

MRS. DALLOWAY'S EXISTENTIAL TEMPORALITY

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'The existential-ontological constitution of Dasein's totality is grounded in temporality.' (Heidegger 2007: 488)

'Human time is always a rolling accumulation of traces of previous time, taken up into the body and bound up with intentions directed at the future.'
(Armstrong 2005: 13)

ABSTRACT: Using Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* as primary text to illuminate the human experience of time, it is argued against T. Armstrong (in *Modernism*) that the depiction of time by Modernist writers such as Woolf is Heideggerian rather than Bergsonian. This study is used to reveal the originality of Heidegger as opposed to Bergson, whose ideas on time, it is suggested, are merely an accumulation of traces of previous ideas on time. Drawing on Aristotle's *Metaphysica*, *De Interpretatione*, *Ethico Nicomachea*, *Rhetorica* and *Physica* to develop a new vocabulary, Heidegger revealed the distinctive ontological foundation of space and time in connecting temporality with being. The characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* illustrate the difference between an authentic and an inauthentic relation to the temporality of being.

KEYWORDS: English Literature; Ontology

The disambiguation of Martin Heidegger's conception of time can be found profoundly in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, which will be my primary text. Heidegger published *Being and Time* in 1927, Woolf published *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1925, thus these two masterpieces of literature will be my starting point. Armstrong has noted that the human experience of time in Modernity was helped shaped fundamentally by the studies of Bergson. I would like to argue against Armstrong on

this matter, as Bergson's theories on time can also be described as an accumulation of traces of previous ideas on time. Bergson's account of time was essentially determined by Aristotle. My understanding of the depiction of time by Modernist writers (such as Woolf) is not so much Bergsonian but much more Heideggerian. Heidegger's *Being and Time* rethinks time very differently to Bergson, drawing in particular upon Aristotle's *Metaphysica*, *De Interpretatione*, *Ethico Nicomachea*, *Rhetorica* and *Physica*. Heidegger uses an elaborate vocabulary of his own, discarding traditional terminology. Adverbs, prepositions, pronouns and conjunctions are often used by him as nouns, thus my following argumentation may not seem as cogent as usual due to Heideggerian innovations in linguistics.

The analytical framework of this article will utilise Heidegger contra Bergson. To be specific, the departure of Heidegger on the concept of time as one of space and time as having a distinctive ontological function which connects temporality with being. This will be done to shed light on the fictional Modernist narratives of Woolf.

The following quote is extracted from a chapter entitled: Dasein's authentic potentiality-for-being-a-whole, and temporality as the ontological meaning of care in Heidegger's *Being and Time*:

An authentic potentiality-for-Being-a-whole on the part of Dasein has been projected existentially. By analysing this phenomenon, we have revealed that authentic Being-towards-death is anticipation. Dasein's authentic potentiality-for-being, in its existentiell attestation, has been exhibited, and at the same time existentially Interpreted, as resoluteness. (Heidegger 2007: 349)

Clarissa Dalloway fears the forward progression of time, thus she is inauthentic in her being-towards-death. As *Mrs. Dalloway* (like Joyce's *Ulysses*) takes place in one single day, this inauthenticity stems from her spending the majority of that day reminiscing over a former infatuation. This obsession has lasted three decades, which Woolf weaves into the narrative with analepsis. The Dasein of Clarissa and her potentialities are abstracted by windows or mirrors, frames in which, the perspective of a constructed moment can be suspended in time.

This contrasts radically with the potentiality-for-Being-a-whole of Septimus Warren Smith. As preceding his suicide he contemplates and anticipates his death. Time is not suspended or frozen for Septimus. Flashbacks are less formative of the future for Septimus unlike Clarissa. It is clear that the two characters do not inhabit the same time. To clarify, Clarissa's existential intentions directed at the future are inauthentic while Septimus has an authentic interpretation of time as the horizon of being.

Heidegger thought that our being can be divided up into finitude as mortality and finitude as nullity; where we cannot exist authentically without fully grasping our

existential choices in the face of our finitude. The death of previous traces of time, which cannot be changed, but determine the future has to be resolutely anticipated. This anticipation makes intentions directed at the future authentic, as it removes Dasein from its lostness in the they and returns its individuality. Future intentions are limited because death reminds us that our possibilities are finite.

To clarify, it is the anticipatory resoluteness that a choice made may be one's last and grasping the moment (as it emerges from the preceding moment) that the possibilities of the coming moment become authentic. This is how Dasein as a whole comes to expression, through acceptance of one's approaching death. Being-towards-death is the only way Dasein's totality can be revealed and thus authenticated. To summarise this point: death completes one's identity by totalizing and individualising Dasein.

