

Duration: from Bergson to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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Abstract

Time, an important element in modern literature, has always been one of the most important themes of Virginia Woolf's novels. Woolf subverts the traditional concept of time as a driving force that does not decelerate for anybody. In *To the Lighthouse* time is no longer a governing force, in contrast the characters are able to slow down the time. So this slowed-down concept of time provides the opportunity for meditation over minor events rather than the so-called major ones. Woolf in *To the Lighthouse* tends to present minor events more than important ones and present them in no chronological order. For this issue of non-chronologicality she is mainly under the influence of Henri Bergson, whose ideas, especially the idea of duration, were of high significance. According to Bergson separating the segments of time into hours, minutes and seconds is impossible. We carry the past with ourselves through memory, and manipulate it in the present to form the future. So past, present and future are melted in each other and create a unified whole.

Key Terms: Bergson, Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, Duration, Memory.

Introduction

In *Time and Free Will* Bergson introduces two ways of capturing reality. They are intellectual and intuitive ways. The former can be described as the way we chronologically conceive the time, and the latter, the way we psychologically perceive time, or what Bergson calls duration. The intellectual way tries to spatialize time, which is to separate time according to our artificial units such as hours and minutes, while the intuitive one tends to connect what could be recognized as different moments. Our intellect is associated with quantity, and our intuition is related to quality. The notion of duration, which stands for psychological time or inner duration, is not suitable for any logical, quantitative or intellectual analysis: “pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states.”¹

Henri Bergson believes that we unknowingly drag behind us the whole of our past. It is through pure duration that we go back to the past, “a duration in which the past, always moving on, is swelling unceasingly with a present that is absolutely new.”² In his view “flux is reality and it is the flow of time, it is the very flux of the real that we should be trying to follow.”³ Living in this flux into this fluidity is life itself: “life... progresses and endures in time.”⁴ According to this view clock time or mechanical time is not reality. It should be rejected because it is artificial, and “the intellect turns away from the true vision of time” since it “dislikes what is fluid,”⁵ or real time.

This division of time into duration or inner time and clock time or mechanical time is necessary to comprehend the flow of life. Bergson regards “inner time as a continuously moving stream and the divisions into past, present and future as artificial. The past lives in the present in memory and in its consciousness, and it is in this manner that it shapes the future.” Thus, according to Bergson, time duration is “the continuous life of a memory which prolongs the past into the present, the present either containing within it a distinct form of the ceaselessly growing image of the past or more probably, showing by its continual change of quality the heavier and still the heavier load we drag behind us as we grow older.”⁶

¹ Henri Bergson. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, Trans. F. L. Pogson. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1921, p100.

² Henri Bergson. *Creative Evolution*, Trans. A. Mitchell. New York: Routledge, 1970, p219.

³ Ibid, p372.

⁴ Ibid, p58.

⁵ Ibid, p52.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze. *Bergsonism*, Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberiam. New York: Zone Books, 1991, p47. (Hereafter referred to as Deleuze)

According to Bergson duration has two fundamental characteristics; continuity and heterogeneity. It is free from the characteristics of space, namely, homogeneity and discontinuity. He believes that duration is pure and space is impure. He says that the idea of a homogeneous and measurable time should be considered an artificial concept that is formed by the intrusion of the idea of space into the realm of pure duration.¹

Bergson also makes the distinction between the analytical concept and the personal experience of time, while the physicist observes objects and events in succession, as time ticking away on the dial of a clock, which can be marked and measured accordingly. We experience time as duration—a constant flowing process, with no end points and beginnings where sometimes those hours seem to pass as seconds while others hang so heavily as to make a day seem as burdensome as a week. This inner experience is qualitative, heterogeneous, dynamic, unpredictable, and non-linear—indeed. It invents time as every moment brings with it something radically new. Bergson argues against the mechanistic science and psychology which were dominant at the time, that real time is experienced as duration and apprehended by intuition, not through separate operations of instinct and the intellect, thus prioritizing intuition.²

Like his concept of simultaneity, Bergson first introduces duration in *Time and Free Will*. He writes:

Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states. For this purpose it need not be entirely absorbed in the passing sensation or idea; for then, on the contrary, it would no longer *endure*. Nor need it forget its former states: it is enough that, in recalling these states, it does not set them alongside its actual state as one point alongside another, but forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole.³

Like the intersecting planes of consciousness that form a heterogeneous whole, duration aligns itself within this idea of past, present, memory, and together forms a unified whole. Duration approaches timelessness since it exists beyond the perception of rational, linear time. There is no ticking away of segments of time since all is one. Duration resides within a realm of awakening

¹ *Time and Free Will*, p88-91.

