"Time in the Mind"
vs.
"Time on the Clock"

Modernism, Bergson and Woolf’s To the Lighthouse

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Paper submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of “Master in de Taal- en Letterkunde: Frans – Engels” by Birgit Van Puymbroeck

June 2008
But Time, unfortunately, though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality, has no such simple effect upon the mind of man. The mind of man, moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time. An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second. This extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind is less known than it should be and deserves fuller investigation.

Virginia Woolf – *Orlando*
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Marysa Demoor for supervising this dissertation. Her valuable advice and constructive feedback have been indispensable. Furthermore, I am indebted to Ms Sarah Posman for providing ample suggestions on up-to-date reference material. Special regards go also to my family and friends whose support, assistance and encouragement contributed substantially to the writing of this paper.

Birgit Van Puymbroeck – May 2008
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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the perception of time fairly suddenly changed as a result of a series of sweeping technological innovations including the telephone, wireless telegraph, cinema, and automobile. Travelling times were cut back drastically due to the expansion of the railroad system, communication happened almost instantaneously, and for the first time, people felt that the mechanical representation of time in hours, minutes and seconds did not correspond to their experience of time as flux. Independent cultural and scientific developments reflected the way time was experienced and conceptualized. In physics, Einstein demonstrated the relativity of time. In psychoanalysis, Freud analysed the deviant chronology of events in dreams. Henri Bergson considered subjective time as an indivisible stream in his philosophical works and novelists such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf developed a new mode of writing called the stream-of-consciousness.

This dissertation investigates the re-conceptualisation of time during Modernism. It presents a close reading of three of the major works of the French philosopher Henri Bergson: Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience (1889), Matière et mémoire (1896) and L’Évolution créatrice (1907), and offers an in-depth analysis of time in Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse (1927). More specifically, this thesis postulates that if we examine the concept of time in the works of Bergson and Woolf – works which were written in two different disciplines (philosophy and literature), in two different countries (France and Britain), and in two different languages (French and English) – we should arrive at a conclusion that is in line with Stephen Kern’s assertion that “[t]he thrust of the age was to affirm the reality of private time against that of a single public time and to define its nature as heterogeneous, fluid, and reversible” (34).

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1 All quotations (including titles) from Bergson are in the original language (French) to avoid the problem of inadequate or ambiguous translation.

2 Furthermore, Kern notes: “It is impossible to identify a single thesis that properly encompasses all changes in the experience of time and space that occurred in this period. Indeed, one major change was the affirmation of a plurality of times and spaces. Nevertheless, it is possible to indicate the most important development for each of the two major topics – the affirmation of the reality of private time and the leveling of traditional spatial hierarchies” (8, my italics).
A study of “time” during Modernism is particularly compelling as it reveals deeper and more fundamental changes in the twentieth century. In the works of Bergson and Woolf, for instance, thinking about time is inextricably intertwined with questions of memory, perception, knowledge, and – in the case of To the Lighthouse – gender. The Modernists’ interest in the concept of time, therefore, indicates a changing relationship between man and the world, as exemplified by the opposition between an inner and an outer world, the exploration of the relationship between subject and object, and the conflict between a deterministic view of reality and the notion of “creative evolution”. These are conflicts and ideas that did not only determine thinking during the early decades of the twentieth century, but that still remain influential today and, therefore, deserve full investigation.

The first chapter discusses the historical context in which modernist perceptions of time evolved. It examines the dichotomy between public and private time and considers various thematic issues linked to discussions about the past, the present and the future in the fields of physics, sociology, psychology, literature and philosophy. Modernist ‘thinking in time’ is explored from a Bergsonian viewpoint in chapter two. It summarizes Bergson’s views on time as flux (la durée), voluntary and involuntary memory and creative evolution. Chapter three addresses the potential influence of Bergson’s philosophy on Woolf and comments on current ideas concerning their relationship. Finally, chapter four analyses time in To the Lighthouse. Close attention will be paid to both the contents and formal characteristics of the novel, as this last chapter investigates how time is represented in the various layers of the novel: from structure to theme over imagery to individual words.

∞

The changing understanding of time in Modernism has been studied by scholars before. In particular, Stephen Kern provides a thorough overview of the significant changes in technology, culture and science in the period in question in The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1919 ([1983] 2003). Similarly, Randall Stevenson offers a lucid and comprehensive exploration of the new concepts of time shared by Modernist authors such as Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce in Modernist Fiction: An Introduction (1992). Critics have also devoted attention
to Bergson’s and Woolf’s views on time. Suzanne Guerlac offers an admirably comprehensible readers’ guide to two of Bergson’s key texts (Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience and Matière et Mémoire) in Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson (2006), and Mary Ann Gillies’ article “Bergsonism: ‘Time out of Mind’” (2003) discusses the concepts of durée, memory and evolution, introduced by Bergson. With respect to Virginia Woolf’s treatment of time, general discussions of her fiction such as Julia Briggs’s Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life (2006) and Michael Levenson’s Modernism and the Fate of Individuality: Character and Novelistic Form from Conrad to Woolf (1991) were instrumental to the study of time in To the Lighthouse in this dissertation. Furthermore, theorists have established numerous parallels between Bergson’s philosophical theories and Woolf’s literary methods, although these have been equally convincingly denied by others.\(^3\) This dissertation, however, does not seek to establish or deny any such parallels between Woolf and Bergson. Bergson’s philosophy is used rather as a ‘guiding principle’ to analyse time in To the Lighthouse, as 1) it covers a wide range of topics connected with time, such as the idea of time as flux, the complex relationship between time and language, and the apprehension of time by the mind and 2) it provides a meaningful framework to study a novel that is essentially philosophical in nature (See Fokkema and Ibsch 80; Duran 300; Banfield, Phantom 4).

\(^3\) For a critical survey of studies on the relation between Bergson and Woolf, see chapter three: “Bergson and Woolf: Literary Criticism” in the present study.
CHAPTER 1

MODERNIST CONCEPTS OF TIME

Few concepts so preoccupied the twentieth century as time. Whether it was Einstein’s theory of relativity, Durkheim’s social relativity of time or Marcel Proust’s search for temps perdu. The way time was experienced, analysed or represented was a cornerstone of Modernism. This chapter examines the dual conception of time that dominated the beginning of the twentieth century. It opposes public and personal time and considers multiple aspects of the past, the present and the future in various cultural and scientific areas. In this way, an overview is given of how thinking in time developed during the early decades of the twentieth century.

1. PUBLIC TIME VERSUS PRIVATE TIME

1.1. Public Time

At the turn of the twentieth century, the rhythm of modern life changed. Transportation became significantly faster with the further expansion of railroads and the invention of the automobile. The telegraph and telephone made communication almost instantaneous and the electric light reduced the distinction between night and day. In 1886, the Canadian engineer Sanford Fleming commented that the use of the telegraph left “no interval of time between widely separated places proportionate to their distances apart.” Day and night had become mixed up as “noon, midnight, sunrise, sunset, [were] all observed at the same moment” (qtd. in Kern 11-12).

The attempt to institute a uniform time was first made by the railway companies that wanted to synchronize travelling times. While Britain already had a uniform Railway Time in 1848, the United States had to wait until 1883. Yet governments around the globe also made efforts to establish a universal time system. In 1884, the Meridian Conference established the Prime Meridian at the Greenwich Observatory. It divided the earth into twenty-four time zones (each one hour apart) and fixed the exact length and exact beginning of the universal day. Still, different local times were in use as late as the
It was the French that ultimately took the lead in the development of a uniform world time. French President Raymond Poincaré hosted the International Time Conference in Paris in 1912. In the same year, the “Bureau International de l’Heure” was founded to determine “l’heure définitive.” And on 1 July 1913, the Paris Observatory, using the Eiffel Tower as an antenna, sent out the first time signal that was transmitted around the world.

Time, as it was defined and used in the public arena, was homogeneous, atomistic and irreversible. It was based on Newton’s calculus, as it was considered the sum of infinitesimally small, but discrete units. This was made clear both audibly and visually by the ticking and moving of the hands on the clock. The modern electric clock with the sweeping movement of its second hand was only invented in 1916. Clocks decorated the streets, the home, the workplace and the individual’s body with the pocket and the wrist watch. As Stevenson remarks, the “new systemization of time had become a key component of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century industrial and economic developments” (*Modernist Fiction* 128).

In spite of all its practicality and economic benefits, however, the universal time system left “the total human personality’ reduced, reified, and subordinated with processes of increasingly soulless automation and mechanization” (Stevenson, *Modern* 128). This is, for instance, exemplified by D.H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love* (1921), as Gerald Crich radically reforms the workings of his father’s mine.

The working of the pits was thoroughly changed, all the control was taken out of the hands of the miners, the butty system was abolished. Everything was run on the most accurate and delicate scientific method, educated and expert men were in control everywhere, the miners were reduced to mere mechanical instruments. […] [It was] the substitution of the mechanical principle for the organic, the destruction of the organic purpose, the organic unity, and the subordination of every organic unit to the great mechanical purpose. It was pure organic disintegration and pure mechanical organization. (259-260)

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4 Note that ‘l’heure définitive’ was, however, not established until 1 January 1920, the war having interrupted the work of the Bureau International.
Ironically, it is Gerald’s life that is most subjected to the mechanisation and coldness of the modern life as described by Lawrence; his obsession with profit, system and mechanisation turns him, in Gudrun’s view, into something “more intricate than a chronometer-watch” (525). Her views, however, also reflect a wider uneasiness with bondage to time, as “she [Gudrun] suffered, lying there alone, confronted by the terrible clock, with its eternal tick-tack. All life, all life resolved itself into this: tick-tack, tick-tack, tick-tack; then the striking of the hour, then the tick-tack, tick-tack, tick-thank, and the twitching of the clock-fingers” (522-23).5

1.2. Private time

In parallel with the search for a universal time system, a number of ideas and movements against the establishment of a single system emerged in the fields of physics, sociology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and literature.6 Physics questioned the physical possibility of a universal time. Sociology challenged its homogeneity and found that conceptions of time differed from one society to another. In philosophy, a new dualistic thinking that separated external or physical time from internal or experienced time was introduced, while psychoanalysis and literature focused on the private experience of time. The following is a more detailed account of the main tendencies in the five areas mentioned above.

In physics, Ernst Mach questioned Newton’s concept of absolute space and time in a textbook of 1883. His views were greatly advanced by Albert Einstein’s theories of relativity. In 1905, Einstein calculated how time in one reference system moving away at a constant velocity appears to slow down when viewed from another system at rest. He extended this theory in 1916 and concluded that “every reference body has its own particular time” (qtd. in Kern 19). While the Bureau International de l’Heure was trying

5 Randall Stevenson notes how comparable anxieties, specifically about clocks and clockwork, appear with striking frequency in modernist writing. “In James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916), for example, the image chosen to represent hell is of the unceasing ‘ticking of a great clock’. Clocks occupy an equally unpleasant and threatening role in Virginia Woolf’s fiction. In The Waves (1931), one of the things which most upsets the sensitive Bernard is ‘the stare of clocks’, while in Orlando clocks are capable of striking ‘like thunder,’ ‘like a meteor’” (Stevenson, Modernist Fiction 84-85).

6 Physics, although usually associated with “outward” or unified time, is considered under the heading ‘private time’ because of Einstein’s focus on the relativity of time according to the position of the observer, which challenges the universal character of time on the clock.
to establish ‘l’heure definitive’ from 1912 onwards, Einstein affirmed, with what seemed to be scientific certitude, that no definitive or universally valid scale of time could be assumed to exist.

In sociology, Emile Durkheim pointed out in *The Elementary Forms of Social Life* (1915) that space and time are both social constructs. Different societies hold qualitatively different concepts of space and time. “The divisions into days, weeks, months, and years,” for example, “correspond to the periodical recurrence of rites, feasts, and public ceremonies” (qtd. in Kern 19). A temporal framework such as a calendar is, therefore, based on the way a particular society organizes life around various social activities. Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss similarly argued in their “Summary Study of the Representation of Time in Religion and Magic” (1909) that the social origin of time ensures its heterogeneity. In magic or religion, time could be discontinuous due to the appearance of a deity, or expanded as “heroes can live years of magical life in an hour of ordinary existence” (qtd. in Kern 32).

In psychoanalysis, the focus was on the individual’s subjective experience of time. Karl Jaspers’ work in phenomenological psychiatry outlined different modes of perceiving time that could occur in mental illness. Similarly, Eugène Minkowski attempted to understand the way his patients experienced time. Just as sociologists had observed modifications of the continuity and irreversibility of time in magic and religion, psychoanalysts highlighted the temporal distortions in dreams and psychoses. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), for example, Sigmund Freud examined how the sequence of experiences in the course of our conscious life is rearranged to suit the needs of the dreaming mind.

Philosophy was marked by a tendency to distinguish experienced time from physical time. Henri Bergson separated time as we analyse it from time as we experience it, each concept representing a different reality. Nevertheless, only the second concept – experienced time or *la durée* – was considered as ‘real time’ by Bergson. Bertrand Russell, likewise, differentiated between “physical” and “perceptual” time, each representing its own reality. Contrary to Bergson, however, Russell believed that both realities were ‘real time’. While Bergson’s concept of *la durée* emphasized that time as we experience it cannot be divided into separate moments or units, Russell postulated that
there was insufficient proof for any such assumption. According to Russell, the fact that “the sensible flux is devoid of divisions” was “essentially incapable of being proved by immediate experience” (qtd. in Banfield, “Time” 480), which led him to believe that time was dividable as his intuition told him.

In literature, novelists examined the inner lives of characters and changed the form of the novel accordingly. Virginia Woolf was convinced that it was the writer’s obligation to go beyond “the formal railway line of a sentence” and described the chronological realist novel as “false, unreal, merely conventional” (qtd. in Stevenson, Modernist Fiction 87). This corresponded to Ford Madox Ford’s view that “what was the matter with the Novel, and the British Novel, in particular, was that it went straight forward, whereas in your gradual making acquaintanceship with your fellows you never do go straight forward” (qtd. in Stevenson, Modernist Fiction 94-5). In modernist fiction, the passage of time was, therefore, modulated by a character’s consciousness rather than by the clock.

Private or experienced time differs from public time in so far as it is heterogeneous, fluid and reversible. This is, for instance, illustrated by James Joyce’s Ulysses (1922), which follows Leopold Bloom on his meanderings through Dublin while commenting on Bloom’s unique experience of time and its relation to the infinite expanses of cosmic time. Time is heterogeneous in the novel as each chapter is written in a specific rhythm of prose. The last chapter – Molly’s interior monologue – is written in the stream of consciousness illustrating the fluidity of experienced time, while the novel as a whole compresses the twenty years of travel of Ulysses into a mere sixteen hours in the life of Bloom. Joyce also comments on the relativity of time, by recalling the precise day on which he last weighed himself in seven different time systems.

[It was] the twelfth day of May of the bissextile year one thousand nine hundred and four of the christian era (jewish era five thousand six hundred and sixty-four, mohammedan era one thousand three hundred and twenty-two), golden number 5, epact 13, solar cycle 9, dominical letters C B, Roman Indication 2, Julian period 6617, MXMIV. (qtd. in Kern 18)
As for the direction and speed of time, Kern notes how “Joyce created a dramatic interruption in the forward movement of narrative time” (31). For instance, when Bloom approaches a brothel, he steps back a moment to avoid a street cleaner, and only resumes his course forty pages later. In those forty pages, the reader is led through a long digression that involves dozens of characters and covers a period of time far exceeding the few seconds public time would allow.

1.3. The conflict between public and private time

In a diary entry of 1922, Kafka commented on the madding discordance between public and private time: “It’s impossible to sleep, impossible to wake, impossible to bear life or, more precisely, the successiveness of life. The clocks don’t agree. The inner one rushes along in a devilish or demonic – in any case, inhuman – way while the outer one goes, falteringly, its accustomed pace” (qtd. in Kern 17). This extract illustrates the conflict between public and private time. Inner time runs at its own pace, which differs from moment to moment, while external time maintains the same “accustomed” rhythm. This was felt to be a source of conflict and confusion in the twentieth century as the individual seemed to live in two parallel worlds: an external one that was ruled by the ticking of the clock and an internal one that was unpredictable and that followed its own logic.

In general, the inner or private world was preferred over the mechanisation and artificiality of the outer world, especially in literature and philosophy. People felt universal time intruded upon the uniqueness of private experience and the freedom of the individual. In philosophy, Henri Bergson argued that only a life fully open to the fluid movement of la durée had access to an essential source of individual freedom, as it allowed for a full integration of the past into the present. He characterised the representation of time into space – i.e. as divided into hours, minutes and seconds – as a “bastard concept” and dismissed it as pure “vice” (qtd. in Kern 24). This was stressed even more by William James who described the spatialization of time as the “vicious mode of mangling thought’s stream” and ridiculed it by saying that it was the same as arguing that a river was composed of “pailfuls” of water (qtd. in Kern 24). Internal time
was, therefore, not only considered as a source of freedom, it was presented as morally superior to external time.

