

A Consideration of the Relationship between Time and Consciousness in Modernism: Focusing on Henri Bergson and Virginia Woolf

Shota TOZAWA

This paper explores the relationship between time and consciousness in the writing of Henri Bergson and Virginia Woolf. It begins by offering a contextual analysis of attitudes towards time and consciousness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before reflecting on how this is manifest in the responses of artists and writers in the Modernist movement. It then offers an account of the writing of Henry Bergson, paying close attention to his 1889 *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* but also attending to the explorations of time and consciousness in his later writings. Having explored Bergson's writing in detail, this paper then moves on to consider the writings of Virginia Woolf: exploring first her essays with a focus on the themes of character, consciousness and time; then looking to her novels, exploring the same themes. Having explored Woolf's writing more broadly, this paper will then turn to Woolf's 1931 novel *The Waves* and suggest how the themes concerning time and consciousness are especially clearly manifested in this work.

As Maggie Humm notes, Woolf famously claimed in 1932 to have "never read Bergson" (Quoted in Humm 7). This paper therefore does not claim that Bergson had a direct influence on Woolf, even though Humm suggests that "Bergson's view of the mental processes involved in aesthetic sensibility not only informed Woolf's circle, but shaped art practice at the Slade School (attended by Vanessa Bell [Woolf's sister])" (7). Rather than arguing for a causal relation between these two authors, this paper instead observes common themes, and suggests that they may be interpreted as two contiguous but distinct responses to a broader sense of shifting perceptions of time and consciousness in the early twentieth century.

Several critics have noted a radical transformation in terms of how time was perceived in the early twentieth century. Ástráður Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska have for instance argued that social, scientific and technological transformations that took place at the end of the nineteenth century produced psychological disruptions that profoundly altered common perceptions and experiences of time and space, writing: "The notion of time as a steady course of continuous moments and the sense of space as an objective and fixed phenomenon, but above all the distinctiveness of the temporal and spatial dimensions of reality were fundamentally disrupted" (251). In his study *Modernism: A Cultural History*, Tim Armstrong offers a more precise account of what these social, scientific and

technological transformations were, in a passage worth quoting in full:

Up to the middle of the nineteenth century, each town had a local time, set by the sun. The needs of navigation and of regularizing railway timetables across continents, and the possibility of sending time signals across distances by the telegraphs strung alongside them, led to British Railway Time and the time zones proposed at the International Meridian Conference in 1884. (7)

As a result, Armstrong argues that “time becomes exploitable, suffused with the values of capital,” suggesting that through the factory system time was “segmented and commodified” (Ibid.). Armstrong continues: “The result is a technologized time, indeed a teletime in which temporalities generated in the metropolitan centre are transmitted elsewhere” (Ibid.). In short, during this period time is both commoditised and standardised. An entity that was formerly heterogeneous was transformed into a homogenous sequence of units.

At the same time, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are often perceived by critics as being a period in which perceptions regarding consciousness underwent a major transformation. Sigmund Freud’s theory of the conscious and the unconscious mind; Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution; Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of Christian morality and his philosophy of perspectivalism: each of these developments signal a development towards an idea of consciousness as something that is complex, layered and constantly evolving. One of the clearest expressions of this new conception of consciousness is found in Karl Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* in which he writes:

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. (74)

At the heart of all of these theories is a sense in which consciousness is determined, it does not determine. In other words, there is an interrogation of the idea of free will: with Darwin demonstrating that human behaviour and thought is a result of a process of evolution; Nietzsche indicating that Christian morality is a construct rather than an innate truth; Freud suggesting that human behaviour and thought and shaped by subconscious and socially determined factors; and Marx insisting that human consciousness is determined by social conditions.

On top of this suggestion that late nineteenth century thought interrogated the idea that consciousness is something that is impregnable and that we have control over – critics have noted that in the early twentieth century perceptions of consciousness were further disturbed by the development of urban growth. Christopher Butler has written that during the early twentieth century urban growth made people “feel anonymous within the mass and cut off from face-to-face relationships,” resulting in a series of discourses in which it is suggested

that human consciousness has altered (133). For instance, Gustave Le Bon's 1895 *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* claims that "an individual immersed for some length of time in a crowd" becomes essentially "hypnotized" (35-36). Georg Simmel's 1903 *The Metropolis and Mental Life* similarly explores the disorientating effects of an "intensification of nervous stimulation" when living in cities (Quoted in Butler, 133). Thus, there is a sense in the early twentieth century that not only has free will been questioned, but that the individual living in modernity is overwhelmed by the conditions of modern existence.