The suicide of Septimus, and his thoughts preceding this event, is a Modern fictional example of authentic being-towards-death. Clarissa lacks this anticipation; her time is less psychological, internal and measured by emotion. The striking of Big Ben at three o'clock has to give her narrative a structural temporality. This external, historical, linear clock time has no structural effect on Septimus due to his shell-shocked state, yet he has realised that time is constitutive for Being-in-the-world. Septimus in his ill health doesn't live by the ordinary, traditional conception of time. This is how Clarissa's time differs, as Clarissa is subject to an externalization of a 'qualitative time' into space akin to Bergson's interpretation of time. Alternatively, Septimus (albeit unwittingly due to madness) finds Clarissa's time ontologically indefinite and inadequate. Evidence of the influence of external, quantitative time on Clarissa is found very early on the novel:

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; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. (Woolf 2000: 4)

Here both internal time (Clarissa's heartbeat) and external time (Big Ben) are shown as part of the Urban experience. Big Ben could be a metaphor for the archaeology of time, the time inherited by Bergson from Aristotle: time manifested as space, through the irrevocable striking of the hour. Clarissa mentions that she has lived in Westminster for over twenty years, yet the soft city of Septimus in his delusional state is maybe more authentic and real than the hard city of Clarissa's. Rather than Big Ben reminding Clarissa of her finitude, it is a piece of architecture that is more

symbolic of freezing time. The recurrence of three o'clock throughout the discourse supports this idea.

My juxtaposition of the characters Clarissa and Septimus is clarified by Clarissa's being-towards-death. Her being-towards-death is made explicit in an interior monologue concerning Peter. She feels that somehow in the streets of London both she and Peter survive. She feels immortalised in the landscape of the city in a stream of consciousness akin to a daydream. For Heidegger, Dasein is essentially Being with Others. The thought of Clarissa's that both herself and Peter survive in the architecture of London is an inauthentic manifestation of Dasein. According to Heidegger, the Dasein of Others (like our own) only reaches its wholeness in death; thus Peter's Dasein would remain incomplete if Clarissa's assertion transpired. From a deconstructionist's perspective, Clarissa does not think concretely on this matter, prior to her idea that she survives her death, there is a self-subversion:

Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely?
(Woolf 2000: 9)

The inevitability and/or consolation of death contradicts her following notion of immortality. This deconstruction doesn't erase Clarissa's inauthentic being-towards-death, it just highlights a point in the text where psychological/biological time and linear Clock time intersect. Derrida or Irigaray maybe would describe this intersection as an *aporia*.

The dying of the Other is the most important idea being contemplated (on this page) by Clarissa. If Heidegger is correct, the end and totality of Dasein can only be conceived in each case as one's own, thus Clarissa cannot authentically conceive Peter's death; as Peter's death is his own exclusively. Death is an existential phenomenon. The existential meaning of Peter's coming-to-an-end is not addressed by Clarissa. Her thoughts turn to the people of London, (the they) which Heidegger would describe as falling. Falling is the evasion of death through fleeing in the face of it. The 'they' or the inhabitants of London in this part of the novel does not permit Clarissa the courage for anxiety in the face of death.

The car had gone, but it had left a slight ripple which flowed through the glove shops and hat shops and tailors' shops on both sides of Bond Street. For thirty seconds all heads were inclined the same way – to the window [...] strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag of Empire. (Woolf 2000 : 19)

This everyday scene describes an indifference towards the uttermost possibility of existence subsiding briefly. To clarify, for thirty seconds there is authentic being-towards-death collectively. By thinking of the dead, the 'they' (for thirty seconds) become individualised through each stranger facing their own potentiality-for-being. They themselves realise the constraints of time. The gaze of the Other projects death as a limitation of possibilities for thirty seconds. This is contra Bergson's notion that there is no moment, that our concept of now is only a scientific abstraction. Heidegger would describe this moment in Bond street as one of an existential-ontological connection; as death becoming a possibility of Dasein's being. Perhaps existence reaches its height of authenticity in this scenario. The ultimate definition of an individual is the possibility of having no more possibilities, which is death, as no one else can share one's own mortality.

Death imposes a limit on us, a boundary on our potentialities, and manifests our finitude by making it present in Dasein's existence. To clarify, Dasein is not endless because its possibilities are determined by death. This disambiguation of Heideggerian thought is present at this early stage in the novel.

Thrown projection is the catalyst behind Dasein's existence. It throws one into the moment that is grounded in previous moments, which in turn grounds moments to come. Time, as the human horizon, perhaps is the underlying meaning of Dasein. How one orientates oneself in thrownness, especially in the narrow time limit available in life, is of the utmost significance. This means that we do not necessarily exist in time, but rather we exist as temporality fundamentally.

Septimus becomes liberated from his thrown projection through madness. Clarissa and Peter's illusions of the 'they' however are augmented by the sound of Big Ben striking on page 52 and more importantly on page 69 when they last meet. To clarify, Septimus has a freedom towards death which Peter does not. Although Septimus could not look upon the dead on page 76, later in contemplating suicide, he realises that death is the horizon of his being. The novel ends with Peter in extraordinary excitement from crossing paths with Clarissa again, yet this may be naïve because this could be cut short by an accident, such as when Clarissa's sister was killed by a falling tree on page 85.

Peter doesn't anticipate the future possibility of such an abrupt death, thus his excitement is inauthentic. He forgets his past sorrow and how he felt thrown into it on page 69. An authentic moment of vision (at this point) would have been to consider the repetition of these earlier events and death as being a possible boundary.