The conflict between public and private time was also explored in a number of literary works, but its most powerful dramatisation was achieved by Joseph Conrad in *The Secret Agent* (1907). There, Mr Verloc is assigned to “blow up the meridian” by the anarchist leader, Mr Vladimir. The attempt, however, fails due to an early detonation of a hand-bomb: the Greenwich Observatory remains intact and Verloc’s brother-in-law, the mentally retarded Stevie, is killed in the process. The attempt constitutes one of the most direct assaults on uniform public time imaginable. As Mr Vladimir testifies, the attack was supposed to be an act of pure absurdity, an assault on science and logic itself that had imposed a limitation on freedom:

But what is one to say to an act of destructive ferocity so absurd as to be incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable, in fact, mad? Madness alone is truly terrifying, inasmuch as you cannot placate it either by threats, persuasion or bribes. […] The demonstration must be against learning – science. But not every science will do. The attack must have all the shocking senselessness of gratuitous blasphemy. Since bombs are your means of expression, it would be really telling if one could throw a bomb into pure mathematics. But that is impossible. […] What do you think of having a go at astronomy? […] There could be nothing better. Such an outrage combines the greatest possible regard for humanity with the most alarming display of ferocious imbecility. […] And there are other advantages. The whole civilized world has heard of Greenwich. The very boot-blacks in the basement of Charing Cross Station know something of it. See? […] Yes, […] the blowing up of the first meridian is bound to raise a howl of execration. (36-7)

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7 Kern, for example, also notes Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), in which Dorian’s picture grows older and uglier while Dorian himself stays young and handsome, as well as Marcel Proust’s *A la Recherche du temps perdu* (1922), in which the private time experienced by the narrator Marcel does not conform to the time measured by the clocks. Marcel, for instance, reflects that his body keeps his own time (see Kern 16). In the first example, however, it is the outer time as represented by the picture that is seen as morally superior over Dorian’s eternal youth, i.e. time as Dorian wishes to experience it, instead of time as it is actually experienced by Dorian.
Conrad’s most significant influence on later writing, however, is not the attack on public time, but his suggestion of “antidotes which are not directly political […] but imaginative and aesthetic” (Stevenson, Modern 130-31). The Secret Agent resists strict chronology at the level of form through its extensive anachronisms and seemingly random assemblage of its own narrative. When Winnie Verloc, for instance, stabs her husband with a kitchen knife, the scene is played out in slow-motion from the victim’s, i.e. Mr Verloc’s, point of view.

[The movement of the knife was] leisurely enough for Mr Verloc to recognize the limb and the weapon, […] for him to take in the full meaning of the portent, and to taste the flavour of death rising in his gorge. […] for the first paralysing effect of this discovery to pass away before a resolute determination to come out victorious from the ghastly struggle […]. They were leisurely enough for Mr Verloc to elaborate a plan of defence […]. But they were not leisurely enough to allow Mr Verloc the time to move either hand or foot. The knife was already planted in his breast. (212)

As Winnie realizes she has killed her husband, she becomes aware of an extremely loud ticking in the room. She first thinks it is the wooden clock in the parlour, but remembering that the clock had no audible tick, she discovers it is the blood dripping from her husband on the floor: “Dark drops fell on the floorcloth one after another, with a sound ticking and growing fast and furious like the pulse of an insane clock” (214).

Strategies comparable to those used in The Secret Agent inform many modernist narratives. In Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway (1925), for example, inner and outer time are contrasted as characters’ inner trains of thought are persistently interrupted by the chiming of Big Ben, thus “[f]loodin’ characters’ minds, sometimes between single lines of conversation (MrsD 47). The deafening intrusion of Big Ben’s chime is, moreover, accompanied by an extraordinary number of other vociferous clocks, forcing characters to consider, for example, how

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, suspended above a shop in Oxford Street, announced genially and fraternally, as if it were a pleasure to Messrs Rigby and Lowndes to give the information gratis, that it was half-past one. Looking up, it appeared that each letter of their names stood for one of the hours; subconsciously one was grateful to Rigby and Lowndes for giving one time ratified by Greenwich; and this gratitude [...] naturally took the form later of buying off Rigby and Lowndes socks or shoes. (MrsD 103)

This description is in several ways exemplary of the new views on time. First of all, time is associated with commerce; it is commodified as the free information of the hour is juxtaposed with the buying of socks and shoes. Secondly, the passage indicates a view of time as something whole or continuous: time as a ‘mound’, but one which is shredded and divided by time on the clock. Stevenson notes that these shredding clocks are “escaped” by means of the narrative mode that “turn[s] away from the reifying pressures of modern life towards more inviolate inner states of consciousness;” the divisions and subdivisions of public time “dissolve in a seamless, unchronological stream of mingling and impressions” (Modern 131).

2. Past, Present and Future: Concepts of Time

2.1. The Past

2.1.1. The Historical Past

In the Modernist era, the perception of the past changed. The phonograph, invented by Edison in 1877, registered sounds, music and voices as faithfully as in real life and literally brought the past into the present. Similarly, the recording of events on film in 1869 made it possible to create a direct vision of the past with all the details a painting or a description would omit. This not only provided direct access to immediate history, but also increased awareness of what would become historical documents. These new inventions went hand in hand with a renewed interest in history.

In the face of rapid technological, cultural and social change, people turned to the past for stability: not to romanticize it as philosophers from the Romantic or the Enlightenment movements had done (e.g. Jean-Jacques Rousseau), but as a foundation of
formal thinking. The Modernists believed that man was shaped entirely by history and society; that philosophies, nations, and social systems had become what they are as a result of vestiges of all that has gone before. Furthermore, now that the world had become a secular place, the historical past constituted an important source of identity. After almost two millennia of Christianity, thinkers sought to find meaning and justification for life in history. As Kern notes, “If man could no longer believe he had a place in eternity, he could perhaps find one in the movement of history” (51).

This renewed interest in the past manifested itself in different areas of the culture. In history, historians and archaeologists found new sources, dug up buried civilizations, and generally professionalized the discipline. Darwin’s theory of evolution discarded reigning modes of thinking in biology and radically changed the view on history, while historicist systems such as those of Hegel and Marx revolutionized philosophy and social science. In the literature of the 1920s, an interest in the historical past was combined with an active search for new modes of expression. T.S. Eliot, for instance, interspersed “The Waste Land” with references to all kinds of mythical and historical figures and events. In order to “Make it new,” to criticise and re-imagine the past, one needed to have a thorough knowledge of what had gone before.

2.1.2. The Personal Past

Just as philosophers, psychologists and novelists had defended a private time against a public time, so they also turned away from the historical past to a personal past – although the two were just as easily combined. As Kern notes, Modernists “rebelled against a sweeping and blind faith in the value of a historical approach to all living processes” and focused on the personal past that was unique for each human being and “essential for a healthy and authentic life” (61). The personal past was considered as a guarantee for mental health (Freud), a condition for freedom (Bergson) or the key to paradise (Proust). Much of the debate centred on the faculty of memory and the influence of the personal past on later experiences.
In philosophy, Bergson distinguished between two kinds of memory: body memory (also called voluntary memory) and pure memory (or involuntary memory). Kern summarizes: “For Bergson every movement leaves traces that continue to affect all subsequent physical or mental processes. The past collects fibres in the body as it does in the mind and determines the way we walk and dance as well as the way we think” (40). The idea that the past persists in every fibre of the body had already been advanced by Henry Maudsley in 1867 when he introduced the concept of ‘organic memory’. It was elaborated by the German psychologist Ewald Hering and the British writer Samuel Butler who also discussed the possibility of inherited memories, i.e. the idea that every living cell contains not only the memory of the experience of its parent cells, but also of those of former generations.

In psychology, the French psychiatrist Théodule Ribot concluded that memories disappear according to a law of regression, i.e. from the more recent to the older, from the complex to the simple. This explains why childhood memories are the most securely fixed; an idea that was picked up by psychoanalysis and literature. Freud, for instance, believed that the most distant past, that of our early childhood, is the most important and that all dreams and neuroses have their origins in childhood. Every experience, however insignificant, leaves a trace on the human psyche; nothing is forgotten, and early experiences continue to shape and structure adult life. The effect of traumatic experiences is also addressed in Woolf’s novel To the Lighthouse, as Mrs Ramsay fears her son James will regret the failed trip to the lighthouse “all his life” (TL 72). In fact, it is only ten years later, when the trip finally materializes, that James can begin to forgive his father and leave the past behind.

In literature, Marcel Proust was one of the first to experiment with memory. Just like Bergson, he distinguished between two types of memory – mémoire volontaire and

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8 Body memory stores all habitual actions, while involuntary memory is the survival of personal experiences, a survival that, according to Bergson, happens unconsciously. This will be further explained in chapter two.

9 Furthermore, Stephen Kern cites Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897) as a “ghoulish elaboration of the organic persistence of the past,” as the blood of several centuries of victims mixed with the blood of a long ancestral line in the veins of the four-hundred-year-old Transylvanian count (41).

10 See also chapter 4: “Time and Structure: Three Parts, Three Perspectives on Time” in the present study.
mémoire involontaire. In A la Recherche du temps perdu, memory plays an essential role in the narrator’s emotional life, as well as in the form of the novel. This is immediately made clear in the opening pages of Du côté de chez Swann. Proust begins his seven volume cycle with a general reflection on dream, memory and sleep, illustrating his reflections with scenes that are taken from both childhood and adulthood, flooding the reader with “shifting and confused gusts of memory” (qtd. in Stevenson, Modernist Fiction 91). This narrative method was adopted by other modernist writers, including Virginia Woolf. In her novel Orlando, Woolf writes:

Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that. Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after. Thus, the most ordinary movement in the world, such as sitting down at a table and pulling the inkstand towards one, may agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments […] our commonest deeds are set about with a fluttering and flickering of wings, a rising and falling of lights. (O 55)

For Woolf, memory does not follow a chronological order; we do not know “what comes next, or what follows after” (O 55). It is the “seamstress” that sews the past and present together. Memory thus becomes a central, structuring device in modernist fiction, although it moves with certain randomness. Moreover, just like in Proust, the most ordinary action could trigger a whole set of associations. When Lily Briscoe is painting her picture in To the Lighthouse, she suddenly remembers an image of Mrs Ramsay sitting on the beach and wonders: “Why, after all these years had that survived, ringed around, lit up, visible to the last detail, with all before it blank and all after it blank, for miles and miles?” (TL 194).

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11 Proust’s use of these terms is, however, considerably different from Bergson’s. See chapter 2: “Bergson and Literature: Voluntary and Involuntary Memory.”

12 See also chapter 4: “Memory and Intuition.”
2.2. The Present

2.2.1 Simultaneity and Sequence

The influence of new inventions such as the wireless telegraph and the telephone reduced the boundaries between time and space and gave the impression of being at two places at once, i.e. on a real physical location, as well as at the other side of the telegraph or phone line. The invention of the cinema, similarly, simulated simultaneity by rapidly alternating different scenes on different locations suggesting simultaneous action.\(^\text{13}\) In music, melody and harmony worked together, different melodies sounded simultaneously and two or more voices could sing different lyrics at the same time. This was imitated in the modern novel through the use of multiple perspectives in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, multiple voices in T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”, or punctuation – in particular the use of square and round brackets – in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*.\(^\text{14}\) Nevertheless, these techniques could not conceal the fact that written language is necessarily sequential and can only give the impression of simultaneity.

Whereas artists tried to capture the experience of simultaneity, Einstein argued that there could be no such thing in a universe with moving parts. In his theory of relativity, Einstein concluded that “spatial and temporal coordinates vary with relative motion, that no exact determination of the simultaneity of distant events is possible for an observer in motion with respect to those events, and that therefore one cannot attach any *absolute* status to the concept of simultaneity” (Kern 80). Two events which, viewed from a system of coordinates, are simultaneous, can no longer be looked upon as simultaneous when envisaged from a system which is in motion relatively to the system at rest. Time is relative and varies from observer to observer. A set of events that happen at the same time for one observer, thus may happen as a sequence for another making the notion of absolute simultaneity an absurdity.

2.2.2. Fragment and Flow

A second element that dominated discussions about the present was the opposition between fragment and flow. Some believed that the present was only an

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\(^{13}\) In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson explains at some length how the cinematograph creates an impression of continuous movement out of what is actually a series of static images.

\(^{14}\) See also Chapter 4: “Time and Language: Linguistic Devices.”
infinitesimally small slice of time between the past and the future, while others expanded the present by including parts of the immediate past and future. As Stephen Kern notes, this controversy about the nature of time and the present had been ongoing since the ancient Greeks (82). Interest was however revived with experimental psychologists trying to measure the present, philosophers debating the nature of what we experience as ‘Now’ and artists combining fluidity and fragmentation in their fiction.

Since the 1880s, psychologists had tried to determine the duration of the present – “that interval of time that can be experienced as an uninterrupted whole” (Kern 82). Wilhelm Wundt, one of the founding fathers of experimental psychology, asserted that the maximum time the present is experienced is five seconds, whereas one of his students set the interval at twelve seconds. The shortest interval between separate clicks that the ear could discern was measured to be 1/500 of a second and the eye could not distinguish sparks less than .044 seconds apart, since it retained an image of an object after it had disappeared. This last result seemed to confirm the novel experience of cinema, since the impression of continuity and movement created out of separate, individual images was only possible if one experienced the present visually as a quantum of time involving the immediate past.

The same debate opposing the continuous or fragmented nature of time was conducted in the field of philosophy. While some thinkers argued that time was composed of discrete parts – “infinitesimal instants that constituted longer durations the way points made up a line” (Kern 82) – others considered only the line itself as of importance and maintained that it could not be divided into separate segments. In fact, one should not consider the line itself but the line as it is being traced since, in this view, time is essentially mobile. The idea that time is composed of discrete parts was defended by David Hume and Bertrand Russell, while the view that time is a continuous stream was supported by Henri Bergson and William James. James believed that it was only by “entering into the living and moving organisation of a much wider tract of time that the strict present was apprehended at all” (qtd. in Kern 82).

The tension between fragment and flow is also a common theme in modernist literature, since novelists struggled with the issue whether to consider time as continuous or discontinuous. Some novelists used short, punctuated sentences, while others had a
more fluid style using rhythm and commas to create long winding sentences. Often these two styles were alternated in the same novel; even in the stream-of-consciousness novel, the flow of time was disrupted by clocks or natural divisions such as night and day. In *Ulysses*, for example, Joyce uses both the stream of consciousness technique and a short and telegram style, reflecting as much an atomistic as a fluid view of the movement of consciousness and time. The antithesis between the nature of public and private time thus returns in the conception of the present as either discontinuous or continuous. As Woolf remarked, we are “somehow successive and continuous, we human beings” (qtd. in Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction* 133).

**2.3. The Future**

*2.3.1. Progress and Decline*

With all the technological inventions and cultural changes, there was an astonishing sense of progress during the first decade of the twentieth century. New technologies provided new sources of power over life and suggested new ways to predict the future. There was a burst of science-fiction literature that sought to appropriate the future imaginatively, while philosophers argued that the possibility of freedom required that the future be unknown. This confidence in the future was, however, somewhat tempered by the concern that it was all happening too fast. Some dreaded the great promise of things to come, felt helpless and feared that the world would come to an end. As Stephen Kern writes, “[t]he entire discussion of degeneration pointed to a future in which mankind waited to be overpowered by the forces of nature and society, leading to a decline of cultures and ultimate extinction of the species” (91). This apocalyptic view seemed to be affirmed when the First World War broke out in 1914.

The War had a tremendous impact on the years to follow and divided the world into a pre- and a post-war period. Not only did it destroy the idea of progress, the War also challenged the view of history as a coherent course seamlessly flowing. D.H. Lawrence, for instance, began *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928) by remarking that “[t]he cataclysm had happened […] there is now no smooth road into the future” (5). Similarly, Virginia Woolf commented that in 1914 “[s]uddenly, like a chasm in a smooth road, the war came” and “cut into” contemporary lives (qtd. in Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction* 142).
This was exemplified in *To the Lighthouse* in which the deaths of three of the main characters are only mentioned in a brief parenthesis, while the novel’s structure reflects the cutting of life into three sections: pre-war continuity, the interruption of the war itself, and post-war mourning and searching for ‘*temps perdu*’.

As Kern suggests, the unrest in the 1920s arose not simply from a nostalgic wish to re-enter earlier and happier times, but also from uneasiness with time itself. People searched for a sense of “reintegration in the flow of time” (298). Looking back on the years before the First World War, George Orwell writes in *Coming up for Air* (1938):

> before the war? […] And yet what was it that people had in those days? A feeling of security, even when they weren’t secure. More exactly, it was a feeling of continuity […] things would go on as they’d know them […] a settled period, a period when civilization seems to stand on its four legs like an elephant […] their way of life would continue […] they thought it was eternity. (106-109)

The enormous violence of the war had destroyed a “feeling of continuity,” the sense of security in history, and a belief in the attractive qualities of the future. Such a radical break in the life of Western man encouraged reconsideration of what principles of evolution, if any, could be thought to remain valid.

2.3.2. An Alternative for Determinism

Even before the unexpected advent of the war, modernist philosophers rejected a deterministic view of the future that had found its roots in works of Pierre Laplace. At the end of the nineteenth century when there was an enormous trust in the possibilities of reason and science, Laplace speculated that the future was determined in the present state of matter in the universe. In his *Essai philosophique sur les probabilités* (1884), he postulated that an intellect that would know all the forces of nature and states of matter in the world would be capable of knowing the future. According to Laplace, everything that happened at a given instant was determined by the situation of the world at the preceding moment. The fact that man could not predict certain phenomena (e.g. the behaviour or decisions of others) merely resulted from his/her ignorance about the laws of nature and/or previous states of affairs in the world. This was paralleled in the literature of the
nineteenth century that often described the development of the protagonist from birth to maturity, as in *Oliver Twist* (1837-8) and *Great Expectations* (1860-1) by Charles Dickens.