Modernism can in a sense be read as a response both to the attempt to these radical transformations in perceptions of time and consciousness. Writing on how modernist artists responded to the interplay between time and perception, Eysteinnsson and Liska write that "modernist artists" responded to surrounding "transformations" by experimenting with "alternative temporal and spatial constructions of reality" (251). In the realm of literature, a preoccupation with time and consciousness, and an attempt to develop "alternative temporal and spatial constructions of reality" is also clearly apparent. The opening of T.S. Eliot's 1941 poem *Four Quartets* offers perhaps one of the most striking modernist inquiry into the nature of time:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable. (1)

Here Eliot offers a "temporal and spatial constructions of reality" that challenges the idea of a fixed, demarcated notion of spatial / temporal difference, suggesting the co-presence of "time present" and "time past" in "time future," and implies that attempts to measure time contradict a sense that it is "eternally present."

In this particular example, I would suggest that we see evidence of an interesting development. The idea of time as "eternally present" may be read as an attempt to respond to a developed distrust of the standardisation and commoditisation of time observed by Armstrong, combined with the collapse of faith in free will suggested by the writings of Freud, Darwin, Nietzsche and Marx, and an emerging sense of disorientation suggested by Simmel and Le Bon, by countering the dualistic sense of time as a multiplicity from which humans are removed with a monistic view of time as a permanent totality. Although Eliot seems cynical about this idea, suggesting that this makes time "unredeemable," in other writers this same concept, that though the parameters of time and perception are indistinct the sense of dislocation that this produces can be countered with a sense of a wider totality. is presented as a positive. We find this view in the example of J.B. Priestley's 1937 play *Time*

and the Conways in which the character Alan at one point reflects:

But the point is, now, at this moment, or any moment, we're only cross-sections of our real selves. What we really are is the whole stretch of ourselves, all our time, and when we come to the end of this life, all those selves, all our time, will be us - the real you, the real me. And then perhaps we'll find ourselves in another time, which is only another kind of dream. (Quoted in Matz 141)

The idea here is that while perceptions in the present may be limited, because at any given point in time one is only a "cross-section" of one's real self: if life is considered as a totality (comparable to Eliot's "eternally present") it is possible to access "the real you, the real me." Priestley was influenced by J. W. Dunne's *An Experiment with Time*, in which it is argued that "the sleeping mind could rise above the 'first-term world, where time appears as a succession of simple three-dimensional scenes' and into a 'second-term world . . . brilliant and real," in which "your past and your future lie stretched out before you like an unrolled scroll" (Stevenson 125-7).

With Eliot on one side, and Priestley and Dunne on the other we see two distinct responses to a sense that time and perception have been drastically altered: with Eliot suggesting that the collapsing of former distinctions is "unredeemable," while Priestley and Dunne suggest that the dislocation opens up the possibility of a wider view of the totality, in which distinctions that are produced by time and perception are dissolved, but an acknowledgment of this indistinctness can precipitate an awareness of the totality, which might in fact be redeeming. These two responses to a widespread re-conceptualisation of time and consciousness may be seen to preconfigure a core ambivalence that we will now find by turning to the writing of Bergson and later Woolf.

In the writing of Henri Bergson, we see a similar attempt to respond to altered perceptions of time and consciousness although his analysis of these themes is arguably much more developed than anything we find in writers previously considered. Bergson's doctoral thesis *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, first published in 1889, explores the concept of time and free will. Early on in the thesis, Bergson draws a distinction between 'real time' (*durée réelle*) and mechanistic time. He develops a distinction between qualitative and quantitative forms of time in order to illustrate this point. Qualitative time, he argues, is experiential: it is not fixed. Quantitative time on the other hand is empirical and can be measured: this is the time of clocks, of calendars etc. Crucially Bergson argues in *Time and Free Will* that quantitative time, or mechanistic scientific time, is fundamentally spatial: it is measured in terms of the progression of the sun, and consequently is determined by movement in space. Qualitative time on the other hand is that which outside of the spatial domain. Clearly, then, Bergson's text might be seen to respond to the attempts

to standardise and commoditise time, which may be seen to have shaped his idea of ‘mechanistic time’. At the same, *Time and Free Will* may be seen as an attempt to try and conceptualise this notion of ‘real time’ (*durée réelle*) further by attempting to envisage the attributes of durational time.