² Stephen Linstead. "Organization as Reply: Henry Bergson and Casual Organization Theory". *Organization*, Sage Publication, 2002, p102. Online: <http://org.sagepub.com/>.

³ *Time and free will*, p100.

where "at any given moment, the past, present, and future mingle within our consciousness, and this duration cannot be divided into individual moments along a traditional timeline."¹

While duration functions in a similar manner as simultaneity, there is another crucial aspect of duration in the mode of timelessness: spiritual fulfillment. If duration is "a succession of qualitative changes, which melt into and permeate one another, without precise outlines, without any tendency to externalize themselves in relation to one another"², then how does this enable the soul to be fulfilled? This harmonious, completeness of the soul occurs since "duration resides in the present, which becomes a moment of transcendence where past, present, and future merge – a moment of awakening, a moment of epiphany, or a moment of self-realization and spiritual fulfillment."³ This sense of fulfillment occurs when a higher awareness is reached. It is a moment when the material, spatial boundaries are transcended and the spirit soars. This sense of duration not only constitutes real time, but the entirety of life to the point where "our existence not only takes place in *duration*, but more precisely it is made of *duration*."⁴

A large number of critics believe that Virginia Woolf was under the influence of Henri Bergson for the issue of time. Bergson's ideas and theories of time changed the way many modernist novelists represented time in fiction. He attempted to redefine the modern conceptions of time, space, and causality in his concept of Duration.

To the Lighthouse is restricted to the space of ten years. The novel is structured in three parts and each displays a different use of time. Woolf's depiction of time in the first section of the novel, "The Window", concerns itself with how its passing is conceived and condensed in the individual psychology. Though it forms two-thirds of the entire novel, the narrative of the first section covers only a September evening but, within this, depicts a wide variety of times, such as the section in chapter twelve, where Mr. Ramsey first reminisces about his own childhood, then is brought, sharply into the present, only to then project his thoughts into the future. The second section of the book is, in many ways, the most intriguing. Woolf conveys the notion of temporal flux and the rapid passing of time through impressionistic language interspersed with factual and brusque asides concerning the fates of the characters we have been introduced to in the first section. We learn that Prue gets married but dies after childbirth, that Andrew is killed during the war and

¹ Katie Moss. "The Power of Timelessness and the Contemporary Influence of Modern Thought." Diss. Georgia State University, 2008, p5.

² *Time and free will*, p104.

³ Moss, p7.

⁴ Paola Marrati. "Time, Life, Concepts: The Newness of Bergson." *MLN* 120.5, 2005: 1099- 1111. Web. *JSTOR*. 6 May 2010, p1103.

that Mrs. Ramsey also dies. The use of time here is shocking and violent. The characters' lives are played out against the machinery of time passing and only the house and lighthouse remains intact, as symbols of both constancy and memory. The third section, "The Lighthouse" describes a morning ten years later as lived by Mr. Ramsay, his children, and two of the same guests, namely the artist, Lily Briscoe, and a poet, Augustus Carmichael. When after the interval of ten years, Lily Briscoe remembers the deceased Mrs. Ramsay, the latter inspire her values in the mind of Lily and make her to be able to finish her painting. By remembering Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay and his children are enabled to sail into the future on their expedition to the lighthouse. So the segments of time, past, present and future merge into each other.

The first and the third part of the novel are somehow alike since they treat elaborately a short period of time, while the short middle section treats in a curt manner a long period of time. While the middle section, "Time Passes" is the shortest of the three sections of the novel, it covers the longest period of time: nearly ten years. In contrast to the first part of the novel that covers only several hours, Woolf expands the second part to the space of ten years described in nearly 20 pages and later in the third section time is again contracted. Louis Gillet wrote in 1929, in an essay on Virginia Woolf: "Whatever is most valuable in modern literature is a meditation on the nature of time, on the mystery of memory and personality."¹

Based on this timeline the effect on the reader is that the events happening in the middle section are unimportant to the reality of the moments experienced by the characters in the first and last sections. By treating the passage of ten years' time as unimportant footnote, she focuses the reader's attention more directly on the scenes at St. Ives. The reversal of significance troubles the readers' expectations about the nature of time.