The mechanistic determinism of the nineteenth century was, however, challenged by modernist philosophers such as Henri Bergson, who felt that it denied freedom. In his most popular book, *L’Évolution créatrice* (1907) Bergson asserted that although science seeks to discover laws and predict the future, human experience is an uncertain chain of events in time. In the opening paragraphs of *Creative Evolution*, Bergson writes: “If I want to prepare a glass of sugared water, try as I may, I must wait until the sugar melts. This little fact is of great significance” (qtd. in Kern 101). The time I have to wait for the sugar to melt is not identical to the interval that can be measured mathematically, as it is completed before the measurement is made. Time as it is experienced coincides with the impatience lived through; “it constitutes its essence and ensures my freedom. Without it the future unfolds as something already known and we are locked in determinism” (Kern 101). It is this uncertainty and the impossibility to plan the future that allows for freedom and creativity.

The French physicist Emile Meyerson joined Bergson in his insistence on the importance of uncertainty. Meyerson pointed to the tendency of modern science “to eliminate time by the identification of cause and effect symbolized in the equal sign of an equation” (qtd. in Kern 101). This was, for example, the case with the principle of conservation of matter and energy, the idea that nothing is neither created nor lost. If science, however, succeeded in describing everything with an equation, then nothing would change and time would be redundant and eventually eliminated. The future would become a necessary consequence instead of a promise of surprise. Although this was the ultimate aspiration of science, it was – according to Meyerson – fundamentally impossible.

The idea that the future could not be known was also reflected in the literature of the period, as novelists often focused on the momentary, rather than describing the protagonist’s growth in time from youth to maturity. *Ulysses* and *Mrs Dalloway* exemplify this thought as they describe the minute routines and thoughts of the protagonist in the timeframe of a single day.
CHAPTER 2

TIME AND PHILOSOPHY: HENRI BERGSON

At the turn of the twentieth century, Henri Bergson (1859-1941) was one of the most famous and influential philosophers. Trained as a mathematician, he combined a scientific background with an interest in the more spiritual realms of being. His best-known works are *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889), *Matière et mémoire* (1896) and *L'évolution créatrice* (1907). This chapter summarizes Bergson’s philosophy and its relation to literature by exploring three of its major focal points: time as duration, voluntary and involuntary memory, and creative evolution. It, furthermore, puts Bergson’s philosophy in its context of a radical innovation in ‘thinking in time’ from the early nineteenth to the twentieth century.

1. THINKING IN TIME: FROM NEWTON TO BERGSON, JAMES AND HUSSERL

According to Isaac Newton, time forms a container for events, which is as real as the objects it contains, i.e. it exists independently of the objects it includes. As Robert Rynasiewicz notes: “Newton did not regard space and time as genuine substances (as are, paradigmatically, bodies and minds), but rather as real entities with their own manner of existence as necessitated by God’s existence”. In *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687), Newton wrote: “Absolute, true and mathematical time, of itself, and from its own nature, flows equally without relation to anything external” (qtd. in Kern 11). Time is part of the fundamental structure of the universe, a dimension in which events occur in sequence. Newtonian time is, therefore, homogeneous and can be divided into equal parts anywhere along the line.

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15 The discussions of Newton, Leibniz and Kant are largely based on the article on ‘Time’ taken from the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Time> (consulted 04/04/08). All other quotations are identified as such in the text.

In contrast to Newton’s theory of absolute time, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz believed that time and space are relational. Leibniz considered time to be a fundamental part of an abstract conceptual framework. In his view, time does not refer to a container or real entity; it is rather an internal or intrinsic feature of the complete concept of things, more an illusion than a substance. The difference between Newton’s and Leibniz’s theory emerged from the so-called Leibniz-Claude correspondence (1715-1716), a philosophical, scientific and theological debate between Leibniz and Samuel Clarke, an English supporter of Newton.

In *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) Immanuel Kant, too, rejected the Newtonian theory of absolute, objective time since it could not be experienced. Kant argues that time is rather a subjective form or foundation of all experience and defines it as an a priori category that allows us to comprehend sense-experience. Instead of a substance or an illusion, it is a mental framework that necessarily structures the experiences of any rational agent, or observing subject. Consequently, even the simplest act of perception has a temporal structure. Nevertheless, time – although seen as subjective – is still considered homogeneous and universal, as it is experienced identically by all human beings.

A powerful critique on Kant was launched by Henri Bergson in his *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889). As Suzanne Guerlac suggests, the title is already a challenge to Kant since the German philosopher had argued against immediate experience, all experience being “mediated by the a priori conditions of the transcendental aesthetic” (21). Moreover, Bergson explicitly positioned himself against Kant by stating that the latter confused time with a homogeneous milieu, while in fact it was heterogeneous: “L’erreur de Kant a été de prendre le temps pour un milieu homogène” (EDI 151). Bergson believed that time was neither a real medium nor a mental construct. Instead, he referred to subjective time as duration (la durée), which is heterogeneous, indivisible and radically independent of space, as we shall see below.

Bergson criticized Kant for confusing time and space. Nevertheless, he elaborated on Kant’s idea that every act of perception has a temporal structure. For the French philosopher, perception always includes memory, since “la formation du souvenir n’est jamais postérieure à celle de la perception; elle en est contemporaine” (ES 913). In
Matière et Mémoire (1896), Bergson wrote: “En fait, il n’y a pas de perception qui ne soit imprégnée de souvenirs. Aux données immédiates et présentes de nos sens nous mêlons mille et mille détails de notre expérience passée” (MM 183). Together with William James and Edmund Husserl, Bergson believed that any moment of perception must involve consciousness of what had gone before. Memory conserved the past, contracting multiple moments of duration into a single moment of perception.

Husserl and James shared Bergson’s idea that time is fluid and not a sum of discrete units. James referred to the mind as “a stream of thought” and asserted that it could not be “chopped in bits” (qtd. in Kern 24). He rejected Newton’s – and later Hume’s – view that time consists of different parts out of which longer durations are formed and argued that each mental event is linked with those before and after, acting like a surrounding “halo” or “fringe.” According to James, there is no single pace for our mental life. The whole of it surges and slows, as different parts move along at different rates. His descriptions of “this vicious mode of mangling thought’s stream,” this “illegitimate” and “pernicious” treatment of atoms of feeling, moreover, anticipate Bergson’s characterizations of the spatial representation of time as “vice” (qtd. in Kern 24).

Husserl, too, rejected the Humian interpretation of time and believed that duration was experienced directly as a whole. He shared with James the idea that there are two kinds of past experiences: a recent one called “retention” and a more distant one called “recollection”. This is contrary to Henri Bergson’s theory that emphasized the constant interconnection of all past experiences with the present regardless of how long ago they had occurred. For Husserl, the present functioned as a nucleus of “now-apprehension”, thickened by a “comet’s tail” of retentions that cling to it (qtd. in Kern 44). As Stephen Kern notes, Bergson, James and Husserl all shared the conviction that “the past had an enormous impact on the present. Bergson’s past gnawed into the present, James’s streamed into it and Husserl’s clung to it” (44-45).

17 As Stephen Kern points out, “otherwise it would be impossible to hear a melody, maintain personal identity or think. The melody would appear as a series of discrete sounds unrelated to what has gone before, understanding of ourselves would be chopped into unconnected fragments, and it would be impossible to learn a language or to follow an argument” (44).
2. BERGSON’S PHILOSOPHY

2.1. Aims and Ideals

Bergson’s philosophical project can be considered as two-fold: 1) to learn how to rethink time without spatializing it, and 2) to develop a philosophy that combines the views of science and metaphysics without subordinating the one to the other. Although both objectives can be reduced to the same fundamental dualism of the mind/body problem in philosophy, I will discuss these separately to offer a better understanding of Bergson’s philosophical ideals.

2.1.1. Time versus Space

In 1927, Wyndham Lewis falsely accused Bergson of putting the hyphen between time and space, creating a new unity of time-space (see Kern 26). Bergson, however, wanted to ‘de-spatialize’ time, which meant that time should be considered as a continuous movement, the parts of which could not be separated or juxtaposed as this would imply thinking time into space. Bergson thus made a radical distinction between time and space, time being essentially heterogeneous and space homogeneous. Bergson writes: “Ce qu’il faut dire, c’est que nous connaissons deux réalités d’ordre différent, l’une hétérogène, celle des qualités sensibles, l’autre homogène, qui est l’espace” (EDI 66). Because time and space belong to two radically different worlds, one cannot transpose the laws from one to the other. To consider time in terms of space (i.e. as a homogeneous milieu) would imply simultaneity and to this extent refuse duration as the flow of time.

This is an idea that is difficult to grasp and is therefore carefully prepared by Bergson by the distinction between quantity and quality on the one hand, and numerous images such as the one of counting sheep on the other. When we want to count a flock of sheep, we consider the sheep to be identical. Therefore, quantitative multiplicity is homogenous; we make abstraction of the differences between the individual sheep. But despite their homogeneity, we can still enumerate the sheep. This is because each sheep is spatially separated from or juxtaposed to the others; in other words, each occupies a specific location in space. Bergson’s analysis of counting concludes that involuntarily,
we always count in space, since counting requires juxtaposition, juxtaposition implies simultaneity, and simultaneity presupposes space.

Bergson argues that if we transpose time into space, we will lose contact with our own experience of time as flux and sensation as an inner experience. In the *Essai*, he writes: “en introduisant l’espace dans notre conception de la durée, [nous corrompons] à leur source même, nos représentations du changement extérieur et du changement interne, du mouvement et de la liberté” (*EDI* 51). This raises the question whether time as duration can be adequately represented by space. Bergson’s answer is yes, if it is a question of time already passed, but no, if one is speaking of the time that passes. Since action occurs in the time that passes and not the time already passed, freedom is automatically associated with the domain of time passing or *la durée*. As Bergson asserts: “Toutes les difficultés du problème, et le problème lui-même, naissent de ce qu’on veut trouver à la durée [associated with time] les mêmes attributs qu’à l’étendu [associated with space], interpréter une succession par une simultanéité, et rendre l’idée de liberté dans une langue où elle est évidemment intraduisible” (*EDI* 145).

2.1.2. *Science and Metaphysics*

Bergson’s second objective was to redefine the relation between science and metaphysics or intellect and intuition. As Mary Ann Gillies puts it, “he wanted to find a way of wedding the two and thereby allowing philosophy, and other intellectual endeavours, to mirror what the ordinary individual’s common sense said: that the world consists of physical and spiritual aspects that necessarily work in concert to define human beings and their existence” (“Bergsonism” 100). Bergson explains this dualistic view in the introduction to *Matière et Mémoire*: “Ce livre affirme la réalité de l’esprit, la réalité de *la matière*, et essaie de déterminer le rapport de l’un à l’autre sur un exemple précis, celui de la mémoire” (161, my italics).

By *matière*, Bergson means inert matter, that which is studied by the natural sciences. It is essentially static and if there is movement, the movement is continuous, reversible and predictable. In the world of *la matière*, the principles of mechanism and determinism prevail. Every movement is predetermined, has its necessary cause and consequence; there is no freedom. In order to obtain understanding of this type of reality,
we measure things and discuss them in terms of logic. The world of l’esprit, however, cannot be explained by the same laws of science. In this world, movement only occurs in one direction, quality is irreducible to quantity and states of consciousness cannot be separated, identified, named or counted. Life processes, according to Bergson, can only be known through the metaphysical method of l’intuition. The élan vital, a vital life force, causes a non-deterministic, spontaneous movement that cannot be predicted or measured in physical time.

This harmonisation of reason and revelation which forms the fundamental basis of Bergson’s philosophy was unprecedented in history according to Richard A. Cohen (22). It runs through all of his major works, which tackle different philosophical issues departing from the same precept that life is dualistic, that both matter and spirit are essential, and that true understanding of life’s phenomena can only be grasped by accepting this fundamental duality. Nevertheless, the duality is one that Bergson does not seek to resolve. Bergson argues that “the tension of the apparent opposites [is] the necessary condition of existence” (Gillies, “Bergsonism” 100).

2.2. Concepts

2.2.1. Time and Duration

For Bergson, there are two possible conceptions of time: “l’une pure de tout mélange, l’autre où intervient subrepticement l’idée de l’espace” (EDI 67). Both conceptions are essential to Bergson’s discussion of time, although la durée is the one that most occupies his attention. It is “la forme que prend la succession de nos états de conscience quand notre moi se laisse vivre, quand il s’abstient d’établir une séparation entre l’état présent et les états antérieurs” (EDI 67). Consequently, la durée can only be approached through inner states, i.e. through immediate or purely qualitative experience. It can only be lived in the very specific moment of it is unfolding. La durée, therefore, cannot be applied to the world outside the self. The individual cannot perceive it; he/she can only experience it.

Throughout his work, Bergson defines the concept of la durée, but the best description is probably found in Chapter II of the Essai, where he writes that “la durée proprement dite n’a pas de moments distincts par extérieurs les uns aux autres, étant
La durée is essentially heterogeneous; its parts cannot be juxtaposed as a succession of distinct parts, with one causing the other. It is a pure mobility, constantly moving. No moment is ever recoverable; no moment is ever perceived as external to the living of it until after it has been experienced. As Gillies asserts, “Bergson’s view of time removes the external standard and replaces it with what the internal sense of time reveals – that real time is that in which people live and it is qualitative, not quantitative in nature” (“Bergsonism” 102).

To explain the concept of la durée further, Bergson uses the image of a ‘melody.’ Just as in inner experience, each moment is radically discontinuous from the next, while giving the impression of flowing out of one and into another. A melody consists of different notes that succeed each other, while we perceive them as melting one into the other. Bergson writes:

Ne pourrait-on pas dire que, si ces notes se succèdent, nous les apercevons néanmoins les unes dans les autres, et que leur ensemble est comparable à un être vivant, dont les parties, quoique distinctes, se pénètrent par l’effet même de leur solidarité ? La preuve en est que si nous rompons la mesure en insistant plus que de raison sur une note de la mélodie, ce n’est pas sa longueur exagérée, en tant que longueur, qui nous avertira de notre faute, mais le changement qualitatif apporté par là à l’ensemble de la phrase musicale. On peut donc concevoir la succession sans la distinction, et comme une pénétration mutuelle. (EDI 67-8)

Melody is the figure for qualitative multiplicity in duration. We are dealing with a succession of qualities and nuances of feeling, but a succession without distinction. Elements overlap and interpenetrate in a peculiar “solidarité” (EDI 68). Moreover, melody evokes movement as a purely mental synthesis; it is a movement that does not occur in space.

Nevertheless, Bergson does not see all existence as a continual free-flowing flux in which no states are ever permanent. As stated before, Bergson makes a distinction between the inner and the outer realms of being, metaphysics and science, la durée and time. Although for Bergson real living occurs in the indivisible realm of la durée, this
world is automatically fragmented if we want to explain, analyse, or understand the nature of experience. The conscious reconstruction of our experiences distorts them, but this distortion is inevitable because we cannot capture the continuous flow of life. As Guerlac points out, “[t]he difference between time and duration is thus not exactly a difference between two concepts. It is more exact to say that time is the concept of what we experience directly as Pure Duration. Time is the symbolic image of Pure Duration. It stands in for it in reflective consciousness; it is what duration becomes when we think and speak it” (69).

2.2.2. Voluntary and Involuntary Memory

In *Matière et mémoire*, Bergson distinguishes between two types of memory: *mémoire volontaire* (voluntary memory or habit memory) which involves the body and occurs through movements and *mémoire involontaire* (involuntary memory or pure recollection) which involves images and occurs through representations. Voluntary memory is tied to the body: it is automatic and is built right into the nervous system as a mechanism of adaptation to the external world. Motor functions which have been learned by dint of practice and repetition are stored into this type of memory and can be easily recalled by the brain or the will for practical purposes. In other words, voluntary memory coincides with the acquisition of sensor-motor mechanisms. Involuntary memory, however, does not have a utilitarian function like voluntary memory. It simply records all the perceptions of past experience by the mere necessity of its own nature. It is the spontaneous surging up of lived moments from the past.

Although both memories are necessary for a proper functioning of the memory system, it is the latter type of memory that is preferred by Bergson, because it is immediately perfect from the outset, time can add nothing to its image without disfiguring it. Bergson writes:

Le souvenir spontané [involuntary memory] est tout de suite parfait; le temps ne pourra rien ajouter à son image sans la dénaturer; il conservera pour la mémoire sa place et sa date. Au contraire, le souvenir appris [voluntary memory] sortira du temps
à mesure que la leçon sera mieux sue; il deviendra de plus en plus impersonnel, de plus en plus étranger à notre vie passée (MM 229).

Bergson describes involuntary memory as “la mémoire par excellence” and refers to voluntary memory (“[ce que] les psychologues étudient d’ordinaire”) as habit informed by memory, rather than memory itself (MM 229).

Both types of memory, however, are essential for a full realization of the spiritual life. Bergson writes: “N’est-ce pas […] à la précision avec laquelle ces deux mémoires complémentaires s’insèrent l’une dans l’autre, que nous reconnaissons les esprits ‘bien équilibrés,’ c’est-à-dire, au fond, les hommes parfaitement adaptés à la vie?” (MM 293-4). Indeed, both types of memory integrate themselves in one another, creating a dynamic process of body and mind, present and past. To illustrate this, Bergson introduces the image of the inverted memory cone.