Two main points stand out in *Time and Free Will* in terms of Bergson’s observations about durational time. The first is that it is innately linked to cognitive perception (or ‘intuition’). Bergson theorised duration as a condition in which “several conscious states are organized into a whole, permeate one another, [and] gradually gain a richer content” (*Time and Free Will* 122). Second, as this last quote also indicates, durational time is a multiplicity, in which the boundaries between experiences (of the kind of that a mechanistic conception of time delineates) lack precision. Bergson writes that durational time “might well be nothing but a succession of qualitative changes, which melt into and permeate one another, without precise outlines” (*Time and Free Will* 104). There are here clear echoes of Nietzschean perspectivalism, while there is also a sense, evocative of Duchamp, of the importance of the quality of imprecision and randomness in perception, with Bergson making explicit the idea that this imprecision offers an insight into the true nature of durational time.

There is the suggestion here that consciousness, which is multiplicitous and imprecise, offers a means of accessing ‘real time’ (*durée réelle*), or of intuiting a reality that mechanistic, scientific or indeed positivist science misses. This idea is tentatively developed further in *Time and Free Will* when Bergson explores the notion of what he terms ‘pure duration.’ Bergson 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, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another. (*Time and Free Will* 122)

The idea of pure duration as a condition distinct from being immersed in the present, but rather, as a state through which one can transcend mechanistic time and access an “organic whole” clearly crosses over with Eliot’s conception of time and consciousness. This idea of ‘pure duration’ as a condition in which “both the past and the present states” coexist strongly resembles Eliot’s conflation of “time past” and “time present” into an “eternal memory.” In Bergson’s later writing, he would be more explicit on this point, developing the idea of ‘inner duration’ as a condition in which the past survives into the present, as he writes: “Inner

duration is the continuous life of a memory which prolongs the past into the present, the present either containing within it in a distinct form the ceaselessly growing image of the past, or, more profoundly, showing by its continual change of quality the heavier and still heavier load we drag behind us as we grow older” (*An Introduction to Metaphysics* 44-45). In this same text, Bergson suggests that positivist or mechanistic conceptions of time as linear and demarcated cannot account for “this survival of the past into the present” which is a component of durational time and pure duration (Ibid.) As Paul Atkinson puts it: “His theory of memory [...] accepted that there is always a retention of the past in the present” (237).

While there are clear echoes of Eliot here, there is little sense that all “time is unredeemable.” Rather Bergson seems closer to arguing, as Priestley does, that this new conception of time reveals ‘another time.’ In Bergson’s later writing, this sense becomes heightened as he begins to argue, like Priestley, that within this new conception of time, there is a sense of totality. In his 1911 text *Creative Evolution*, Bergson reinforces a sense that consciousness is a state of flux, writing: “For a conscious being, to exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly” (14). And yet at the same time, he also seems to argue that this state of flux can be viewed as a totality, as he writes:

All the living hold together, and all yield to the same tremendous push. The animal takes its stand on the plant, man bestrides animality, and the whole of humanity, in space and in time, is one immense army galloping beside and before and behind each of us in an overwhelming charge able to beat down every resistance and clear the most formidable obstacles, perhaps even death. (*Creative Revolution* 271)

The view is remarkably similar to Alan’s in Priestley’s *Time and the Conways*. Though there is perhaps a spiritualist element to Alan’s suggestion that death enables one to realise the totality of one’s existence that is lacking in Bergson, there is still a strong resemblance between this claim and Bergson’s philosophical point that viewed as a totality humanity can be seen as a single death defying unit in a constant state of flux. In short, Bergson proceeds from an analysis that emphasises the flaws of mechanistic time and valorises conscious intuition, arguing that this provides access to a multiplicitous durational time, onto an argument that this multiplicity may be viewed as a totality. Whether Eliot and Priestley were influenced by Bergson’s ideas or not, the clear parallels between these writers are suggestive of a whole new conception of the relationship between time and consciousness.

As we have seen, Woolf herself denied having read Bergson, although claims have been made that his writing influenced her circle of friends. Nonetheless, we can discern clear parallels between her conception of time and consciousness and Bergson’s. To begin with we might turn to her essays in which although she does not address the theme of time directly

she routinely discusses the phenomenon of consciousness and experience, while railing against mechanistic and systematic understandings of these domains in a manner that strongly resembles Bergson.