Moreover, the overall time pattern is established by these three divisions (The Window, Time Passes, and The Lighthouse). Throughout, the progression of the clock-time is paralleled with the characters' inner sense of time which allows an intermingling of thought about the past, present and future. However, there is a difference in tonal stress in each section. In "The Window" the emphasis is upon the present, in "Time Passes" the emphasis is upon the future, when the house will be preoccupied, and in "The Lighthouse" the emphasis is upon the past-the morning activities are haunted by the memory of Mrs. Ramsay, whose death was announced in part two. Because of repeated references in Part three to the beginning section of the book, a circular movement and a

¹ Jean Guiguet. *Virginia Woolf and Her Works*, Trans. Jean Stewart. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1966, p384.

sense of wholeness is suggested by the structure of the novel. The time-pattern is held together as a unit by the existence of the lighthouse, the slow realization of Lily's aesthetic vision, and the influence of Mrs. Ramsay.¹

Duration

T. S. Eliot states in "The Metaphysical Poets" a good poet is someone who tries to amalgamate disparate experiences. So the modernist writers attempt to compose from the available fragments a perfect whole. And this is an approval of Bergson's philosophy that tries to merge the separate and broken pieces into a new whole. So according to his philosophy separating moments into present and past states is impossible. And if we try to do so we confuse space and time, in other words we are in danger of spacialization.²

In the same manner it sounds impossible to separate past, present and future from each other in *To the Lighthouse*. The boundaries between them are removed and they permeate each other. Ryan Fitzgerald suggests that Woolf managed to surmount this problem in *To the Lighthouse* by using symbols. One of the most important symbols is that of "leaf" whose importance is clear through its repeated uses. Its meaning is never static and varies through the course of the novel. In fact by means of the image of the "leaf" Woolf merges the past and the present. In the opening chapter leaf represents change and decay: "leaves withering before rain". Elsewhere in the novel James likens his mother to "a fruit tree laid with leaves". So we observe that autumn and winter have come to an end and were replaced by spring. Thus, the idea of renewal and reviving of a leaf in the spring- after winter- suggests a message of endurance and stability. Thus, as a symbol the leaf is "ever the same and ever changing."³

Lisa Larson states that it is internal time and memory that makes the simultaneity and interaction of past and present possible. Thus memory links the events of "The Lighthouse" with those in "The Window". Larsen continues to say that epiphanies⁴ (moments of being) are central

¹ Francesco Mulas. "Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*: A Work in Progress from vision to Reality". *Annals* 5, 2005(2009), P170.

² Thomas Stearns Eliot. "The Metaphysical Poets" in *The Selected Essays*. London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1932, 9114.

³ Fitzgerald, p4.

⁴ "Virginia Woolf describes epiphanies, as she conceives them, as 'moments of being' which are contrasted with 'non-being'. In 'A Sketch of the Past' Woolf reflects that a great part of life is lived unconsciously, 'embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool'. While living in the wool, people sometimes experience exceptional moments which bring with them some kind of revelation and/or strong feeling. Woolf tentatively described as her philosophy the idea that behind the cotton wool there is a pattern, a wholeness, which becomes briefly visible in a moment of being. The

to this issue.¹ An example of epiphany can be found in the last part of the novel when Lily Briscoe contemplates the drawing of the painting that she left unfinished in the first part of the novel. While she decides to paint the unfinished picture of Mrs. Ramsay, she suddenly recollects the moment of revelation she had at the dinner party. The memory of this epiphany (in the past) sparks another one (in the present), and suddenly she knows what she wants to do. So because of this revelation she attempts to complete her painting and not marry. Consider this passage at the end of the novel:

...Lily stepped back to get her canvas—so—into perspective. It was an odd road to be walking, this of painting. Out and out one went, further, until at last one seemed to be on a narrow plank, perfectly alone, over the sea. And as she dipped into the blue paint, she dipped too into the past there. Now Mrs. Ramsay got up, she remembered. It was time to go back to the house—time for luncheon...