![Inverted Memory Cone](image)

**Fig. 1. Inverted Memory Cone**

The image of the memory cone consists of a plane P and an inverted cone SAB of which summit S is inserted into the plane. Plane P is the plane of the actual representation of the universe; the cone SAB symbolizes the totality of memories (*souvenirs*), gathered in our memory (*mémôire*). Bergson writes:

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18 This figure is taken from *Matière et Mémoire* (293).
Si je représente par un cône SAB le [sic] totalité des souvenirs accumulés dans ma mémoire, la base AB, assise dans le passé, demeure immobile, tandis que le sommet S, qui figure à tout moment mon présent, avance sans cesse, et sans cesse aussi touche le plan mobile P de ma présentation actuelle de l’univers. (MM 293)

At the cone’s base AB are located our unconscious memories, the oldest surviving memories, which come forward spontaneously, for example, in dreams. As we descend, we have an indefinite number of different regions of the past ordered by their distance of nearness to the present. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

For a memory to reappear into consciousness, it has to descend from the heights of pure memory AB to the precise point were action occurs, i.e. in S (the present). Bergson writes:

Il faut en effet, pour qu’un souvenir reparaissse à la conscience, qu’il descende des hauteurs de la mémoire pure jusqu’au point précis où s’accomplit l’action. En d’autres termes, c’est du présent que part l’appel auquel le souvenir répond, et c’est aux éléments sensori-moteurs de l’action présente que le souvenir emprunte la chaleur qui donne la vie. (MM 293)

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19 This figure is taken from Matière et Mémoire (302).
In this way, as Suzanne Guerlac notes, the two memories – i.e. voluntary and involuntary memory – and with them the present and the past, the body and the mind interact (152). The cone also represents what Bergson calls l’esprit, which has two extreme moments or activities: action represented by the point S that is integrated in the present and dream which is represented by the base of the cone AB. In the words of Suzanne Guerlac: “the energies of the esprit move between the various planes of consciousness indicated by the various conic sections. What distinguishes these sections are differences in tension (or in focus of attention) which are greater as we approach S, the locus of action, and looser as we approach AB, the psychic level of a dream” (Guerlac 152).

The inverted cone symbolizes a dynamic process, mobility. It is the double movement up and down across the various levels of this mental state that operates the interaction between memory and perception, as for Bergson, perception always includes memory. Memories are descending down the cone from the past to the present perception (i.e. the moment of action). According to Bergson, thinking is therefore never mere contemplation; it is the entire or integral movement of memory between contemplation and action, mind and matter. The double current operates in the context of a generalized psychology of which the principle feature is “le double mouvement de contraction net d’expansion par lequel la conscience resserre ou élargit le développement de son contenu” (MM 305).

2.2.3. Creative Evolution: Spencer, élan vital and Intuition

At the root of the development of Bergsonism, and more specifically at the root of Bergson’s third work L’Évolution créatrice (1907) is the philosophy of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). Bergson admired Spencer for his attempt to develop a philosophy in agreement with the then recent progress in biology. In a letter to William James in 1908, Bergson wrote: “[…] Herbert Spencer, le philosophe auquel j’adhérais à peu près sans réserve” (qtd. in Gouhier xviii). Yet Bergson could not accept the mechanistic character of Spencer’s evolutionary theory, for the latter believed that evolution was directed towards a certain endpoint, the attainment of the final state of equilibrium which would involve the creation of the perfect human being in the perfect society, i.e. completely adapted to social life. Bergson disagreed with this mechanic and teleological view,
because it excluded the possibility of novelty and creativity, the unpredictability of (inner) life. In La Pensée et le Mouvant, he wrote: “Je voudrais revenir sur un sujet dont j’ai déjà parlé, la création continue d’imprévisible nouveauté qui semble se poursuivre dans l’univers. Pour ma part, je crois l’expérimenter à chaque instant” (La Pensée et le mouvant 1331). Bergson wanted to include the element of creativity in evolution.

According to him, the future could not be planned beforehand, as time itself unravelled unforeseen possibilities.

As stated above, the laws of cause and effect do not apply to the world of living, as opposed to the world of inert matter (cfr. Bergson’s dualistic precept). Bergson suggests that the world of living is governed by a certain life force, a creative energy called l’élan vital. The élan vital is a vital impetus, an image for the process of time as duration. It is the impulse common to all life that pushes us along, assuring continuity. It is also a source of creativity and difference as one cannot possibly know or predict the direction in which it guides us. The concept of l’élan vital thus accounts for evolutionary change, but in a less mechanical and more lively manner than other evolutionary theories; it is

\[\textit{un élan originel} \text{ de la vie, passant d’une génération de germes à la génération suivante de germes par l’intermédiaire des organismes développés qui forment entre les germes le trait d’union. [...] [Il] est la cause profonde des variations, du moins de celles qui se transmettent régulièrement, qui s’additionnent, qui créent des espèces nouvelles.} \text{(EC 569-570)}\]

Just as all living organisms are subject to the push of the élan vital which is at the origin of evolutionary change, so each organism also has its own élan vital which accounts for its individual evolution and explains the creative impulse of mankind. Through the force that is l’élan vital, the individual reaches a degree of higher complexity, a better understanding of the world around him/her and a heightened state of creativity. It is, however, not sure whether mankind will ever reach the state of perfection Spencer had predicted, as the élan vital is by its very nature unpredictable. Unlike
Spencer, Bergson thus envisages life as a contingent process of growth and change, as a positive movement of perpetual differentiation that invents new forms.\textsuperscript{20}

Equally important to Bergson’s evolutionary theory was his concept of intuition, a kind of experience or empathy that leads us to understand the world of ‘living’ (inner life). Bergson writes: “Car, nous ne saurions trop le répéter, l’intelligence et l’instinct sont tournés dans deux sens opposés, celle-là vers la matière inerte, celui-ci vers la vie” (\textit{EC} 645). Intuition involves an identification with the thing itself, experiencing it from within. It is a kind of intellectual sympathy by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it: “par la communication sympathique que [l’intuition] établira entre nous et le reste des vivants, par la dilatation [\textit{expansion}] qu’elle obtiendra de notre conscience, elle nous introduira dans le domaine propre de la vie, qui est compénétration réciproque, création indéfiniment continuée” (\textit{EC} 646). By approaching the object from inside, by entering into it as it were, we acquire what Bergson calls ‘absolute knowledge’.

Still, intellect cannot be dispensed with, for it is from “l’intelligence que sera venue la secousse [\textit{the push}] qui aura fait monter [l’intuition] au point où elle est” (\textit{EC} 646). Without intellect, intuition would remain indistinct and riveted to the object itself. Bergson writes: “l’intelligence reste le noyau lumineux autour duquel l’instinct, même élargi et épuré en intuition, ne forme qu’une nébulosité vague” (\textit{EC} 645). Intellect and intuition are complementary, and together they permit a fuller understanding of objects external to the individual, as well as of the inner world. “[F]or when we turn our gaze inward, we intuitively enter into an understanding with ourself [sic] and then employ our intelligence to explain what intuition has revealed. Intuition becomes the means by which we may apprehend the essence, the organic wholeness, of other organisms and ourselves” (Gillies, “Bergsonism” 107). \textit{L’élan vital} and intuition in tandem create an alternative approach to understanding the nature of life. While the former accounts for the way life evolves, the latter explains how we can experience objects outside ourselves.

\textsuperscript{20} Mary Ann Gillies positions Bergsonism against Darwinian mechanism and Lamarckian finalism: “Bergson’s creative evolution counters the prevailing neo-Darwinian mechanism which said that adaptation is purely an organism’s response to external stimuli, and it also opposes neo-Lamarckian finalism because it does not argue that the adaptations occur in order that the organism reach some state of evolutionary perfection” (“Bergsonism” 107).
2.3. Aesthetics

Although Bergson did not devote any particular work to aesthetics, his ideas about art nonetheless permeate many of his works. Arthur Szathmary provides a useful insight into Bergson’s approach to art, asserting that “Bergson conceives of art, not as an expression superimposed upon the more vital aspects of experience, but as the finest rendition of experience itself” (50). For Bergson, all aspects of life are aesthetic; art is not simply found in the static object itself, its meaning is only released when the object’s perceiver penetrates to its living elements.\(^{21}\) Art, therefore, does not reside in the material world of the finished poem, painting, or symphonic score; it consists in the experience of it. Bergson comments in *L’Évolution créatrice*:

[C’est] l’intention de la vie, le mouvement simple qui court à travers les lignes, qui les lie les unes aux autres et leur donne une signification, […] que l’artiste vise à ressaisir en se replaçant à l’intérieur de l’objet par une espèce de sympathie, en abaissant, par un effort d’intuition, l’espace interposé entre lui et le modèle. (EC 645)

In and through aesthetic experience, artist and audience are joined in a rediscovery of emotions, perceptions and impressions prompted by the work of art. “In simple terms,” Mary Ann Gillies comments, “what Bergson says occurs is the understanding of the object (through intuition), the re-creation of the object according to the perceiver’s experience of it, and the final assimilation of the object by the perceiver so that the object ceases to be part of the external world and becomes an intimate part of the perceiver’s inner world” (“Bergsonism” 109). As a result, the experience of art is a highly personal one – “[elle] n’atteint que l’individuel” (EC 645), as its ultimate end is the appropriation of the art object into the perceiver’s private world.

To continue Gillies’ train of thought, we can easily see how other Bergsonian concepts support this aesthetic.

\(^{21}\) Similarly, Woolf writes in her essay “Modern Fiction”: “Everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss” (*MF* 154)
Intuition […] supplies a means through which one can enter the art object in order to experience its organic wholeness. Memory becomes crucial to the reconstruction of the experience and perceptions that the artist uses to fashion the art object and that are reexperienced by the observer. And notions of the self as multiple interpenetrating entities existing below a superficially stable surface provide a template for understanding the multiple experiences and perceptions lurking beneath the surface of an apparently stable art object” (“Bergsonism” 107).

Moreover, the idea of creative evolution allows for an aesthetic of novelty, creativity and individuality. In the words of Gillies, “Bergson’s aesthetic resists closure, and instead embraces multiplicity in terms of both the experiences and interpretations of art” (“Bergsonism” 107). In his philosophy, Bergson had expanded the notion of what was ‘aesthetic’ and argued that art should take as its object “la vie en général” (EC 645).

3. BERGSON AND LITERATURE

3.1. Time and Duration

Bergson’s concept of la durée resonated strongly within artistic and literary circles. As Gillies observes: “It provided artists and authors with a theory that corresponded with their own need to find a new mode of representing experience” (“Bergsonism” 102). The most prominent example of this is the stream-of-consciousness novel as the term itself already includes a reference to time as flux.22 Modernist authors valued the experience of ‘being’ more than the analysis of it; all descriptive or analytical details being either completely dispensed with or reduced to a bare minimum in order to capture the dynamic, fluid nature of the inner world. Bergson writes:

Soit encore un personnage de roman dont on me raconte les aventures. Le romancier pourra multiplier les traits de caractère, faire parler et agir son héroïne autant qu’il lui

22 In The Principles of Psychology (1890), William James writes: “Consciousness does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as ‘chain’ or ‘train’ do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought of consciousness, or of subjective life” (qtd. in Kumar 14).
plaira : tout cela ne vaudra pas le sentiment simple et indivisible que j’éprouvais si je coïncidais un instant avec le personnage lui-même. […] Description, histoire et analyse me laissent ici dans le relatif. Seule la coïncidence avec la personne même me donnerait l’absolu. (Introduction à la métaphysique 1394)

The translation of real life experiences into literature, however, causes the dynamic process of life to become static as the very act of writing, of putting experiences into words, necessarily spatializes them. This paradox of conveying a dynamic process in a static medium was addressed by Bergson as he wrote that “le mot aux contours bien arrêtés, le mot brutal, qui emmagasine ce qu’il y a de stable, de commun et par conséquent d’impersonnel dans les impressions de l’humanité, écrase ou tout du moins recouvre les impressions délicates et fugitives de notre conscience individuelle” (EDI 87). He continues: “Pour lutter à armes égales, celles-ci devraient s’exprimer par des mots précis; mais ces mots, à peine formés, se retourneraient contre la sensation qui leur donna naissance, et inventés pour témoigner que la sensation est instable, ils lui imposeraient leur propre stabilité” (EDI 87). Language, therefore, cannot capture the flux of time because it has to rely on analysis, organization, and ‘spatialization’ of experiences for communicative purposes.

Still, Bergson believes that language is the best means of communication available. It is the one tool that approximately conveys experiences to others and, therefore, one should use it as effectively as possible. This was, for example, what symbolists like Mallarmé did when they sought to “counteract the ordinary state of language [l’état brut] with a pure state of poetic language, which operates through suggestion, not naming” (Mallarmé qtd. in Guerlac 73). “To name an object,” Mallarmé claimed, “is to do away with three quarters of the joy of a poem, made to be divined little by little, to suggest it” (qtd. in Guerlac 52 / see also Pilkington 120). This is precisely what stream-of-consciousness writers such as Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf aimed to achieve. They questioned language itself,
exploited the formal or sound qualities of words, stretched the syntax to the limits of the comprehensive and focused on the form of language itself. In the words of Bergson:

En réalité, l’art de l’écrivain consiste surtout à nous faire oublier qu’il emploie des mots. L’harmonie qu’il cherche est une certaine correspondance entre les allées et venues de son esprit et celles de son discours, correspondance si parfaite que, portées par la phrase, les ondulations de sa pensée se communiquent à la nôtre et qu’alors chacun des mots, pris individuellement, ne compte plus: il n’y a plus rien que le sens mouvant qui traverse les mots, plus rien que les deux esprits qui semblent vibrer directement, sans intermédiaire, à l’unisson l’un de l’autre. (ES 849-50)

3.2. Voluntary and Involuntary Memory

Bergson’s theory of memory equally appealed to modernist writers, who were concerned with the past and the way the past had a hold on the present. In A la Recherche du temps perdu, the narrator Marcel, for example, tries to retrieve his lost childhood happiness. The smell and taste of a Madeleine biscuit soaked in tea triggers all sorts of memories and carries him back to his childhood at Combray. Still, Proust’s distinction between voluntary memory and involuntary memory, which theorists often equate with Bergsonian time, does not quite correspond to Bergson’s differentiation between habit memory and pure recollection. To begin with, Proust himself fiercely denied any such connection. In the newspaper Le Temps, he stated:

A ce point de vue, mon livre sera peut-être comme une suite de “Romans de l’Inconscient”: je n’aurais aucune honte à dire de “romans bergsoniens,” si je le croyais, car à toute époque il arrive que la littérature à tâché de se rattacher – après coup naturellement – à la philosophie régnante. Mais ce ne serait pas exact, car mon œuvre est dominée par la distinction entre la mémoire involontaire et la mémoire volontaire, distinction qui non seulement ne figure pas dans la philosophie de M. Bergson, mais est même contredite par elle. (qtd. in Pilkington 146)

23 Joyce’s disciple and friend Samuel Beckett once wrote that in Joyce’s later work, “form is content, content is form […] His writing is not about something; it is that something itself” (qtd. in Albright 47).
Indeed, while it is true that both Bergson and Proust draw a distinction between two radically different modes of memory, the distinction is not identical. What Bergson terms “mémoire-habitude” is not found as such in Proust, whose voluntary memory is defined as intellectual – an attempt to recapture the past through an effort of the brain – and is distinct from the acquiescence of sensory-motor mechanisms, such as walking, running, etc. which are stored in the body. Similarly, Proust’s involuntary memory does not exactly correspond to what Bergson calls “mémoire pure,” the spontaneous recollection of the past. As Pilkington suggests, both concepts differ in an important aspect, i.e. spontaneity. Whereas the nature of Bergson’s involuntary memory is “arbitrary” and “random,” Proustian involuntary memory is caused by the “association of a sense impression with a past one” (150-151). As in the example of the Madeleine biscuit, the memory is involuntary but not spontaneous since it is triggered by sensory perceptions.

The characters in *Ulysses* do not go in search of lost time. Memory seems to co-exist with their perceptions, manifesting itself in the most elusive forms. Kumar comments: “It may [...] be said that mémoire involontaire is a permanent aspect of their mental processes, and it is rarely that they have to evoke past images by a deliberate effort of the will” (119). By means of illustration, Kumar cites the following example: When Stephen Dedalus, under a somewhat embarrassing thrust from his rival Heron, begins to recite the Confiteor, he hears both Heron and Wallis break into laughter.

