CHAPTER SIX

THE DIFFICULTY OF BEING COURAGEOUSLY VULNERABLE

Introduction

In this final chapter, I will return to the notion of courageous vulnerability as it was sketched in Chapter Two and draw upon chapters Four and Five to fill out this preliminary account. Specifically, I will draw upon the discussions about crystallization and the “will to believe” to both offer a better understanding of courageous vulnerability and distinguish it from other, similar, notions, especially Marcel’s “creative fidelity.” A close reading of several passages from À la recherche will again help sharpen my argument. The passage cited in the Introduction showed that the narrator’s grandmother is present to the narrator in an involuntary memory. Later chapters showed that the narrator feels that, in order to be faithful to his grandmother, he needs to cling to the pain of this privileged moment because it allows him to fully experience her presence. The combination of À la recherche with Marcel’s work is particularly fruitful here because Marcel makes our relation to the dead an essential part of his ethics. In the present chapter, I will discuss the narrator’s relation to his grandmother afresh and relate it to a question central to Marcel’s thought: can there be a bond between the dead and the living? Death, for Marcel, appears as a test for presence: true presence defies absence, even the ultimate absence that is death. Marcel’s notion of creative fidelity, therefore, is an account not only of love between the living, but also of the bond which continues to exist between the living and their dead loved ones. Just as in Chapter Four, the pessimistic account of love in À la recherche will serve to criticize Marcel and to show that what seems easy in his descriptions is in fact very difficult. This does not mean, however, that the notion of creative fidelity should be rejected; I will merely argue that this notion is incomplete. Courageous vulnerability incorporates the valuable aspects of creative fidelity, but offers a more realistic ethical attitude by integrating these aspects with, on the one hand, the pessimistic account given in À la recherche and, on the other, James’ pragmatic theory of the will to believe. I will argue that though privileged
moments and presence are not under our control, intersubjectivity is possible because of the will to believe. The narrator, it became clear in the previous chapter, chooses to pursue the felt knowledge of his primarily aesthetic privileged moments and writes his book; had he chosen to pursue the felt knowledge of his sorrowful privileged moments, he could have changed his actions towards others and created the possibility for Marcellian love. The narrator holds that love and friendship are impossible, at least in the way Marcel describes these phenomena, but I argue that he himself has created this impossibility. Marcel, on the other hand, ultimately holds that love and friendship are easily achieved and maintained. Despite his remarks emphasizing the difficulty of being creatively faithful, his writings are pervaded by a certain optimism, and it is this optimism which I will try to temper through an application of Marcel’s thought to À la recherche. Proustian and Marcellian ethics dovetail in the notion of courageous vulnerability, which maintains the balance between the two by means of James’ will to believe. In preparation for this final account of courageous vulnerability, I will now turn to the rich passages from À la recherche describing the narrator’s relation to his dying grandmother.

Fidelity and Death in À la recherche

In Le côté de Guermantes, the volume preceding Sodome et Gomorrhe, the narrator’s grandmother falls ill. Dr. Cottard, the family doctor and member of le petit clan, tells the family that the situation is very grave, but Dr. du Boulbon, asked for a second opinion, claims that she is in fact not ill at all and tells her that all she has to do is decide to pick up her old life; the sickness is merely something in her head. The narrator and his mother feel relieved and plans are made for the narrator and his grandmother to go to the Champs-Elysées, where she will sit and read while he meets with friends. The narrator does not feel the need to deny himself pleasures such as these now that his grandmother has been declared healthy, and he is annoyed with his grandmother for making him wait while she takes an unusually long time to put on her cape:

Now that I knew that she was not ill, with that strange indifference which we feel towards our relations so long as they are alive, and which makes us put everyone else before them, I thought it very selfish of her to take so long and to risk making me late when she knew that I had an appointment with my friends.