...Mrs. Ramsay has faded and gone, she thought. We can over-ride her wishes, improve away her limited, old-fashioned ideas. She recedes further and further from us. Mockingly she seemed to see her there at the end of the corridor of years saying, of all incongruous things, “Marry, marry!” (sitting very upright early in the morning with the birds beginning to cheep in the garden outside). And one would have to say to her, It has all gone against your wishes. They’re happy like that; I’m happy like this. Life has changed completely...²

Therefore the two moments of being (past and present) exist simultaneously, and interact with each other. For example as Lily is drawing her painting in “The Lighthouse” in a moment the simultaneity of different times is clear: she is painting, and at the same time she feels as if sitting next to Mrs. Ramsay on the beach. Recollection of that moment makes Lily feels as if Mrs. Ramsay is beside her and in the dialogue between her memory of the past and the present moment the revelation helps her to paint.³

As Bergson stated, the components that form the self, including memories, perceptions, and expectations or the series of past, present, and future can become co-present. Since these

perception of the epiphanies, as well as the need to ‘explain’ them, is what Woolf felt made her a writer and she was deeply concerned with methods of conveying the being as well as the non-being.”(Larsson, 2005, p5)

¹Lisa Larsson. “That fluidity out there: Epiphanies and the Sea in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*”. Department of English Lund University, A60 Literary Seminar, (2005), p8. (from now on Larson).

² *To the Lighthouse*, p144-146.

³ Larsson, Lisa. “That fluidity out there: Epiphanies and the Sea in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*”. Department of English, Lund University, A60 Literary Seminar, 2005, p9.

components are available all the time, the existence of past in the present through memory makes a permanent “now”. The characters in *To the Lighthouse*, like in *Mrs. Dalloway*, experience a simultaneous conception of past, present, and future. The present moment ceaselessly fades into past and future. This is an approval of Bergson’s ideas that says “in reality, the past is preserved by itself; automatically. In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought and willed is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it.”¹ The simultaneous co-presence of past and present is of high importance to grasp Woolf’s novels. Peach states that in *To the Lighthouse* the past interrupts and disrupts the present and in the same way the present interrupts the past. “*To the Lighthouse* exemplifies ideas about different levels of time co-existing and the way in which the past and the present relate to each other.”²

Significance of Time

Much modernist literature portrays writers’ various attempts to express and explore religious impulses. Virginia Woolf, for example, proposes alternative avenues through which to commune with the sacred in *To the Lighthouse*, especially the middle section entitled “Time Passes.” Specifically, in this section of the text, Woolf enlists an innovative conception of time to create windows of opportunity for profound spiritual meditation. In doing so she opens the possibility of feeling the sacred in everyday events and experiences, and in turn the possibility of connecting more intensely with existence.³

In “Time Passes”, Woolf puts the emphasis upon “the synchronic dimension of time”⁴, or the moments in time that is passed in slow-motion and is perceived in depth. As Dominick LaCapra

¹ *Creative Evolution*, p4.

² Linden Peach. *Virginia Woolf*. Houndmills: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000, p135.

³ Katie Gemmill. “Time and the Sacred in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*”. [www.library.queensu.ca > I@Q Journal > Volume 1](http://www.library.queensu.ca/~I@Q/Journal/volume1), (2007) p1.(Hereafter referred to as Gemmill).

⁴ “In his book *History, Politics and the Novel*, Dominick LaCapra points out that the argument that Woolf collapses linear time creates a dichotomy between time and the intemporal; in other words, it sets linear time in opposition to a state of collapsed temporality. He proposes an alternative and more complex theory about how Woolf constructs time in “Time Passes”, which allows for an interplay between linear time and the intemporal, instead of a dichotomy. LaCapra theorizes time as having a two-dimensional structure, made up of a horizontal plane and a vertical plane. The horizontal plane represents diachronic time, which is concerned with events as they develop through time on a linear trajectory. The diachronic dimension of time comprises everyday commonplace events, as well as what LaCapra describes as “epoch-making events, like war in collective life or marriage in personal life”. The vertical plane represents synchronic time, which is concerned with an event, or part of an event, as it exists at one exact point in time. The synchronic dimension of time comprises one moment that is fixed or lengthened in defiance of ordinary linear time. In these synchronic moments, Woolf delves into a deep and detailed analysis of the experience of that moment. In LaCapra’s words, this “aesthetic immobilization and perception in depth of the random event or moment seems to provide a fleeting passage outside time”. Woolf’s use of the synchronic dimension of time is what leads to the common conclusion that she transcends linear time. In effect, however, it is not simply a matter of Woolf

states in his book *History, Politics, and the Novel*, the main events of the middle section including Mrs. Ramsay's death, Prue's marriage and her death during childbirth, and Andrew's death during the war are parenthetical details. In contrast Woolf places the emphasis upon the unimportant moments.¹