The confession came only from Stephen’s lips and, while they spoke the words, a sudden memory had carried him to another scene called up, as if by magic, at the moment when he had noted the faint cruel dimples at the corners of Heron smiling lips. (qtd. in Kumar 119)

These “magical” recurrences of past images are a permanent feature of Joyce’s use of the stream-of-consciousness, and they are often represented in a strange and jumbled form. They rise and fall without any control of the consciousness will and are therefore flashes of “pure memory.” This may be illustrated by another extract, taken from *Ulysses*:
Windy night that was I went to fetch her . . . He and I behind. Sheet of her music blew out of my hand against the high school railings . . . Remember her laughing at the wind, her blizzard collar up . . . Remember when we got home raking up the fire and frying up those pieces of lap of mutton for her supper with the Chutney sauce. . . Could see her in the bedroom from the hearth unclamping the busk of her stays. White . . . Swish and soft flop her stays made on the bed . . . That was the night . . . (qtd. in Kumar 120)

The image of the inversed memory cone also found resonance in the modernist aesthetic, even if only remotely. Virginia Woolf, for example wrote in “A Sketch of the Past”: “If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills and fills – then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory” (MB 64). Furthermore, she continues to say that she hopes she has included enough of the present in her writings, “at least enough of the present to serve as a platform to stand upon” (MB 75, 85). The similarity in thought could be just coincidental, since it is uncertain to what extent Woolf was familiar with Bergson’s philosophy.\(^24\) Still, the image of the bowl is similar to the cone as a container for past images, just as the idea of the platform recalls the plane P that represents the present surroundings on which one stands.

### 3.3. Creative Evolution and Intuition

Bergson’s view of creative evolution that integrates continuity and difference, evolution and creativity must have appealed to Modernist artists who wanted to re-imagine the past, i.e. to add something new to that which already existed. The latter element echoes Bergson’s view that in the evolution of life each form that arises flows out of previous forms, while adding something new to them. Just as Bergson argued that each new development alters the nature, the appearance and as it were the rhythm of the whole, so Eliot noted that:

What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of

\(^{24}\) This is will be further investigated in Chapter 3 of the present study: “Bergson and Woolf”.
the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered. Whoever has approved this idea of order […] will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.25

Furthermore, one of the essential tenets of modernism was that artists must continually create the new work of art. In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe muses upon her painting, thinking that “the vision must be perpetually remade” (*TL* 206). Similarly, T.S. Eliot stated in *The Sacred Wood* that “an impression needs to be constantly refreshed by new impressions in order that it may persist at all” (qtd. in Lebrun 157).

Although the general thrust of Bergson’s view on creative evolution had a certain appeal to the modernist artist, Gillies claims that “there are few examples of the *élan vital* or intuition being used directly by artists” (“Bergsonism” 108). Still, one finds a clear example in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which Stephen Dedalus states that the “personality of the artist passes into the narration itself, flowing round and round the persons and the action as a vital sea” and further adds that the dramatic form is “reached when the vitality which has flowed and eddied round each person fills every person with such vital force that he or she assumes a proper and intangible aesthetic life” (233). Both quotations contain references to the *élan vital* as described by Bergson. In the first quotation the process of intuition is central as the artist enters into the narration, while in the second the “vital force” seems to be a direct translation of *élan vital*. A second parallel between Bergson’s concept of *élan vital* and the method of intuition can be found in *To the Lighthouse*, as Mrs Ramsay could be said to embody intuition while Mr Ramsay functions as the epitome of reason. This will be elaborated on in chapter four: “Time in *To the Lighthouse*”.

4. Evaluation

Bergson’s philosophy generated a broad and varied cultural response, ranging from passionate support to frantic condemnation. As John Mullarkey notes, Bergson was at one point held to be both “the greatest thinker of the world” and “the most dangerous man in the world” (1). His combination of science and metaphysics, his emphasis on intuition as opposed to intellect, and his preference for instability over stability excited many as the world was rapidly changing. Bergson’s influence extended far beyond the French context to the rest of Europe, and even to the United States of America, transforming him into some sort of cult figure, worshipped by some, despised by others. The downside of his immense popularity, however, was that Bergson’s theories – in principle open and non-systematic – were easily borrowed and altered to serve various ideological, aesthetic, political or spiritual agendas. Critics nowadays even speak of a variety of Bergsonisms.

Charles Péguy and Georges Sorel, for example, appropriated Bergson’s philosophical theory for their own practical purposes. In the 1890s, Sorel “developed a blueprint for socialist revolution that was intended to create an ‘intuition’ of socialism for the workers by having them participate in a general strike” (Kern 27). He argued that the European working class had stopped in its revolutionary course, because it was artificially frozen by scientific analyses of socialism that obscured the essential indivisibility of change and movement. Similarly, Péguy applied Bergson’s ideas in ways that are rather remote from their original source. He believed Cartesian tradition locked French thought in an unproductive rigidity and “explained the spiritual death of modern Christianity by its mindless repetition of fixed ideas: layers of habit stifle the dynamic energies of true faith” (Kern 27).

Not all responses to Bergson’s philosophy, however, were as admiring as those of Sorel and Péguy. Bertrand Russell, for example, who was one of the most authoritative opponents of Bergson, accused the French philosopher of reasoning like the “cosmic poets” and of waging a “war to the knife” with the intellect. “When his philosophy will have triumphed,” Russell wrote, “it is supposed that argument will cease, and intellect will be lulled to sleep on the heaving sea of intuition” (qtd. in Guerlac 28). Similarly, in 1927, the British artist and critic Wyndham Lewis concluded that Bergson’s romance
with flux was “the start of a most unfortunate development in the modern world which cooked up all the articulate distinctions of clear analysis into a murky durational stew” (Kern 27).\textsuperscript{26} This reminds us of Julian Benda, a French contemporary of Bergson, who portrayed the latter’s thought rather disparagingly as a “philosophy of democracy” and added that “Bergsonism was perhaps the only philosophy to have been really understood by the vulgar” (qtd. in Guerlac 12).

Critiques such as those of Russell and Lewis, however, did not reduce Bergson’s popularity in Britain. As Mary Ann Gillies documents, “the period 1909-1911 saw over two hundred articles published on Bergson in English journals, newspapers and books” (97). Three factors can be said to account for Bergson’s popularity in the Anglo-Saxon world: 1) the widespread availability of English translations of Bergson’s central work, 2) his visits to England in 1911 that were immensely successful social events as well as intellectual exchanges, and 3) the way in which Bergson engaged with the dominant issues of the day. Gillies, for instance, notes how Bergson articulated the fears of the time and offered solutions to many of the problems addressed in chapter one of the present study (97). In 1927, Bergson won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Yet from the 1930s onwards, his philosophy was superseded by a growing interest in Hegel and Bergson gradually disappeared from the public scene.

\textsuperscript{26} SueEllen Campbell sums up some of Lewis’ most vicious phrases to describe Bergson: “[He] is the perfect philosophic ruffian, of the darkest and most forbidding description: and he pulls every emotional lever on which he can lay his hands. / He discovered nothing; he interpreted science; and he gave it an extremely biased interpretation, to say the least / his metaphysic is pretentious and insincerely optimistic. / [Bergson was a] popular purveyor to the enlightened Everyman / Until the coming of Bergson, [the vulgar mercantile class] could not have found a philosophical intelligence sufficiently degraded to take their money and do, philosophically, their dirty work. The unique distinction of that personage is that he was the first servant of the great industrial caste-mind arriving on the golden crest of the wave of scientific progress” (353).
CHAPTER 3
HENRI BERGSON & VIRGINIA WOOLF

This chapter investigates the relation between Henri Bergson and Virginia Woolf. Is there a connection between Woolf and Bergson? Was Woolf familiar with Bergson’s philosophy? And if so, was she influenced by his ideas about time? In order to provide a deeper insight into these controversial issues, I first examine Woolf’s understanding of philosophy and philosophical concepts in general. Secondly, I focus on possible links between Woolf and Bergson. A third part gives an overview of the current criticism concerning Bergson’s alleged influence on Woolf’s thoughts.

1. WOOLF AND PHILOSOPHY

It is well-known that Woolf had no formal education, let alone a formal philosophical training. Her “untrained mind” (TL 12) is frequently attested to by herself and others. She characterizes herself in A Room of One’s Own as “[l]ike most uneducated Englishwomen” (Room 98) and discusses “the fact that she was never at school” with a sense of regret in A Sketch of Past (MB 65). Like Bernard, the writer character in The Waves, she might have lamented: “Certain things lie beyond my scope. I shall never understand the harder problems of philosophy” (W 186). Certainly she invokes philosophy cautiously, for “philosophic words, if one has not been educated at a university, are apt to play one false” (Room 99). One wonders, then, whether Woolf was familiar with philosophy and to what extent.

To begin with, there was the private education by her father, Leslie Stephen, as “the daughters of educated men are not members of Cambridge University” (TG 152): they are “restricted to the education of the private house” (TG 158).

Leslie Stephen was a man of letters as well as a philosopher, although the portion of his philosophical writings is relatively limited in comparison to his total literary output. It is generally admitted that he made two valuable contributions to philosophical history and theory: The History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century (1876 and 1881) and The Science of Ethics (1882). Woolf notes how her father “always loved
reading aloud,” and “still went on reading to my sister and me, but chose more serious books” when her brothers had left for school (Essays VW, I 128). Furthermore, Woolf was allowed to read “any book” in her father’s library (Letters VW 5: 91) and mentions her father’s book History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century in her essay “Leslie Stephen” (Banfield, Phantom 30). It is, therefore, very likely that Woolf, in some way or another, read philosophy in her early formative years.

The next phase in her ‘philosophical development’ was marked by a desire to expand her knowledge. In 1903, she wrote to her brother Thoby:

I don’t get anybody to argue with me now, & I feel the want. I have to delve from books, painfully & all alone, what you get every evening sitting over your fire & smoking your pipe with Strachey, etc. No wonder my knowledge is but scant.

There’s nothing like talk as an educator I’m sure. (qtd. in Banfield, Phantom 30)

Woolf was excluded from the secret meetings of the Cambridge apostles, among whom there was her husband Leonard Woolf, Apostle No. 241. As Ann Banfield notes, it was these talks that Virginia Woolf longed for and was jealous of “[f]or it forms a hiatus in her aural development between her father’s talk and Bloomsbury” (Phantom 33).

Describing this period when she was dragged from party to party by her stepbrother George Duckworth in A Sketch of the Past, Woolf remarks: “How strange it was to think that somewhere, there was a world where people did not go to parties – where they perhaps discussed pictures – books – philosophy – But it was not our world” (MB 135).

When Bloomsbury27 began, Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell were fully included in the discussions and conversations. “Never have I listened so intently to each step and half-step in an argument,” (MB 189-90). Woolf wrote. Moreover, Woolf actively participated in the debates: “Never have I been at such pains to sharpen and launch my own little dart. And then what joy it was when one’s own contribution was accepted. No praise has pleased me more than Saxon saying [...] that he thought I had argued my case very cleverly” (MB 190). In Bloomsbury, both philosophy and art, men and women met.

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27 Bloomsbury or the Bloomsbury Group refers to a group of writers, artists and philosophers living in or associated with the Bloomsbury area in central London in the early twenty century. It included Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, Roger Fry, E.M. Forster, Desmond MacCarthy, Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, Saxon Sidney-Turner.
Woolf wrote: “From such discussions Vanessa and I got probably much the same pleasure that undergraduates get when they meet friends of their own for the first time” (MB 190). Whether these conversations also had the same effect as an undergraduate course, however, remains doubtful as Virginia Woolf herself recognizes that “[t]alk – even the talk which had such tremendous results upon the lives and the characters of the two Miss Stephens – even talk of this interest and importance is as elusive as smoke. It flies up the chimney and is gone” (MB 164-5).

That Woolf had at least a notion of contemporary philosophical debates is demonstrated by her letters and novels. From her diary, we know that she “read some Berkeley, whom I much admire” (D 2: 33), and Hume and Moore (see Banfield, Phantom 30). The same names occur in her work, as “Locke, Hume, Berkeley” are mentioned in To the Lighthouse (TL 53) and Moore is in The Voyage Out (VO 33). Woolf knew some of the most famous philosophers of her era personally – e.g. Russell, Moore, Whitehead, John Maynard Keynes and Wittgenstein – and she occasionally attended formal lectures on philosophy, such as Karin Costelloe’s paper on what Bergson meant by ‘Interpenetration’ in February 1913 (see below). Yet, her fiction also reveals her uneasiness with the subject of philosophy. As Banfield observes, “[t]he philosophical problem, whenever explicitly alluded to in the novels, is typically filtered not through the thoughts of a philosopher but through the reactions of a woman” as she, “no philosopher herself, hesitates to write their script, recognizing her limits with mingled exasperation, anger and grudging respect for philosophical rigor” (Phantom 50). Nevertheless, Woolf also emphasises the importance of philosophy in fiction, as she asserts in a Room of One’s Own: “Fiction will be much the better for standing cheek by jowl with poetry and philosophy” (Room 98).

2. WOOLF AND BERGSON: POSSIBLE LINKS

Based on Leonard Woolf’s and Clive Bell’s statements, Woolf never read Bergson, nor would she have admitted any indirect influence of Bergson on her work. Leonard Woolf wrote: “I don’t think Virginia Woolf ever read a word by Bergson” (qtd. in Kumar 67) and Clive Bell affirmed that he doubted “whether Virginia Woolf ever opened a book by Bergson” (qtd. in Kumar 67). This, however, does not imply that she
was unfamiliar with Bergson altogether. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Bergson was extremely popular in Britain and Virginia Woolf was eager to expand her philosophical knowledge. Critics have pointed at various specific links between Woolf and Bergson. Although these are often indirect and largely inconclusive, they are worth noting here, if only to demonstrate various possibilities of connection.

2.1. Via her sister-in-law: Karin Stephen

As indicated above, Woolf attended Karin Stephen’s – then Karin Costelloe – lecture on Bergson in 1913. Karin Stephen was Virginia Woolf’s sister-in-law, married to her brother Adrian, and Russell’s “niece and philosophical protégée” (qtd. in Banfield, *Phantom* 35). In a first instance, Woolf’s Bergsonism was thus filtered through another woman, who was in her turn influenced by Russell. A second possible link between Karin Stephen, Henri Bergson and Virginia Woolf – apart from Karin Stephen’s lecture – is the former’s book *The Misuse of Mind – A Study of Bergson’s Attack on Intellectualism* that was published in 1922. Some critics assumed that Woolf must have read her sister-in-law’s exposition of Bergsonism. Floris Delattre, for example, claimed in 1932:

> En s’appuyant surtout sur les définitions de la perception, de la matière et de la mémoire, Mrs. Karin Stephen décrit dans le détail la conception bergsonienne de la réalité, conception de tous points originale, affirme-t-elle, et « qui ne sera intelligible que si nous sommes désireux et capables d’effectuer un profond changement dans notre attitude ». Il est vraisemblable que Virginia Woolf n’a point tout à fait ignoré l’ouvrage de sa belle-sœur, travail que Bergson lui-même a déclaré « intéressant au plus haut point. » (qtd. in Kumar 64-5)

Yet Leonard Woolf wrote that he did not think Virginia Woolf ever read Karin Stephen’s book (Kumar 67). In fact, he was generally reticent concerning his wife’s interest in philosophy. Writing to Margaret Thwaites, he contended that “the one type of book she hardly ever read was the philosophical and metaphysical” (qtd. in Banfield, *Phantom* 29).
2.2. Via Bloomsbury: G.E. Moore and Post-Impressionism

Lytton Strachey, Maynard Keynes, Leonard Woolf and Duncan Grant – all members of Bloomsbury – were influenced by the Cambridge philosopher, G.E. Moore. “Given Moore’s repeated attacks on idealism and his persistent emphasis on logic and reason that directly opposed Bergson’s writings,” Mary Ann Gillies notes, “we may assume that both at Cambridge, and later in the Stephen’s Bloomsbury salon, Bergsonian flux, intuition, and metaphysics were attacked” (Henri Bergson and British Modernism 52). As Virginia Woolf attended the discussions of life and art, Gillies continues, it is not too far-fetched that Woolf came into contact with Bergson through Bloomsbury and the Cambridge Apostles, as she herself acknowledged “the influence on me of the Cambridge Apostles” (MB 80). This argumentation, however, is speculative and even if Bergson was discussed within the Bloomsbury circles, it is not clear to what extent Woolf followed these discussions or was familiar with the details of Bergson’s concepts of la durée, intuition, and memory.

Two other members of the Bloomsbury group, Roger Fry and Desmond MacCarthy, were familiar with Bergson through “its partial manifestation in the contemporary post-impressionistic painting” that focused on the “importance of the immediacy of experience rendered in a fluid medium” (Kumar 65). This, however, does not imply that the two art critics/painters subscribed to a Bergsonian doctrine. Fry, for instance, wrote that “the painter should express his visual experiences by means of touches of colour juxtaposed on a flat surface” (qtd. in Banfield, “Time” 478). Continuity was thus seen as a series of separate elements, rather than as a continuous stream or streak. Nevertheless, Fry and MacCarthy were fully conscious of Bergson’s philosophy and the possibilities it opened for art and literature. This is, for instance, illustrated by a dedicatory letter to Fry in MacCarthy’s translation of Jules Romains’ The Death of a Nobody (1914):

At the end of the book there is an attempt to portray in the emotions of a young man walking down a rain-swept boulevard one late afternoon, a conception of the world not unlike that which M. Bergson’s philosophy suggests. How far such
experiences are engendered by reading M. Bergson, and how far they are independent, M. Romains can tell better. (qtd. in Kumar 13)

This, however, does not unequivocally lead to the conclusion that Virginia Woolf was acquainted with Bergsonism, as Kumar points out in *Bergson and the Stream of Consciousness Novel* (66).