Septimus, by plotting his death, has a better conception of Dasein's temporality. The psychological death of Septimus is quite surreal, yet paradoxically the realest in

terms of facing temporality as the horizon of being. Perhaps Septimus mirrors a surreality: where dream and reality form an absolute surrealist reality. The surreal world of Septimus appears mad and thus is dismissed by Dr. Holmes, yet this is merely a superficial account, an external account by the Other. Internally, Septimus anticipates the completion of his Dasein through suicide, which is rational and quite sane. Dr. Holmes' temporality differs to the temporality of Septimus.

Mad Septimus is a very Modern character, perhaps even post-modern. The dismemberment of logic he displays can be found in Marinetti's futurism, Breton's surrealism and later in the post-structuralism of Derrida (as a reaction against de Saussure). Septimus dissolves binary logic, logic has failed him. Logic has shattered his nerves and confidence in morality. He refutes logic after the War, as fighting for civilisation seems to him an absurdity.

On an ontological level, the post-War shift into surreality by Septimus is unacceptable for Dr. Holmes. The negation of logic and Clock time is not allowed by his London society. Monumental time is the sole authority ideologically. Big Ben operates as a permanent force. It is a tradition for Big Ben to regulate time politically. This regulation of time alienates Septimus. Big Ben, as a Bergsonian representation of time in a closed space, is rejected by Septimus.

Alienation only consecrates, with didactic insistence and systematic heaviness, the non-participation of spectators (and even of directors and actors) in the creative act, in the irruptive force fissuring the space of the stage [...] All the limits furrowing classical theatricality (represented/representer, signified/signifier, author/director/actors/spectators, stage/audience, text/interpretation, etc) were ethico-metaphysical prohibitions, wrinkles, grimaces, rictuses – the symptoms of fear before the dangers of the festival. (Derrida 1978 : 244)

Septimus feels alienated from society, which is expounded by never meeting Clarissa in the novel. The stage of London is fissured by these two stories alongside each other. The War has left Septimus feeling like a spectator in a theatre of cruelty. As a casualty of this War he becomes introspective and withdrawn while the spectacle surrounds him, ethico-metaphysical prohibitions become a blurred and indistinct to him. Lucrezia feels just as alienated because she is a stranger to the city, in a different temporality to her own perhaps.

Clarissa fears Miss Kilman's possession of Elizabeth which is a danger of the festival of London. Each character has a different perception of what reality is, different fears and different temporalities. Time for the directors (like Dr. Holmes) differs from the time for the actors such as Septimus, yet they share the same stage. Co-presence and temporality is what makes the festival of London life cruel, as it is

difficult to maintain authenticity when subjected to the temporality of the other because monumental time dictates that there is only one temporality.

For Sartre, there are three temporal dimensions: the past, present and future: The past is facticity, it cannot be changed, it is in-itself. The present is for-itself in contrast, this is because of its presence. Interestingly, the past being-in-itself exists as a totality because of the presence of the for-itself of the present. Beings in our world are co-present, because this universal for-itself establishes our presence.

But the present is not only the For-itself's non-being making itself present. As For-itself, it has being outside of it, before and behind. Behind, it was its past; and before, it will be its future. It is a flight outside of co-present being and from the being which it was, toward the being it will be. (Sartre 1969: 123)

To conclude, Modernist being receives its meaning from the future. The lack of meaning in the for-itself becomes conscious, as it has a consciousness towards the possibilities of the future. The present is also conscious of the past and this dimension of time is called reflection. This is a consciousness of the succession of events structuring temporality. There is a lot of dense thought which needs unpacking in this quotation. Intricate movements away from Heidegger and the history of being is at work here. Sartre considers the in – itself as an abstraction without consciousness. The for-itself's passion only catalyses there to be in -itself. The serious ontological doubts surrounding being set forth by Hume's challenges are part of the foundations of this departure. These challenges awoke Kant from his dogmatic slumber on being and provoked him to re-question the distinction between things – in – themselves and appearances. Although Hume and Kant were primarily philosophers, Sartre and Heidegger (in his later work) suggest that perhaps the question of being cannot be undertaken independently of literature, art or science. Sartre was a playwright and a novelist as well as a philosopher. Hume was an economist and historian as well as a philosopher. Near Cambridge, in the Grantchester meadows, temporality, economics and novels were openly discussed between Woolf, Keynes, Russell and Wittgenstein. On and off stage, the entanglement of being, literature and time is a distinct feature of Modernity. A refined point should conclude this article.

There would be no present, that is to say, no sensible world with its thickness and inexhaustible richness, if perception, in Hegel's words, did not retain a past in the depth of the present, and not contract that past into that depth. (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 279)

Hegel's thoughts on time are analysed by Heidegger in a sustained manner from pages 428 to 436 of *Being and Time*. Septimus can be thought of (in this Heideggerian context) as setting himself free for death, throwing back upon his factual there or

factual presence. Paradoxically, He takes over his thrownness with a moment of vision for his time. This is authentic, finite temporality, turning his fate into authentic historicity. Counter to Hegel, time appears as the very fate and necessity where his spirit becomes complete. There is no need to wait until dusk falls for the owl of Minerva to spread its wings and fly.

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