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## The Mind against the Hours: Bergsonian Conception of Time in *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf.

Paulo Lorca<sup>1</sup>

The article presents an analysis of *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf in the light of Henri Bergson's theory of time, as presented specifically in *Time and Free Will* and *Matter and Memory*. The discussion focuses around the modernist concern about the struggle between the time of the mind and the time of the clock, and remarks on the importance of Bergson's theory to elucidate the actual resolution of this tension within the narrative.

KEYWORDS: Virginia Woolf, Henri Bergson, time, duration, subjectivity, homogeneous time.

When schematizing her ideas during the course of writing *Mrs Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary on Monday, October 15, 1923, that she had discovered what she called the "tunnelling process" by which she would tell the past of her characters by means of "instalments" (68); this envisionment refers not only to the particular relations of time and memory as displayed particularly in *Mrs Dalloway*, but they also hint at what became one of the pivotal concerns of

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Modernist writers during the first half of the twentieth century, which was the meditation on mnemonic experience and the relation between the inner world of the mind and the nature of time. This dualist notion of time as two opposite and simultaneous experiences, one inner and the other outer, had its treatment extensively in a wide variety of works, such as Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which introduced the distinction between Habitual Memory and Involuntary Memory; or as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which, as well as *Mrs Dalloway*, articulates its plot within the frame of a single day. But most notoriously, this dualism was developed in depth by French philosopher Henri Bergson, whose theories manifested a "resistance – like modernist writers" to conceptions of time or life as a series; as a succession of separate, clearly divisible events (Stevenson 100). In the light of Henri Bergson's ideas about time and duration, I will argue that these bear much resemblance with how Virginia Woolf constructs the way in which her characters, especially Clarissa and Septimus, experience time and memory in the novel.

For Bergson, in his book *Matter and Memory*, perception in terms of sensible knowledge works on certain diagrammatic designs of "homogeneous time and homogeneous space" that are essentially fictitious (210); thus for conceiving the idea of homogeneous time, and to be able to distinguish in it the separate unities of different 'moments', Bergson affirms that "we are bound to imagine a diagrammatic design of succession in general . . . which is to the flow of matter in the sense of length as space is to it in the sense of breadth"(211). This diagrammatic and homogeneous design of time was previously regarded by Bergson, in *Time and Free Will*, as a "spurious concept, due to the trespassing of the idea of space upon the field of pure consciousness" (99). For the author, time does not consist of a sequential, measurable *line*; this was nothing more than the contamination of spatial perception at the level of superficial psychic states. The true experience is considered by the author as pure heterogeneity, or in his words

Pure duration ... 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 ...

[It] forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole. (100)

Henceforth, the true experience of time occurs exclusively within the self, and it can only be perceived by means of intuition since any other attempt to categorize or define time will become a transposition of the idea of space. Bergson describes duration as the "states of consciousness [that], even when successive, permeate one another and in the simplest of them, the whole soul can be reflected"(98). On the other hand, he is very critical about "the time which our clocks divide into equal portions", regarding it as a mere "illusion" (107). Bergson presents a suspicious attitude towards the clock, as the figure that represents the 'spurious conception of time'. The author explains that the movement of its hands corresponds to the oscillations of the pendulum, yet they do not measure duration, but merely count simultaneities; moreover, he states: "Outside of me, in space, there is never more than a single position of the hand ... Within myself, a process of organization or interpenetration of conscious states is going on, which constitutes true duration"(108). It is in this scheme that memory plays a very specific role. It functions as the vehicle of past states of the mind for the permeation of the present ones, allowing for the merging of both into one accumulative experience. In *Endurance of Life*, Bergson explains the mnemonic component by saying: "My memory is there, which conveys something of the past into the present. My mental state ... is continually swelling with the duration which it accumulates: it goes on increasing -rolling upon itself, as a snowball on the snow" (171); it is like this that all successive moments become the sensible qualities of our memory-shot perception, and consequently they can be conjured as to participate simultaneously, while the past is prolonged into the present, in the mind of the individual.

While one can hardly state that Virginia Woolf was a practitioner of Bergson's theory, it is evident that his ideas about time and memory resonate at the core of Woolf's concerns. Even the images that both authors use to refer to human consciousness bare a resemblance regarding their sense of accumulation. Bergson's rolling snowball points to the same limitless and untamable properties of Woolf's "luminous halo", which is the image she uses in "Modern Fiction", to gather up the "myriad impressions" that the mind receives and which are "trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms"(85).

The Bergsonian contrast between time as experienced by the mind and time as a homogeneous construct can be found as echoing throughout the whole narrative of *Mrs Dalloway*. In the novel, Woolf frames all its development within the lapse of a single day, or what one could also identify with the time of the clock (which would not be exaggerated since the book's first title was meant to be *The Hours*). However, the accounts of what occurs on that specific day of June are not as relevant as what unravels in the minds of the characters through intertwined memories and disquisitions, which are presented by a shifting focalization, in the form of a free indirect discourse. On the one hand, when portraying time in spatial terms Woolf uses the image of the Big Ben, and turns it into a dissecting and brooding figure which remarks its presence upon the life of London, as its strike is described as "[F]irst a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable"(2). This portrayal of time as inescapable is not only materialized, but it is also personified, as for example, when it is given a "great booming voice [that] shook the air...; the half hour" (42). Furthermore, the novel seems to explicitly take the Bergsonian image of the clock as a dividing agent:

Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing, the clocks of Harley Street nibbled at the June day, counselled submission, upheld authority, and pointed out in chorus the supreme advantages of a sense of proportion, until the mound of time was so far diminished that a commercial clock ... announced genially and fraternally... that it was half-past one. (1-2)

For Anne Fernihough, the intrusion of the clock functions not only as the form of presenting the Bergsonian problematic, but, as she states, "the same tolling of Big Ben is heard by the various characters (Clarissa, Septimus, Peter Walsh), but serves only to accentuate the way in which their individual consciousnesses diverge from the commonality imposed by clock time" (4); thus, it is also a useful literary device to change the narrative focus, from the tyrannical outer reality into the depths of the characters' minds. These shifts are most noticeable in the characters of Clarissa and Septimus, which in the writer's words constitute a duality that represent the "world seen by the sane and the insane side by side" (*A Writer's Diary* 60). It is from the first lines of *Mrs Dalloway* that one can notice the focalizing method that prevails in the novel:

Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself... And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning –fresh as if issued to children on a beach. What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her. For having lived in Westminster – how many years now? Over twenty, – one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity ... Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so.

These opening lines present the shifting voice as it starts with the traditional third-person-singular, passing through the impersonal 'one', to the first-person-plural 'we', that is used to plunge the reader surprisingly into Clarissa's thoughts.

The sense of speed regarding the pace of the novel is enhanced by its setting; London works as a catalyst, and it is the center of the most powerful stimuli for the mind and its workings. Cars and accidents, airplanes drawing signs in the sky, people going in and out the tube; all these elements place the narrative in a thought-provoking landscape, where the inner world is at risk of being triggered into unwelcome memories. The Bergsonian irruption of memory is a medium that reveals the characters to us readers; nevertheless, there is a clear contrast in the way in which Clarissa and Septimus experience memory and duration. For Clarissa, her former life in company with Peter Walsh, which "she could remember scene after scene at Bourton" (4), is a scheme on which she can work in order to comprehend her present; the stimuli provided by the city, make her revisit her past, her rejection of Peter's proposal, and her love for Sally almost by means of mapping her memories before her eyes, as she walks through Bond Street. The sense of accumulation and interpenetration of past into present that Bergson remarked as the true experience of time, his pure duration, is clearly noticeable through the focus of Clarissa: "somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part" (6). All the possibilities of remembrance, as brought by the urban experience on Bond Street, are celebrated by Clarissa. We are told that "Bond Street fascinated her" (8); and even the sound of a violent explosion, followed by the passing of a car, apparently bearing an important person, produces in her a kind of spiritual experience: "she had seen something white, magical circular ... which by force of its own lustre, burnt its way through (Clarissa saw the car diminishing, disappearing)" (14); this agitation of the surface of the city by the passing car, plunges her into a

feeling of comfort, and to the realization that "she gave a party too" (14). In contrast, the workings of the city are certainly a risk to the frail mind-wanderings of Septimus Warren Smith, whose relationship with past states of memory is much more conflictive. By means of involuntary association, the traumatized mind of Septimus brings forth war memories into the present. Anne Fernihough describes this character as "it is the mentally ill, shell-shocked soldier ... who is most vulnerable to [mind-wandering] and least able to cope with life", adding that "His shell shock has opened him up to a richly synaesthetic, yet also bewildering, experience of the world around him" (67). The reaction of the character to the same stimulus of the violent sound that Clarissa hears is evidence of this bewildering experience: "Septimus thought, and this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him"(12). The sensible fiber of the minds of these two characters makes them similar regarding their place as subjects to the involuntary workings of mnemonic experience; however, their different ways of coping with past states merging into the present makes them work as doubles, almost in contrast. In this sense, Septimus appears as a foil to Clarissa, because he represents the inability to *endure*, in a Bergsonian manner, with the accumulative experience of time.

Considering the importance that Virginia Woolf gives to the subjective experience of time, which is extremely similar to the Bergsonian concept of duration, it is interesting to notice that the whole narrative is framed by time; it takes place during a single day, "in a moment of June" and the majority of its actions gather up in at the final event: the party. It is this definite event in time which first motivates Clarissa to go to Bond Street to buy her flowers in the first place, and it is also the awaited event in which the most important agents of the life of the protagonist, Peter and Sally, will meet again. It is awaited, and it is scheduled. Although time seems to flow

simultaneously within the minds of the characters who, by means of intervallic monologues reveal the hidden patterns of their pasts, the whole structure of the novel seems to run sequentially, as the focuses shift, into the definite time of a single event. This imposition of time as the spurious, homogenous scheme to which Bergson held his apprehensions, is a recurrent symbol that manifests through the strikes of Big Ben, forcing its presence as unstoppable. This is further increased by the intrusion of the news of Septimus' suicide into the party, the one character who is unable to carry the burden of his traumatic past: "Oh! Thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death" (162), and here, the uninvited guest, the unwelcomed figure of the last hour seems to remark that the tyrannical scheme of spatial time, as a line that ends, cannot be surmounted, nor denied, by the reveries of mind-wandering. Therefore, although there is an embracing of the conflictive relationship of the two forms of conceiving time by Bergson, it seems that the anxiety of overcoming the clock in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* cannot be utterly relieved and we are almost compelled to dwell on Peter's last inquiries: "What is this terror? What is this ecstasy? ... What is it that feels me with extraordinary excitement?" (172).



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