### 2.3. Via Marcel Proust

Marcel Proust has been suggested as another link between Virginia Woolf and Henri Bergson. Woolf greatly admired Proust although she did not read him until 1922. In May 1922, she wrote to Fry: “Proust titillates my own desire for expression that I can hardly set out a sentence. Oh if I could write like that! I cry. [...] Scarcely anyone so stimulates the nerves of language in me: it becomes an obsession” (*Letters VW* 2: 525). She shares the importance he attaches to apparently fugitive impressions, his ability to combine “perfect serenity and intense vitality,” and his attempts to follow the natural progress of thought in a language that is “feathery and evanescent” at the surface, “but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron” (*TL* 194). She draws comparisons between Proust’s *A la Recherche du temps perdu* and her own novels, and claims that “he [Proust] will I suppose both influence me and make me out of temper with every sentence of my own” (qtd. in Tudeau-Clayton 311). Unmistakably, Proust had a tremendous influence on Woolf. Yet Proust’s relation to Bergson is more complex; especially if we consider the concepts of voluntary and involuntary memory. Even so, Proust shared the idea of time as flux. It is, therefore, plausible that Bergson’s ideas as they were implemented in Proust’s work reached Virginia Woolf through the latter’s work. As Delattre points out, Proust’s novel was immediately assimilated into the heart of the English literary tradition by Scott Moncrieff’s translation, which appeared from 1922 (qtd. in Tudeau-Clayton 307). Furthermore, Clive Bell – Woolf’s brother-in-law and a member of the Bloomsbury group – published a little book on Proust in 1928, in which he noted that “a student of Proust might do worse than read a little Bergson to realize that the form of the novel is a shape in time” (qtd. in Kumar 65).

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28 See chapter two: “Bergson and Literature: Voluntary and Involuntary Memory.”
2.4. Via T. S. Eliot

T.S. Eliot was a personal friend of the Woolfs. Virginia Woolf had first met him in 1918 and although he seemed to her at their first meeting “a polished, cultivated, elaborate young American,” she also found him “sinister, insidious, eel-like” and “intensely reserved” (qtd. in Lee 439). They immediately disagreed on literature, as Woolf did not share Eliot’s enthusiasm for Pound, Joyce and Wyndham Lewis. Both her friend and critic, employee and employer (she wrote for The Criterion; The Waste Land was first published in book form by the Hogarth Press), Eliot might have introduced her to Bergson, just as he never stopped trying to convince her that Ulysses was a great a book. How much, if anything at all, Virginia Woolf would have learned from Eliot, however, remains uncertain and debatable.

2.5. Via Symbolism

Shiv Kumar notes how Edmund Wilson brings out the resemblance between the metaphysics implicit in Bergsonism and Symbolism. “Just as Symbolism represented a new way of rendering reality free from traditional conceptualization [via symbolic images and indirect suggestion], so was Bergsonism a plea for a free intuitive process of creative evolution against more mechanistic theories of nineteenth-century materialism” (66). Both Bergsonism and Symbolism focused on language and the inadequacy of language to convey that which is fleeting and mobile, as was illustrated in Chapter 2 with reference to Mallarmé. Similarly, there is a marked resemblance between Woolf and Symbolism. In The Waves, for instance, Woolf suggests the ephemeral states of consciousness through a quick succession of images. Although it is possible to link Woolf with Symbolism and Symbolism with Bergson, it may be too far-fetched to explain Woolf’s style of writing in terms of Bergsonism. Furthermore, Kumar notes the difficulty of identifying Symbolism with Bergsonism, since “both movements were almost simultaneous manifestations of the new awareness of experience as continuity” (66).
3. WOOLF AND BERGSON: LITERARY CRITICISM

Whereas literary critics of the 1930s such as Floris Delattre and Edmund Wilson sought to establish a direct or indirect connection between Woolf and Bergson, others have established parallels between the works of the British novelist and those of the French philosopher, regardless of whether or not Woolf was influenced by, or even familiar with, Bergson. In 1962, Shiv Kumar demonstrated the speculative character of theories that connected Woolf and Bergson directly and argued that both Woolf’s and Bergson’s works were products of the same age, the same cultural climate or “Zeitgeist”. He especially focused on the parallelism between durational flux and the stream-of-consciousness and asserted that in Bergson’s philosophy “one finds a most effective articulation of that intuitive sense of fluid reality of which sensitive minds were becoming aware in the early years of this [i.e. the twentieth] century” (13).

In the 1990s, when interest in Bergson was revived, Mary Ann Gillies revisited the parallelism between Bergson and Woolf and argued that the focus on the inner world as primordial over the external world was shared by Bergson, Fry and Bell. Especially interesting is Gillies’ interpretation of Woolf’s concept of ‘moments of being’, which she sees as exemplary of Bergson’s notion of la durée that has become spatialized because it is written down. This view was, however, contested by Ann Banfield, who considers ‘moments of being’ as discontinuous units of time. Banfield, therefore, pleads for a connection between Woolf, Russell and Moore, and considers Fry’s Post-Impressionism as essentially discontinuous. She writes:

Contrary to a common assumption, Woolf adopted not Henri Bergson’s philosophy but G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell’s realism. Time passes not as durée but as a series of still moments. (Banfield, “Time” 417)

Although she acknowledges that “the Cambridge time philosophy Woolf was exposed to developed not primarily against Bergson,” she does affirm Woolf’s novels to be “profoundly anti-Bergsonian” (“Time” 474).

Evidence indeed suggests that Woolf never read Bergson. Similarly, possible links between Woolf and Bergson – although perhaps convincing at first glance – are largely speculative when they are examined in depth. It, therefore, seems futile to continue any further discussion as to whether Woolf was influenced by Bergson or whether her novels are Bergsonian. What is certain is that Woolf and Bergson were part of the same modernist culture in which the concept of time played an essential role. Furthermore, it is generally admitted that Woolf approached time from “within a philosophical framework” (e.g. Banfield, “Time” 473). Whether this framework was Bergsonian or not, Bergson’s philosophy provides a valuable way of approaching Woolf’s aesthetic of time, as Bergsonian thinking covers various aspects of time (e.g. inner and outer time, time as flux, time and perception, the influence of the past on the present, the combination of creativity and evolution) and specifically addresses the problem of time and representation. If this dissertation, therefore, draws attention to parallels between the works of Bergson and Woolf, it is not to establish a specific connection between the two, but to gain a better understanding of Woolf’s ‘philosophy’ of time.
CHAPTER 4
TIME IN TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

In order to enhance our understanding of the way Woolf dealt with ‘time’ in her fiction, this chapter examines several temporal aspects of To the Lighthouse from a Bergsonian viewpoint. The following questions will be addressed: how does the three-part structure of the novel reflect different aspects of time? Is time, as seen by Woolf, fluid or fragmented? How is the passing of time translated into language? In what ways does the novel explore the mental categories of memory and intuition? Can art surpass the transience of life? And finally, how does the novel situate itself in the historical context of the beginning of the twentieth century?

1. TIME AND STRUCTURE
1.1. The H-like diagram

To the Lighthouse is divided into three parts of disproportionate length, resembling the H-like diagram Woolf sketched in her notebook (see figure 3). The first and third sections of the novel (“The Window” and “The Lighthouse”) spin out the events of one evening and one morning each over a few hundred pages, while the middle section (“Time Passes”) compresses the passage of ten years into that of a single night and a few dozen pages. The novel thus gives the impression of covering the time span of one day. It begins by describing a late afternoon/evening, presents the events of the second section as one night, and focuses again in the third part on one morning. In a sense, it thus seems as if James who wishes to go to the lighthouse in section one, indeed visits the lighthouse the next morning, but that morning takes place ten years later.30

30 See also the beginning of the story, in which “a night’s darkness” and “a day’s sail” respectively refer to the second and third section of To the Lighthouse, while “years and years” suggests the passing of ten years in section two: “To [James] these words conveyed an extraordinary joy, as if it were settled the expedition were bound to take place, and the wonder to which he had looked forward, for years and years it seemed, was, after a night’s darkness and a day’s sail, within touch” (TLS).
The H-symbol ("two blocks joined by a corridor")\textsuperscript{31} derives its power specifically from its ability to suggest both connection and separation. Structurally, the "corridor" links and opposes sections one and three: it divides the narrative into a pre- and a post-War section, into a section with and without Mrs Ramsay, but it also joins the two blocks together, echoing "the tunnel which connects the present moment with powerful scenes from the past" (Mepham 100). In her diary, Woolf wrote how she was concerned with "the flight of time" and the "consequent break of unity in my design" (D 3: 36). These are questions that are addressed in the novel itself, as Lily Briscoe’s wonders how "to connect this mass on the right hand side with that on the left?" (TL 62). Similarly, "that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces: Mr Ramsay and the picture" Lily tries to achieve in her painting (TL 219) can easily be linked with the composition of the novel’s third part, “The Lighthouse,” in which Woolf interweaves Mr Ramsay’s sail and arrival at the lighthouse and Lily’s completion of her picture, making them coincide with the ending of the novel.

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{To the Lighthouse: Holograph}, qtd. in Hermione Lee, \textit{Virginia Woolf} 475.
Moreover, the structure of *To the Lighthouse* can be traced to Virginia Woolf’s own childhood experience of revisiting her parents’ holiday house in St Ives after ten years of absence (see figure 5). Woolf’s had spent each summer, from her birth in 1882 until her mother’s early death in 1895, at Talland House, St Ives.\(^{32}\) She revisited it in 1905, the year after her father’s death with her sister Vanessa and her brothers Toby and Adrian and noted in her journal, how the house – once so reassuringly familiar – made them feel “like ghosts,” although it was “all, so far as we could see […] as though we had but left in the morning.”\(^{33}\) This echoes the structure of *To the Lighthouse* as James, Cam, Mr Ramsay, Lily Briscoe and Mr Carmichael, just like Woolf herself, return to their holiday home in the Hebrides ten years after their last summer visit. Just as in Woolf’s experience, it seemed but one night that had past in between.

\(^{32}\) Julia Briggs notes: “[T]he same seaside setting that had opened *Jacob’s Room.*” (160-61)

\(^{33}\) “The Lights were not our lights; the voices were the voices of strangers. We hung there like ghosts in the shad of the hedge, & at the sound of footsteps we turned away.” Virginia Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897-1909* (qtd. in Briggs 162).
1.2. Three Parts, Three Perspectives on Time

In accordance with Bergson’s theory on time, Shiv Kumar argues how the three sections of the novel correspond to three aspects of time “represented symbolically” (76). What these three aspects precisely entail is, however, not exactly clear from Kumar’s discussion. Nevertheless, the three sections of the novel each provide a different view on time.

1.2.1. “The Window”

In the first section, “The Window,” Virginia Woolf describes multiple experiences in a cross-section of a September evening from six o’clock to supper time. Whereas the clock covers only a couple of hours, the reader is given a view into the characters’ inner experience of time. Kumar writes: “In Mrs Ramsay, time becomes a symbol of inner expansion because she fills it with love, hope and understanding” while Mr Ramsay’s “inordinate egotism” contracts time. To James, time is “synonymous with ‘tomorrow’” (i.e. the expedition to the lighthouse), whereas to Lily it is “a symbolic
process of the intaking of sensory impressions and memories” (76-77). Time is thus represented as a qualitative process and not as an assemblage of discrete moments of experience. By the slow detail of shifting points of view, Woolf conveys the subjective experience of time of each character. Furthermore, the dominant impression of “The Window” is one of hope, aspiration and expectation, providing a powerful contrast with the second section that is set during the First World War.

1.2.2. “Time Passes”

“Time Passes,” the second section of the novel, differs from “The Window,” in that it focuses on the external passing of time. The ravages of war, destruction, and the passage of time are reflected in the condition of the house, rather than in the emotional development or observable ageing of the characters. Events such as Mrs Ramsay’s, Prue’s and Andrew’s deaths and the publication of Mr Carmichael’s poetry are announced in bracketed interpolations, presenting them as shocking but minor interruptions to the flight of time. As John Mepham asserts, the reader is startled by their suddenness and the impersonal viewpoint from which they are told, yet they seem to have “no more significance than the fall of a leaf or any other natural event” (110). In contrast with the first section of the novel, time is not internalized, but externalized in this section of the novel. Nevertheless, it is still presented as continuous, rather than as fragmented, as the narrator notes how “night and day, month and year ran shapelessly together” to form one long indefatigable night (TL 154).

34 Similarly James Hafley notes: “Mr Ramsay is afraid that he will be forgot [sic], that time will destroy his work; Mrs Ramsay, however, since she does not draw a line around her individuality, does not fear time; and Lily finishes her painting, even though she knows that it will never be displayed, because ‘one might say, even of this scrawl, not of that actual picture perhaps, but of what it attempted, that it “remained for ever”’ (137).

35 Nevertheless, Mrs Ramsay realizes that happiness does not last: “If it were fine, they should go for a picnic. Everything seemed possible. Everything seemed right. Just now (but this cannot last, she thought, dissociating herself from the moment while they were all talking about boots) just now she had reached security” (TL 120).

36 The importance of the house in ‘Time Passes’ seems reminiscent of the role the church of Combray plays in Du côté de chez Swann by Marcel Proust. The church not only evokes precious memories, as the Ramsays’ summer house will do in section III, it also exists in the fourth dimension of time. It is “un édifice occupant, si l’on peut dire, un espace à quatre dimensions – la quatrième étant celle du Temps – déployant à travers les siècles son vaisseau qui, de travée en travée, de chapelle en chapelle, semblait vaincre et franchir non pas seulement quelques mètres, mais des époques successives d’où il sortait victorieux ; dérobant le rude et farouche Xle siècle dans l’épaisseur de ses murs” (60).
In “Time Passes,” time becomes one big stream, engulfing the little island of home and garden, carrying away reason and civilization. Not one part can be distinguished from another, as “[n]ight after night, summer and winter, the torment of storms, the arrow-like stillness of fine weather, held their court without interferences” (TL 153). Time on the clock, fragmented into days, hours, seconds, seems to be “a purely artificial concept imposed by Man on Nature” (Derbyshire 358). This is in line with Bergson’s theory of “real time” or “duration.” Furthermore, Woolf explains how the passage had to express “not oneself but something in the universe that one’s left with” (D 3: 113). She had “to give an empty house, no people’s characters, the passage of time, all eyeless & featureless with nothing to cling to” (D 3: 76). Time is presented as a life force – a destructive force – on which humanity hardly has any grip as “there was scarcely anything of body or mind by which one could say ‘This is he’ or ‘This is she’” (TL 144).

Levenson notes how “Time Passes” produces a “daunting juxtaposition of human limits and extra-human powers, finite human time and the infinite and infinitely patient timelessness of eternity” as in the epic tradition (170). “As Adam and Eve are swallowed in divine immensity [Milton], as Bloom and Stephen melt into the analogies that exalt them [Joyce], so the lives of the Ramsays are reduced to parenthetical asides, within time’s endless monologue” (170-171). Yet Woolf finds no consolation in this widening view. Rather than letting the larger context “secure local meanings” as in the traditional epic, Woolf engages in the “counter-epical act of enlarging her background as a way of diminishing those left wandering in the foreground” (171). It seems as if the world is too vast to exercise full control. It is only through the miniature of, for instance, Nancy’s micro-universe in little pool of water37 or through the work of art (e.g. Lily’s painting) that one can begin to understand life at large. “Time Passes” might, therefore, be read as a warning for, or parody of, epic justification, as one is confronted with forces one cannot explain.

37 “Brooding, she changed the pool into the sea, and made the minnows into sharks and whales, and cast vast clouds over this tiny world by holding her hand against the sun, and so brought darkness and desolation, like God Himself, to millions of ignorant and innocent creatures, and then took her hand away suddenly and let the sun stream down” (TL 87).
1.2.3 “The Lighthouse”

In the third section, “The Lighthouse,” time is again internalized as in the first section of the novel, with this difference that it now becomes conflated with the powers of memory and the past. When the memory of Mrs Ramsay, after an interval of ten years, re-appears in the mind of Lily Briscoe, the Ramsays and their guests start to remember their activities and promises of ten years earlier. Comparable to the novel itself, Lily’s painting seems to be designed on a durational pattern, “since it derives its aesthetic validity from a qualitative interpenetration of the past, present and future” (Kumar 78). Not the present moment of experience, but only its recapitulation after an interval can reveal its true essence as “[t]en years had to pass, the proposed expedition to the lighthouse had to materialize before the final vision could dawn in her consciousness” (Kumar 79).

Furthermore, the structure of this third section is more straightforward than that of “The Window” as we can clearly discern two main structural lines: the journey of Cam, James and Mr Ramsay to the lighthouse on the one hand, and Lily’s completion of her painting on the other. As Kumar indicates, the arbitrary segments of time once more seem to merge into each other to form durée réelle when, the party lands on the lighthouse and Lily Briscoe simultaneously realizes her vision (79). Woolf struggled with this last section, feeling that the material in the boat was not so rich “as it is with Lily on the lawn” (D 3: 106). Wanting to convey the impression of simultaneity, she wondered: ‘Could I do it in a parenthesis? so that one had the sense of reading the two things at the same time?” (D 3: 106).

