179). However, as the moment of delivery and final relief approaches, the stars "move forward" and tantalizingly wheel above Dorsey before granting her union with their infinite presence and permanent light:

Light is splashing all over her, the light of the stars wheeling above her, and then, in great heat, pushing out from under her. She is about to give birth to a ball of light. (180).

The "ball of light" turns out to be her son Noah, a human form "sheared out of time" (180). The stars penetrate Dorsey's body, saturate it with their permanent light and produce an eternal figure, Noah:

This infant has, is, a tiny replica of her own father's face. At first she can't quite believe it, this baby, looking like her father, but there he is, sheared out of time. 'Noah,' she says, unprompted, without thinking. (180)

A product of a moment of eternity, Noah is also eternal in the sense that he preserves the image of the departing dead. For both reasons, Noah deserves his ancient, infinite and implicitly eternal name and becomes, through such name, a symbolic representation of this moment of eternity in his mother's life.

Dorsey's quest of union with the stars has religious implications in the novel. These implications surface in Carlo Pavorese's fascination with the stars. Voicing his own fascination, Carlo gives it a universal touch: "We all begin as children, gazing at the stars. We want the stars to come down to us. We want to have a star right here, on earth. We want to have a star we ourselves have made" (170).

However, Carlo's longing, unlike Dorsey's, has no need for transcendental union. It finds satisfaction in the light of a bomb. Watching the Trinity Test one early morning, Carlo expresses his joy at the sight of the explosion: "I will tell you something about the light of the bomb, the first light like a momentary morning star, and how it changed my life. . . . It was the first star that men had made, it was pure light, the sun's rival, brilliant and unmediated and beautiful" (169-70). Carlo derives pleasure from an earthly descendent light, the light of a bomb.

Such form of pleasure undermines the religious implications that fascination with the stars carries in the novel. Voicing the religious longing of the novel, Carlo Pavorese associates the human star with God: "I will not say it was God. But I will say that if there is a God, then we had stolen one of His largest wonders," in the act of testing the bomb (170). The doubt even takes a pagan turn when the story of the man-made morning star gains associations with instances and figures in Greek mythology: "we are still looking around to see who will volunteer as Prometheus, to have his body made as a payment in return for this perfect fire" (170). As he voices the novel's religious longings, Carlo negates them by drifting into pagan faith.

The novel's ending also testifies to a similar negation. Its quest of eternity ends in union with earthly, descendent light; its reversed narrative act stops at the first light of Dorsey's birth. Hugh becomes a witness of that light:

But now, at this moment frozen in sunlight, he sees her, inside his mother's right arm, asleep. . . his mother holds his sister

up a little so that he can see her better, lifting her up into the
sunlight. (286)

As it moves backward through its characters' lives and indulges its reader in the timelessness of its events, the novel satisfies itself in union with the first light of human birth. Dorsey's birth, not her transcendental aspirations, fulfils the novel's quest.

Notes

¹ Paul Gray calls this reversed movement "a tug of memory." I do not think the description is very apt because it tends to eliminate the sense of artistic deliberateness in the author's reversed narrative act.

² This is a commentary that the editor of the 1988 Penguin Books edition makes.

³ His commentary first appears on the back cover of the hardback edition, and the editor of the 1988 edition quotes him again.

⁴ In her review of the book, Roberta Schwartz comments on the characters and the "technical virtuosity" of the book.

⁵ John Keats settles his earliest conflict between the transient form of immortality that the “Nightingale” offers, and the more permanent, yet colder, form of immortality that the “Grecian Urn” suggests by embracing the finality of death implicit in his autumn symbolism in ode “To Autumn.” And it is appropriate to acknowledge, at this point, that my reading of Keats’s three odes is influenced by Harold Bloom.

⁶ Despite the paradoxical nature of the statement the concept is inherent in romantic thinking. John Clare, for example, speaks of the “Eternity of Nature” on the basis that Nature originates in heaven and can communicate feelings of eternity, despite its mutability.

⁷ Percy B. Shelley defines the transcendental side of “Power” in terms of indifference and withdrawal from human life and concerns: “Power dwells apart in tranquility, / Remote, serene and inaccessible” (96-7). Bloom’s influence on my reading is also present here.

⁸ The attitude is reminiscent of Wordsworth’s invitation to his sister, in the concluding part of “Tintern Abbey,” to let the moon shine on her and the misty mountain winds beat against her body (134-37).

⁹ Keats wanted to die while the immortal “Nightingale” was “pouring forth” its “soul abroad in such an ecstasy” (57-58).

¹⁰ In his “Intimations of Immortality,” Wordsworth expresses his belief in a state of pre-existence occurring in a transcendental realm of being: “The Soul that rises with us, our life’s Star, / Hath had elsewhere its setting, / And cometh from afar: / Not in entire forgetfulness, / Not in utter nakedness” (59-63).

¹¹ Memories of pre-existence endow Wordsworth's perception of nature in early life with "glory" (17), and "celestial light" (4).

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