Woolf's essays generally convey a sense of change occurring in the early twentieth century. For instance in 'The Leaning Tower,' Woolf draws a distinction between writers writing in the nineteenth century, who she suggests "had leisure" and "security" and who were thus "scarcely conscious" of their "limited vision" to later authors such as Cecil Day Lewis, W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Christopher Isherwood and Louis MacNeice for whom "the whole of civilisation, of society, was changing" and who Woolf finds "acutely [...] conscious of their middle-class birth; of their expensive educations" (187-92). The transformative effect of war, fascism, communism, pandemics and urbanisation thus may be seen to have precipitated a new kind of consciousness.

In 'The Leaning Tower,' Woolf is reflecting on how other writers have responded to these changes. In her 1925 essay *The Common Reader* she describes how she herself has responded to these developments, and in particular to the challenges that the novelist faces when confronting a new perception of consciousness. In *The Common Reader*, Woolf argues that the job of the novelist is to convey the messiness of life, contrasting common perceptions of life as symmetrical with the image of a "semi-transparent envelope." She writes: "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumcised spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?" (*The Common Reader* 122). In suggesting this, she responds that the novelist should respond to the multiplicity and the randomness of human experience as she writes: "Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small" (*The Common Reader* 122). The search for truth in the "disconnected and incoherent" elements of experience, and in domains "commonly thought small," is suggestive of Bergson's emphasis on intuition and his rejection of mechanistic or positivist responses to life.

Following on from this, Woolf reflects in her essays how she has developed an approach as a novelist towards communicating a sense of character. She writes: "People, like Arnold Bennett, say I can't create [...] characters that survive. My answer is - [...] only the old argument that character is dissipated into shreds now: the old post-Dostoevksy argument. I daresay its true, however, that I haven't that 'reality' gift. I insubstantise, wilfully to some

extent, distrusting reality-its cheapness” (Quoted in Goldman 35). The sense that Woolf insubstantises willfully may be seen to accord with the sentiments expressed in *The Common Reader* in her search for the “disconnected and incoherent” elements of experience. The suggestion is that if life is not symmetrically arranged, but is more like a “semi-transparent envelope,” then the unity of character, too, is questionable.

Woolf’s essays thus may be seen to express an awareness of an altered consciousness in the early twentieth century, of a rejection of mechanistic and systematised conceptions of life and of a belief in the need to combat ‘realist’ tendency by conveying a sense of the insubstantial nature of experience when developing characters. In turning now to Woolf’s fiction writing practices, it might be argued that this manifests itself in two distinct characteristics: first, efforts to break down the fixity of subjectivity by developing complex characterisations; second, efforts to dissolve the fixity of time by creating contracted and interwoven narratives, and by making use of free indirect discourse.

On the first point, Jane Goldman has argued that in her fiction Woolf develops “a model of modernist and feminist aesthetics as self-consciously incomplete and arising from the impetus to always undo unifying and fixed models of subjectivity” (Goldman, 56). The attempt to “undo unifying and fixed models of subjectivity” can, paradoxically, be discerned in Woolf’s characterisations. For instance in her 1925 novel *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf describes how the protagonist Clarissa walks along Oxford Street preparing for the party we learn: “She knew nothing; no language, no history; she scarcely read a book now, except memoirs in bed” (9). In short, Woolf is interested in conveying at a level of characterisation the dissolution of character.

On the second point, Woolf may be seen to dissolve the unity of time in her novels through contracted narratives and narrative techniques in which mechanistic time is disrupted. *To the Lighthouse* serves as a strong example of this: in part because as a ‘one day novel’ in which there are no major events it demonstrates Woolf’s interest in the ‘small’ being just as significant as the ‘big’; but also because of the use of free recollection, as well as free indirect discourse, for instance in the following passage:

Then again silence fell; and then, night after night, and sometimes in plain midday when the roses were bright and light turned on the wall its shape clearly there seemed to drop into this silence this indifference, this integrity, the thud of something falling. [A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.]
(*To the Lighthouse* 145)

The conflation of the “thud” with the thus of a shell exploding in the war several years previously conveys a sense of the fluidity of time as it is experienced on a level of memory.