In addition, the emphasis of “The Lighthouse” is curiously divided between experience and achievement. At first sight, it is the journey that seems important to the characters as Lily recognizes that her painting is not physically important – its presence and its merit as art are merely ephemeral. Yet it is only when finishing the painting that she attains her vision; that she can see her creation as wholly new, as if for the first time. The journey to the lighthouse (in its physical and spiritual meaning), likewise, permits growth and “vision” for James, Cam and Mr Ramsay, as the distancing experience of the
journey brings freedom from the thing in the distance, i.e. the past.\textsuperscript{38} Nevertheless, it is only when they arrive that a complete break with the past can be made and the present can be enjoyed. As Hermione Lee remarks, “[t]he ending of the novel is poised between arriving and returning, getting somewhere (‘he must have reached it’) and being finished” (483) – the tension between process and result is not resolved.

In conclusion, while all three sections of the novel merge past, present and future to represent time as fluid, continuous, and indivisible, each section highlights a different aspect of \textit{la durée}: it can be internalized as in section I of the novel, it can be externalized as in section II, or the emphasis can be on simultaneity and the conflation of the past and the present as in section III.

2. \textbf{Time and ‘Moments of Being’}

In her diary Woolf wrote: “Now is life very solid or very shifting? I am haunted by the two contradictions” (\textit{D} 3: 140). The reader, too, is confused when reading \textit{To the Lighthouse}, as time is described as a “stream” (\textit{TL} 131), a “wave” (\textit{TL} 145), “fluidity” (\textit{TL} 112, 180), but is also “crystallize[d] and transfixed” (\textit{TL} 5) into a single moment of being. These moments “arrest the flow of time,” while they also prompt a “conflation of times as each individual moment is related to previous moments that are resurrected almost instantaneously” (Gillies, \textit{Henri Bergson} 109). This raises the question as to whether Woolf considered time as continuous or discontinuous; the former view corresponding to Bergson’s theory of \textit{la durée}, the latter in line with Russell’s assertion that time “consists of a succession of distinct, noninterpenetrating units, directly apprehended one at a time” (Banfield, “Time” 480).

2.1. \textit{Moments of Being}

As early as May 1918, Woolf tried to explain what she meant by what she then called “moments of vision” (the later ‘moments of being’): “certain moments which break off from the mass, in which bidding things come together in a combination of inexplicable significance […] those thoughts which suddenly, to the thinker at least are

\textsuperscript{38} “Already the little distance they had sailed had put them far from it [their house] and given it the changed look, the composed look of something receding in which one has no longer any part” (\textit{TL} 188).
almost menacing with meaning” (qtd. in P. Jacobs 15). Yet unlike Joyce (“epiphany”) or Proust (“moments bienheureux”), she never theorized this type of experience. On the contrary, she added to her description: “Such moments of vision are of an unaccountable nature; leave them alone and they persist for years, try to explain them and they disappear; write them down and they die beneath the pen” (qtd. in P. Jacobs 15). 39

According to Jeanne Schulkind, a moment of being may be defined as “a vision of reality as a timeless unity which lies beneath the appearance of change, separation and disorder that marks daily life” (18, my emphasis). Moments of being thus exist outside the flowing passage of time, although they are precisely those moments when one is “living most fully in the present” (MB 98), i.e. when past, present and future merge into a deeper awareness of life. As Lily Briscoe indicates in To the Lighthouse, they are moments when one feels that “in the midst of chaos there was shape,” when the “external passing and flowing […] was struck into stability,” when life, for one moment, had come to a standstill (TL 183). Moments of being do not explain the meaning of life as “the great revelation never came,” but they are “little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark” (TL 183).

While in the moment all is still, the surrounding world is represented as fluid and ever-changing. “Change and motion” lie only “between the unchanging moments,” Banfield asserts (“Time” 496). In this view, Bergson’s notion of duration would only be an illusion, as time consists of separate moments of being between which time passes. This, however, in my opinion, does not fully correspond to the way time is represented in To the Lighthouse, as time is experienced by the characters directly as flux. Lily Briscoe, for example, claims that “life, from being made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave which bore one up with it and threw one down with it” (TL 55). Woolf frequently uses metaphors of water, light and music 40 to convey the all-pervasive flow of time. In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf writes how we are all “sealed vessels afloat on what is convenient to call reality” (MB 122), how

39 The elusiveness of ‘moments of being’ is also voiced by Lily Briscoe in To the Lighthouse, who feels words fall short to communicate “the urgency of the moment” (TL 202). One could even argue that just like Woolf, Lily is acutely aware of the frustration of trying to convey her moments of intensity into meaningful art. Sensing, for example, on the morning of the trip to the lighthouse that “all words seem to become symbols that day,” she feels that “if only she could put them together […] write them out in some sentence, then she would have got at the truth of things” (TL 167).

40 This will be elaborated on in the next section of this chapter titled “Time and Language”.
she sees herself as “a fish in a stream, deflected, held in place” (MB 80) and how any moment “always include[s] a circle of the scene which they cut out” (MB 79). One could, therefore, reverse Banfield’s statement and assert that these moments of being are an illusion of equilibrium and immobility in a universe that is essentially fluid and dynamic.41

As the opening quotation of this section indicates, Woolf was not sure herself. On the one hand, she claims that “behind the cotton wool [of daily life] is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art” (MB 72); yet on the other hand, she describes the inexorable current of time pushing her along. One may conclude that Woolf had a dualistic conception of time: the world of being or the inner world in which stillness or rather timelessness prevails and the world of non-being in which time flows and is ever-changing.42 This is supported by her claim that the world consists of two types of experience: “being” and “non-being” (MB 70). It is precisely within the moment of being that one passes from one reality to the other, that one catches a glimpse of the “real thing behind appearance” (MB 72).

Moments of being are isolated from the flow of time, as one needs to “dissociat[e] [one]self from the [physical] moment” (TL 120) in order to experience what lies behind the appearance of everyday reality. This is exemplified by Mrs Ramsay who feels connected with a deeper inner life and dissociated from reality outside during her experiences of “being.” In the first example quoted below, Mrs Ramsay identifies with the stroke of the lighthouse (a symbol of time) distancing herself from reality outside herself. In the second example, she clearly detaches herself from the moment itself, “hold[ing] it [the moment] up” for contemplation.

Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this

41 It is precisely those moments in which characters try to make time stand still, that seem illusionary. Nancy creates her little microcosm of life in a puddle of water and tries to make time stand still by blocking the sun with her hand; yet soon the sea washes away her little miniature world. Similarly, Mrs Ramsay tries to delude time by creating moments of order and stability like the dinner party at the end of section I. She, however, realizes that the moment passes and that all are swept back into the flow of time.
42 This dualism does not correspond to Bergson’s dualist concept of time and space, as it the inner world in Woolf is not dominated by the concept of la durée.
peace, this rest, this eternity; and pausing there she looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood. (TL 73)

She felt rather inclined just for a moment to stand still after all that chatter, and pick out one particular thing; the thing that mattered; to detach it; separate it off; clean it of all the emotions and odds and ends of things, and so hold it before her, and bring it to the tribunal, where, ranged about in conclave, sat the judges she had set up to decide these things. (TL 128-29)

As Julia Briggs notes, at “each stage of writing, [Woolf] was reluctant to confine herself to a single approach to the exclusion of others” (5). Just as Lily Briscoe in her painting, Woolf wanted to combine a sense of fluid translucence with a strong structural basis. She later wrote to Lytton Strachey: “What I wanted to do was to give the feeling of a vast tumult of life, as various & disorderly as possible […] the whole was to have a sort of pattern and be somehow controlled. The difficulty was to keep any sort of ‘coherence’” (qtd. in Briggs 5).

3. **Time and Language**

If Woolf saw outward reality as essentially fluid, the problem that presents itself is how to translate fluidity into language. Woolf felt unable to bring “the sense of movement and change” in her writing (especially when writing about childhood) as “all images” seemed to be “too static” – “no sooner has one said this was so, than it was passed and altered” (MB 79). This problem had already been identified by Bergson, who postulated that language was inadequate to describe the unstable, fluid, and

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43 Writing about the stream of consciousness novel, Robert Humphrey notes: “The problem of form for the stream-of-consciousness novelist is the problem of how order is imposed on disorder. He sets out to depict what is chaotic (human consciousness at an inchoate level), and is obliged to keep his depiction from being chaotic (to make a work of art)” (85). This captures Virginia Woolf’s literary project quite well, as she defines the “orderly and expressed work of art,” as a work in which “one thing follows another and all are swept into a whole” (MB 75). Yet “scene making” as Woolf calls her urge to organize and capture the chaotic is not “altogether a literary device” for Woolf, as she feels it is “her natural way of marking the past” (MB 122).

44 In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe notes: “Little words that broke up the thought and dismembered it said nothing” (202).
multidirectional character of *la durée*. To describe the particular ebb and flow of the psychic stream, Woolf needed to find a way that would allow her to convey dynamicty in an essentially static medium. She needed to find that feeling of “transparency in words when they cease to be words and become so intensified that one seems to experience them; to foretell them as if they developed what one is already feeling” (*MB* 93). To translate the fluidity of time into language, Woolf uses a number of specific techniques that can be divided into two categories: 1) linguistic devices and 2) poetic devices.

### 3.1. Linguistic Devices

To represent time as flux, Woolf uses such linguistic devices as parenthesis, prepositional participles, coordinative conjunctions, the imperfect tense, colons, semicolons, dashes, and dots. I would like to illustrate these below:

(a) *Parenthesis*

The function of parenthesis in *To the Lighthouse* is twofold: on the one hand it allows the narrator to add a side comment without interrupting the stream of thought of a character, thus giving the impression of fluidity; on the other hand, parenthesis also functions as means to convey simultaneity in language. E.g.

‘His fame lasts perhaps two thousand years. And what are two thousand years? (asked Mr Ramsay ironically, staring at the hedge). What, indeed, if you look from a mountain-top down the long wastes of the ages? The very stone one kicks with one’s boot will outlast Shakespeare. (*TL* 42)

In the falling light they all looked sharp-edged and ethereal and divided by great distances. Then, darting backwards over the vast space (for it seemed as if solidity had vanished altogether), Prue ran full tilt into them and caught the ball brilliantly high up in her left hand, and her mother said, ‘Haven’t they come back yet?’ (*TL* 85)

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45 Note that five linguistic devices (parenthesis, prepositional use of participles, coordinative conjunctions, the imperfective and dots) are mentioned by Kumar as a general characteristic of Modernist writing (see Kumar 33).
(b) **Prepositional use of participles**

The prepositional use of the ‘-ing form’ conveys a notion of duration. The action is ongoing, unlimited in time. E.g.

_Holding_ her black parasol very erect, and _moving_ with an indescribable air of expectation, as if she were going to meet someone round the corner, she told the story. (_TL_ 13, my italics)

‘No going to the Lighthouse, James,’ he said, as he stood by the window, _speaking_ awkwardly, but _trying_ in deference to Mrs Ramsay to soften his voice into some semblance of geniality at least. (_TL_ 18, my italics)

(c) **Coordinative conjunctions**

As Kumar points out, in the style of Virginia Woolf, there is a marked tendency to introduce new paragraphs with coordinative conjunctions, particularly “for” and “and” (34). These indicate the uninterrupted flow of consciousness from one paragraph to another. E.g.

_For_ they were making the great expedition, she said, laughing. They were going to the town. (_TL_ 13, my italics)

‘Subject and object and the nature of reality,’ Andrew had said. _And_ when she said _Heavens_, she had no notion what that meant. (_TL_ 28, my italics)

(d) **The imperfect tense**

The imperfect tense expresses an action that is uncompleted, ongoing in time. This translates the continuous flow of time and actions into language. E.g.

For she _was wearing_ a green shawl, and they _were standing_ close together watching Prue and Jasper _throwing_ catches. (_TL_ 84, my italics)

‘It must have been fifteen – no, twenty years ago – that I last saw her,’ she _was saying_, turning back to him again as if she could not lose a moment of talk, for she was absorbed by what they were saying. (_TL_ 100, my italics)
But here he was asking himself that sort of question, because Mrs Ramsay was giving orders to servants. *(TL 103, my italics)*

**(e) Colons and semicolons**

Colons and semicolons tie sentences together. This increases the natural flow of the sentence. E.g.

She had a dull errand in the town; she had a letter or two to write; she would be ten minutes perhaps; she would put on her hat. And, with her basket and her parasol, there she was again, ten minutes later. *(TL 12)*

It was true; he was for the most part happy; he had his wife; he had his children; he had promised in six weeks’ time to talk ‘some nonsense’ to the young men of Cardiff about Locke, Hume, Berkeley, and the causes of the French Revolution. *(TL 52-53)*

Perhaps it is bad French; French may not contain the words that express the speaker’s thoughts; nevertheless speaking French imposes some order, some uniformity. *(TL 104)*

**(f) The dash**

The use of the dash interposes a thought or action without interrupting the general stream of thoughts or actions. It simultaneously links and separates words and ideas. E.g.

Only she thought life – and a little strip of time presented itself to her eyes, her fifty years. There it was before her – life. Life: she thought but she did not finish her thought. *(TL 69)*

For she guessed what he was thinking – he would have written better books if he had not married. *(TL 81)*

It’s all come to an end, she thought, while they came in one after another, Charles Tansley – ‘Sit here, please,’ she said – Augustus Carmichael – and sat down. *(TL 96)*
(g) **Dots**

Although not used as frequently by Woolf as other devices cited above, this sign of punctuation expresses the passing of time in its most direct way. It indicates a pause; time passes while the action is interrupted during a small space of time. E.g.

The vast flapping sheet flattened itself out, and each shove of the brush revealed fresh legs, hoops, horses, glistening reds and blues, beautifully smooth, until half the wall was covered with the advertisement of a circus; a hundred horsemen, twenty performing seals, lions, tigers ... Craning forwards, for she was short-sighted, she read out how it … ‘will visit this town’. (TL 14)

Alas! Even the books that had been given her, and inscribed by the hand of the poet himself: ‘For her whose wishes must be obeyed’ … ‘The happier Helen of our day’ … disgraceful to say she had never read them. (TL 32)

### 3.2. Poetic Devices

In addition to these linguistic devices, the particular and elaborate use of rhythm and metaphor underscores the all-pervasive flow of life, as well as the fluidity of the text itself. These are features common to poetry, hence the characterisation of Woolf’s prose as ‘lyric’ or ‘poetic’. ⁴⁶

#### 3.2.1. Rhythm and Phonemic Patterning

The rhythm of Woolf’s writing approximates the rhythm of thought itself. Woolf generally uses very long and elaborated sentences that contain but a few pauses, giving the impression of a constant stream. To provide “some rope to throw the reader”, however, Woolf has an extremely rhythmical style of writing, giving her prose a very fluid feel. When writing *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf highlighted the importance of rhythm to Vita Sackville West: “Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm” (Letters VW 3:

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⁴⁶ Poetic Prose is “prose which approximates to verse in the use of rhythm, perhaps even a kind of meter in the elaborate and ornate use of language, and especially in the figurative devices like onomatopoeia, assonance and metaphor” (Marysa Demoor, *An Introduction to Prose* 11).
When taking a closer look at the passage below, one notices the many parallelisms and sound effects that account for the passage’s natural flow.

The wheelbarrow, the lawn-mower, the sound of poplar trees, leaves whitening before rain, rooks cawing, brooms knocking, dresses rustling – all these were so coloured and distinguished in his mind that he had already his private code, his secret language, though he appeared the image of stark and uncompromising severity, with his high forehead and his fierce blue eyes, impeccably candid and pure, frowning slightly at the sight of human frailty, so that his mother, watching him guide his scissors neatly round the refrigerator, imagined him all red and ermine on the Bench or directing a stern and momentous enterprise in some crisis of public affairs. (TL 5)

This excerpt is taken from the very first page of the novel and is representative of the novel as a whole. It contains a large number of parallelisms, alliterations, assonances and consonances, which are illustrated below:

(a) **Parallelism**

The following examples indicate the use of identical metre or grammatical structure in successive verbal constructions, increasing the rhythm of the text. E.g.

“[t]he wheelbarrow, the lawn-mower”
“the sound of popular trees, leaves whitening before rain”
“rooks cawing, brooms knocking, dresses rustling”
“his private code, his secret language”

(b) **Alliteration**

Alliteration is the repeating of the sound of an initial consonant (or a cluster of consonants) in stressed syllables. This is a feature characteristic of poetry.

E.g. rain and rooks, coloured and code, forehead and fierce, frowning and frailty
(c) **Assonance**

Assonance is the repeating of the sound of a vowel or a diphthong in stressed syllables, stressing the melodious quality of the text. E.g.

/\i:/  wheel, tree, leave, these, he, secret, appeared, severity, fierce, neatly

/\ai/  whitening, mind, private uncompromising, high, eyes, slightly, sight, guide, directing, enterprise, crisis

/\i/  distinguished, image, with, scissors, refrigerator, imagined, him, ermine, public

(d) **Consonance**

Consonance is the repeating of the sound of a terminal consonant (or cluster of consonants) in stressed syllables, emphasising once more Woolf’s patterned language. E.g.