By focusing on the synchronic moments of time Woolf "frees herself from the limitations of ordinary linear time."² This enables Woolf to immobilize, slow down an event, and to deeply ponder over it. Consider the following passage as an example in which Woolf's emphasis is upon the synchronic moments:

Nothing stirred in the drawing-room or in the dining-room or on the staircase. Only through the rusty hinges and swollen sea-moistened woodwork certain airs, detached from the body of the wind (the house was ramshackle after all) crept round corners and ventured indoors. Almost one might imagine them, as they entered the drawing room questioning and wondering, toying with the flap of hanging wall-paper, asking, would it hang much longer, when would it fall? Then smoothly brushing the walls, they passed on musingly as if asking the red and yellow roses on the wall-paper whether they would fade, and questioning (gently, for there was time at their disposal) the torn letters in the waste-paper basket, the flowers, the books, all of which were now open to them and asking, Were they allies? Were they enemies? How long would they endure?

So some random light directing them with its pale footfall upon stair and mat, from some uncovered star, or wandering ship, or the Lighthouse even, the little airs mounted the staircase and nosed round bedroom doors. But here, surely, they must cease. Whatever else may perish and disappear, what lies here is steadfast. Here one might say to those sliding lights, those fumbling airs that breathe and bend over the bed itself, here you can neither touch nor destroy.³

Katie Gemmill states that the use of the verbs "creeping", "fumbling", and "nosing" portrays the image of the air which enter the house in slow-motion. And also by saying that time is at their

transcending or collapsing linear time in this section of her text; instead, time is made up of the complex interplay between the diachronic and synchronic dimensions.(in Katie Gemmill's "Time and the Sacred in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*")

¹ Dominick LaCapra. *History, Politics, and the Novel*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987, p138.

² Gemmill, p1.

³ *To the lighthouse*, p102.

disposal, Woolf subverts the traditional concept of time as a driving force that does not decelerate for anybody. So time is no longer a governing force, instead it is at the mercy of the creeping, fumbling airs. So this concept of slowed-down concept of time provides the opportunity for meditation. “The wandering airs “musingly” meditate over whether the house and everything within it will ultimately be subject to the decaying effects of time. The searching, inquiring tone of the passage reflects the human impulse to question one’s existence in time and to wonder about death. It mirrors the problem common to all humans of having to come to terms with one’s mortality, which is unforeseeable and yet imminent.”¹

At the end of the novel Lily Briscoe tries to find a way of capturing the flow of the chronological time. Thus, she looks for a basis in human experience that is not dominated by this dimension of external time. By means of memory she makes a transcendent reach to reproduce her world and a work of art that will last. For Lily this is an experience of moment of being, a moment that is expanded and deepened, that it seems to encompass all time and convey an aspect of eternity. The notion intended here of eternity and transcendence and their connection to external time has been expressed by Karl Jaspers:

Eternity as transcendence appears in time and encompasses all time. I am aware of it when I no longer see only the needless becoming and passing, when as self-being I see being in all things. In the uplift of transcending I do not see another world through an unreal vision; I see eternity as temporal reality and time as eternity... This uplift alone gives the transcending thought a meaning in which time and timelessness become identical as eternity.²

Conclusion

Virginia Woolf’s novels, including *To the Lighthouse*, present her attitude about the fluid qualities of time and memory. She has always been in search of equilibrium between the past and the nuances of present-tense perception. Woolf was well-aware of the material boundaries of time, and yet she also believed in a permanent source of experience that knew no chronological boundaries. She believed that past and present were interchangeable entities that cannot be bound by physical laws: “My theory being that the actual event practically does not exist- nor time either.” She believes that there are some invisible chains that connect past occurrences to present

¹ Gemmill, p3.

² Karl Jaspers. *Philosophy*, Trans. E. B. Ashton. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971, p30.

consciousness: “I see it-the past- as an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions. There at the end of the avenue still, are the garden and the nursery.”¹

¹ *Moments of being*, p67.

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