As Maggie Humm writes: “Bergson’s idea that interactions of past and present could be envisaged spatially and photographically, is realised in Woolf’s photographic practice” (7), referring to the photographic or montage style suggested in the above passage

While *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* can be seen to reflect a preoccupation with dissolving the unity of character and time, it is Woolf’s 1931 novel *The Waves* in which these themes find their fullest expression, as Woolf explores the relationship between consciousness and time in a way that dissolves systematising schemata more effectively than in any other of her fictional creations. This is achieved primarily by developing a formal approach to narrative that pushes beyond the dissolution of character and time in *Mrs Dalloway*. As Robert Richardson writes:

Despite the multitude of seemingly or potentially symbolic detail, and despite the intensity of vision (for example, the descriptive interludes and the children’s early monologues), the fictive world of *The Waves* seems curiously insubstantial. Plot and character in the traditional novelistic sense seem at best elusive, at worst sketchy, even non-existent. The highly stylized language and the convention of the monologues are disquieting - or simply monotonous - and deprive the reader of realistic dialogue as a means of grasping character. (692)

The dissolution of a conventional narrative structure into six character voices, with one of these, Percival, never actually speaking, is suggestive of Woolf realising her professed aim to “insubstantise, willfully” within the domain of character on a new level.

If we consider Woolf’s characterisation of Bernard in the novel, this sense becomes all the more clear. As we are offered insights into Bernard’s thoughts it is clear that he is sceptical about the idea that consciousness and time are solid entities as he reflects at one point: “Let us again pretend that life is a solid substance, shaped like a globe, which we turn about in our fingers. Let us pretend that we can make out a plain and logical story, so that when one matter is despatched—love for instance—we go on, in an orderly manner, to the next” (*The Waves* 193). At another point, the sense in which character is a constructed entity that is spread out over time and has no whole is communicated as Bernard reflects:

Hence, too, when I am leaving you and the train is going, you feel that it is not the train that is going, but I, Bernard, who does not care, who does not feel, who has no ticket, and has lost perhaps his purse. Susan, staring at the string that slips in and out among the leaves of the beech trees, cries: ‘He is gone! He has escaped me!’ For there is nothing to lay hold of. I am made and remade continually. Different people draw different words from me. (*The Waves* 100)

Over the course of the novel, this sense of dissolution and fragmentation becomes more acute. Igor Webb has argued that by the time we come to the end of the novel’s ninth section,

Bernard “brings us to understand that personality, the conscious (here, the created) self, is [...] a ‘fictitious’ order which interferes with one’s direct participation in life. As Bernard defines it, personality is an accumulation of past choices and events, or, baldly, just another story” (175). And Webb continues that “It is this self which Bernard sheds in his experience of nothingness, and it is this loss which permits him to accept without obstruction or reservation the ‘physicalness’ of the book’s nominalistic universe” (Ibid.). Following from this, Webb observes that in the novel Woolf shows “the ego as a barrier raised between the person and his experience, and the extension of the ego becomes not an extinction of the soul in God but a transformation of external reality into the image of the beholder” (Ibid.).

Here it is clear that Woolf, unlike Bergson, sees the dissolution of consciousness into a soup of time as indicative of a prevailing ‘nothingness.’ This sense the dissolution of character into time results in a reflection on nothingness has been noted by critics, with Janine Utell suggesting that “Woolf’s work resides firmly in a canon of elegy,” pointing out that Ann Banfield “has noted particularly that *The Waves* is elegiac” (6). Thus, while Bergson sees the dissolution of time and consciousness as a phenomenon that gives birth to a new kind of awareness of a totality, in line with Priestley, Woolf’s characterisation of the dissolution, in line with her observations in ‘The Leaning Tower’ and *The Common Reader*, conversely lean towards an Eliotic perception of an “unredeemable” situation, as if an awareness of the dissolution of time, character and consciousness from a formerly perceived sense of unity has resulted in a spiritual despair and sense of nothingness of the kind embodied by Barnard.

This paper began by exploring the causes of a disruption of former perceptions of time and consciousness in the early twentieth century. It then reflected on two distinct responses to the dissolution of unity in the form of Priestley and Eliot. Having established this it has explored in detail the writing of Bergson and Woolf, suggesting that their writing these two contiguous but distinct responses to a broader sense of shifting perceptions of time and consciousness in the early twentieth century.

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