/\nd/  sound, mind, round

/\d/  code, guide, red

/\t/  private, secret, sight

3.2.2. **Imagery and Symbolism**

The flux of time is also conveyed by the many metaphors and images used in *To the Lighthouse*. These can be divided into four categories: water, music, light and air.\(^47\)

(a) **Water**

A particularly powerful image Woolf uses to create a sense of fluidity is the image of water itself (the stream, the waves, the sea). Just as Bergson’s notion of *durée* cannot be divided into units, so water cannot be segmented into separate parts. The waves especially, with their constant ever-changing movement, parallel the continuous

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\(^{47}\) Images of stability are the tree, the ruby and books. Having identified the key problem of this chapter as the discrepancy between the stability of words and the fluidity of time, it would lead me too far to elaborate on these any further.
movement of time. As Stella McNichol suggests, the sound of the sea with its changing rhythms takes on an “aural parallel to the visual alternating light and dark of the Lighthouse beam flashes” (43). They are the current of life, “the compass of the soul” (TL 146) offering comfort, but also causing distress, as “the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach […] for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed consolingly to repeat over and over again […] the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature, ‘I am guarding you – I am your support,’ but at other times […] like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life” (TL 19). The sea almost literally transforms thoughts into fluid concepts as “[i]t was as if the water floated off and set sailing thoughts which had grown as stagnant on dry land” (TL 24).

(b) Music

A second element that is present in To the Lighthouse and that is often linked with the concept of time as flux is the use of musical imagery such as the swelling of a tune or melody. As Bergson writes: “Il y a simplement la mélodie continue de notre vie intérieure – mélodie qui se poursuit et se poursuivra, indivisible, du commencement à la fin de notre existence consciente. Notre personnalité est cela même” (qtd. in Kumar 101). This metaphor for time and interpenetration is repeated on various occasions in the novel. As indicated above, life resembles “the ghostly roll of drums,” a sound that “had been obscured under all other sounds” and that “suddenly thundere hollow in her ears” (TL 19-20). Similarly, Lily Briscoe feels that “to follow her own thought” is “like following a voice that speaks too quickly to be taken down by one’s pencil” (TL 29). The latter example again invokes dynamicity and instability as the voice pushes Lily along on the current of life and time.

(c) Light

The central symbol of the novel, i.e. the lighthouse, indicates the passing of time by its cyclical movement and the alteration of light and dark. As critics point out, the

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48 Water is also symbolical of creativity and birth in To the Lighthouse. It is the “fountain” of creativity (TL 181), the immersion into the deep inner life. This is exemplified by Lily Briscoe, who “[a]lways […] before she exchanged the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting had a few moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul” (TL 180, my italics).
movement of the light beam symbolizes the structure of the novel as the strokes with their variable length (long – short – long) represent respectively “The Window,” “Time Passes” and “The Lighthouse”. Furthermore, Nicolas Marsh illustrates how the rhythm of the sentences describing Mrs Ramsay’s identification with the light beam echoes the three-fold rhythm of the flashes by alternating shorter and longer phrases (30). Time in the form of light is thus at the centre of the text. It, furthermore, constitutes the larger part of the ‘plot’ – a somewhat inadequate term – as the story opens and closes with the possibility of a trip to the lighthouse.

In addition, time in the form of light is associated with flux, as Mr Ramsay reflects that “his own little light would shine, not very brightly, for a year or two, and would then be merged in some bigger light, and that in a bigger still” (*TL* 42) as if it were a form of duration in which one movement is integrated into another. Similarly, Lily Briscoe associates light in the form of candles with instability as “that moment on the tennis lawn when solidity suddenly vanished” was reproduced “by the candles in the sparsely furnished room” (*TL* 113). Darkness “floods” and “pours” down on the world and the house in the second section “Time Passes” indicating the passage of time in the form of a sequence of nights that seem to have merged in one giant stream (*TL* 143).

(d) Air

The movement of time in *To the Lighthouse* is also symbolized by the blowing of the wind and the passing of clouds, conveying dynamicty and movement. Connected to this is the image of hovering birds. Mrs Ramsay in particular is associated with birds as she invents a story about two rooks (Joseph and Mary), transforms the boar’s skull in the children’s bedroom into an imaginary “bird’s nest” (*TL* 132) and is likened to “a hawk suspended” (*TL* 120) during her own dinner party, “flaunt[ing] and sink[ing] on laughter,” “resting her weight on what at the other side of the table her husband was saying” (*TL* 121). With the fluttering of their wings, birds symbolize movement, “The movement of the wings beating out, out, out – she could never describe it accurately enough to please her – was on of the loveliest of all to her [Mrs Ramsay]” (*TL* 93). They are borne up into the sky and float on the currents of air, just as Mrs Ramsay – and indeed all other characters – float on the currents of time.
4. MEMORY AND INTUITION

Memory and intuition are juxtaposed here, as memory implies the stream of the past into present (*la durée*) while intuition – in Woolf’s fiction – is linked with the single moment of being: one apprehends the flow of time “in one flash” as a whole (*TL* 41). Furthermore, memory is connected to epistemology, as it addresses questions of knowledge and perception. Similarly, the concept of intuition draws attention to gender differences in *To the Lighthouse*, as masculinity stands for intellect and solidity and femininity is associated with intuition and fluidity.

4.1. Memory, the Past and Epistemology

Memory occupies a central position in *To the Lighthouse*. Not only did Woolf write the novel – or “elegy” as she called it49 – in remembrance of her parents, the ‘plot’ of the story was also based on the memory of an incident she had reported, aged ten, in the Stephen children’s weekly family magazine, the *Hyde Park Gate News*:

On Saturday morning Master Hilary Hunt and Master Basil Smith came up to Talland House and asked Master Thoby and Miss Virginia Stephen to accompany them to the lighthouse as Freeman the boatman said that there was a perfect tide and wind for going there. Master Adrian Stephen was much disappointed at not being allowed to go. (qtd. in Peter Jacobs 11-12)

Memory has an essential function in the story, as the third part of the novel, “The Lighthouse,” centres on the memory of Mrs Ramsay. Just as the memory of Mrs Ramsay inspires Lily Briscoe to finish her painting, so the sail to the lighthouse is partly done in memory of Mrs Ramsay. The narrator comments: “they had been forced; they had been bidden. He had borne them down once more […] [to] take part in those rites he went through for his own pleasure in memory of dead people” (*TL* 187). It even seems as if Mrs Ramsay carefully plans her own remembrance by weaving herself into the lives of those around her. Mrs Ramsay reflects:

49 Hermione Lee writes, “[Woolf] wanted to call it an elegy and not a novel, because it is a memorial of her powerful, loved, dead parents. It has that peculiarly intimate deep feeling which comes out of fictions where childhood memory is being uncovered and appeased, like George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, or Katherine Mansfield’s *Prelude*, or Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*” (481).
They would, she thought, going on again, however long they lived, come back to this night; this moon; this wind; this house; and to her too. It flattered her [...] to think that how, wound about in their hearts, however long they lived she would be woven; [...] All that would be revived again in the lives of Paul and Minta [...] and Paul and Minta would carry it on when she was dead. (TL 130-31)

As Lily’s character makes clear, memory does not just belong to the past, it also extents to the present as it coexists with every perception. In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf writes: “The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river [...] it is then that I am living most fully in the present. For the present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you can feel nothing else” (MB 98). Memory thus has the ability to surge up spontaneously without any triggering sensation:

There was something [...] something she remembered in the relations of those lines cutting across, slicing down, and in the mass of the hedge with its green cave of blues and browns, which had stayed in her mind; which had tied a knot in her mind so that at odds and ends of time, involuntarily, as she walked along the Brompton Road, as she brushed her hair, she found herself painting that picture, passing her eye over it, and untying the knot in imagination. (TL 178, my emphasis)

So far, Woolf’s view on memory corresponds by and large to Bergson’s distinction between voluntary and involuntary memory, in which involuntary memory is defined as cerebral like a “knot” tied in one’s mind, which spontaneously “unties” itself. Like Bergson, Woolf believes in the “indestructibility of the past” and its “power to re-emerge into consciousness with all its infinite details, in the inseparableness of perception from recollection, and the power of memory to project all human experience in true perspective” (Kumar 93). Unlike Bergson, however, Woolf reflects that one cannot remember everything. In “A Sketch of the Past,” she writes:
If I could remember one whole day I should be able to describe, superficially at least, what life was like as a child. Unfortunately, one only remembers what is exceptional. And there seems to be no reason why one thing is exceptional and another not. Why have I forgotten so many things that must have been, one would have thought, more memorable than what I do remember? Why remember the hum of bees in the garden going down the beach, and forget completely being thrown naked by father into the sea? (Mrs Swanwick says she saw that happen). (MB 69-70)

As the previous quotation makes clear, one’s knowledge of the past is necessarily limited. On the one hand, distance in time brings knowledge and allows for new perspectives to emerge. It is a source of, and even a condition for forgiveness, as James and Cam can only forgive their father for his tyrannical behaviour on the actual trip to the lighthouse. Likewise, Lily can let go of her memory of Mrs Ramsay as a controlling and marriage-obsessed woman by returning to the Ramsays’ summer house ten years after her last holiday there. In both cases, the distance in time is symbolized by a literal distance in space (e.g. the trip to the lighthouse, Lily “stepping back to get her canvas [and thus the figure of Mrs Ramsay] into perspective” (TL 195)).

On the other hand, Woolf also questions the accuracy and truth of memories, as Lily, for example, makes up her own fragmented memory of Minta and Paul, how their marriage “turned out rather badly,” how Paul “played chess in coffeehouses,” etc. “She had build up a whole structure of imagination on that saying” (TL 196-7). What appears as a memory is, in fact, only a figment of the imagination. Lily reflects: “this making up scenes about them, is what we call ‘knowing’ people, ‘thinking’ of them, ‘being fond’ of them! Not a word of it was true; she had made it up” (TL 196-7).

Memory and perception are also addressed by Mrs Ramsay, as she first remembers her old friend Carrie and their walks along the river Thames with feelings of joy and nostalgia. Yet, when Mr Bankes informs her that Carrie is building a billiard room, she first reacts with disbelief and anger – “Building a billiard room! It seemed to her impossible” (TL 101); “she did not know this Carrie who built a new billiard room” (TL 101). Furthermore, Mrs Ramsay wonders how strange it is that the Mannings had “been capable of going on living all these years when she had not thought of them more
than once all that time” (*TL* 101). Without realizing it, Mrs Ramsay thus identifies the philosophical problem which preoccupies her husband. As Andrew explains to Lily in the beginning of the novel, Mr Ramsay’s books deal with “‘[s]ubject and object and the nature of reality’ […] ‘Think of a kitchen table […] when you’re not there’” (*TL* 28).

### 4.2. Intuition versus Intellect: A Matter of Gender?

As Kumar contends, “Bergson’s emphasis on *l’intuition philosophique* as the only authentic approach to the understanding of reality, represents one of the main aesthetic impulses behind the entire work of Virginia Woolf” (Kumar 93). Knowledge by instinct is associated with femininity in the novel, as it is the female characters that are endowed with a delicate sensibility that picks up on the fluid nature of reality. Male characters, on the contrary, are represented as epitomes of intellect – Charles Tansley tracing “the influence of something upon somebody” (*TL* 15) and Mr Ramsay being “the greatest metaphysician of his time” (*TL* 44). Furthermore, they are terribly insecure and averse to change and evolution. This opposition between male and female, intuition and intellect becomes immediately clear when comparing Mr and Mrs Ramsay.

Mrs Ramsay is not a scholar, “not clever, not book-learned at all” (*TL* 139). However, as the narrator notes, “she knew without having learnt. Her simplicity fathomed what clever people falsified” (*TL* 34). Unlike her husband, she has no need to conceptualise reality. Instead she acts upon instinct. This explains her charm and the marvellous effect she has on people as she immediately senses their needs and desires. Mrs Ramsay has the ability to pierce through all surfaces and to apprehend life from the inside. She creates a sense of unity and integration and is generally associated with fluid concepts such as water, air, music and light. 50 This forms a powerful contrast with the intellectual egotism of her husband, as “the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her” (*TL* 96).

Essential to Bergson’s concept of intuition is the ability to grasp the essence of things, to apprehend them as a whole. This corresponds to Mrs Ramsay’s ability to reach the inner core of things, to identify with the thing itself until she becomes one with the reality it expresses. When looking at the lighthouse, for example, Mrs Ramsay becomes

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50 See also “Time and Language” in this chapter.
the light itself: “Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at – that light for example” (TL 73). This identification with the object is precisely how Bergson defines intuition. It is that kind of intellectual sympathy “by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible” (qtd. in Kumar 96). In the following example, Mrs Ramsay identifies with the objects surrounding her, experiencing their inner radiance:

> It was odd, she [Mrs Ramsay] thought, how if one was alone, one leant to things, inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt the knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself. (TL 74)

Similarly, Lily Briscoe is guided by intuition, rather than by pure intellect, when painting her picture of Mrs Ramsay: “Now again, moved as she was by some instinctive need of distance and blue, she looked at the bay beneath her, making hillocks of the blue bars of the waves, and stony fields of the purpler spaces” (TL 206, my emphasis). Just as Mrs Ramsay, Lily too, desires a connection with the object itself, wishing to get hold of “the thing itself before it has been made anything” (TL 219). As Josephine Carubia Glorie points out, “Woolf shows Lily’s growth as an epistemic actor through her evolving perception of the relationship between knower and object” (159). Lily’s desired connection to Mrs Ramsay, for example, approximates complete conflation, “like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored? Could the body achieve it, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? or the heart? […] for it was not knowledge but unity she desired […] intimacy itself, which is knowledge” (TL 60).\(^\text{51}\)

Mr Ramsay, however, lacks intuitive knowledge as he is too dependent on his own intellect. This is observed by Mrs Ramsay as she notes how although “his understanding often astonished her,” he did not notice the flowers, nor the view: “He never looked at things” (TL 81-82). What is meant here is that Mr Ramsay does not look

\(^{51}\) This last passage has also been read as an expression of Lily Briscoe’s lesbian love for Mrs Ramsay. (E.g. Swanson 38-44)
at things the way women do, “to feel simply that’s a chair, that’s a table, and yet at the same time, It’s a miracle, it’s an ecstasy” (TL 229). He cannot identify with the object itself, and only sees its outward appearance. Therefore, Mr Ramsay cannot experience time as an interpenetrating whole, i.e. as duration. His knowledge is merely factual and, therefore, does not allow him to apprehend the workings of time, as intellect “ne saurait, en général, entrer dans ce qui se fait, suivre le mouvant, adopter le devenir qui est la vie des choses” (Kumar, 94). Rather than seeing time and knowledge as entities that are constantly in motion, Mr Ramsay considers them as spatialized; they are divided into several stages like the keys on a piano, or the letters of the alphabet:

For if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. (TL 40)

It is precisely because Mr Ramsay lacks intuitive knowledge which presupposes integration instead of disintegration that he remains pinned at the letter Q. As he himself observes: there are those “plodders” like himself who “repeat the whole alphabet in order, twenty-six letters in all, from start to finish” and those “gifted” who “miraculously, lump all the letters together in one flash” (TL 41). Mr Ramsay’s knowledge is limited because he thinks in terms of analysis rather than synthesis. Similarly, Virginia Woolf portrayed her own father, Leslie Stephen – on whom the character of Mr Ramsay was based – in the following terms:

And the reason for that is to be found in the disparity, so obvious in his books, between his critical and his creative powers. Give him a thought to analyse, the thought of Mill, Bentham, Hobbes; and his is (so Maynard has told me) acute,

52 Morris Beja convincingly links Mr Ramsay’s ‘limited’ knowledge with Joyce’s theory of aesthetics. Mr Ramsay “has reached the apprehension of integritas and consonantia, but he has yet to perceive claritas”. “Having realized that an object ‘is one integral thing, that it is a thing’, Mr Ramsay has achieved the phase of perception called integritas; he has also gone on to the next step, consonantia, which Joyce appropriately associates with the ‘analysis’ of apprehension.” “Mr Ramsay’s over-rational mind prevents him from going beyond analysis. […] That is, he cannot enter into the object and experience its radiance […] Clartias, the phase of apprehension that Joyce associates with intuition and epiphany, is [therefore] out of Mr Ramsay’s reach” (Beja 224).
clear, concise: an admirable model of the Cambridge analy[tical spirit]. But give him life, a character, and he is so crude, so elementary, so conventional, that a child with a box of coloured chalks is as subtle a portrait painter as he is. (MB 126)

The opposition between intellect and intuition can also be observed at a metaphorical level as Mrs Ramsay is associated with the sea (fluidity) and Mr Ramsay with the dunes (stability), as Mrs Ramsay is linked with light (truth/knowledge) and Mr Ramsay with darkness (ignorance), as Mrs Ramsay reads a sonnet (characterized by its ‘whole shape’) and Mr Ramsay a novel (characterized by its serial form, as it is divided into different chapters).\(^{53}\) Mrs Ramsay (just as Lily) thus shares the same metaphor of time as the fluid, interpenetrating source of life and evolution. Even the well-known Bergsonian metaphor of the jet of life (l’\'él\'an vital) injecting itself into matter is suggested in the following passage:

Mrs Ramsay, who had been sitting loosely, folding her son in her arm, braced herself, and, half-turning seemed to raise herself with an effort, and at once to pour erect into the air a rain of energy, a column of spray, looking at the same time animated and alive as if all her energies were fused into force, burning and illuminating (quietly though she sat, taking up her stocking again), and into this delicious fecundity, this fountain and spray of life, the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare. (TL 44, my italics)\(^{54}\)

This reminds us of Lily who, when painting, loses “consciousness of outer things” as she forgets “her name and her personality and her appearance,” thus allowing “her mind [to throw up] from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurtting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modelled it with greens and blues” (TL 181, my emphasis). This marks the decisive difference between Mr Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, as Mr Ramsay is too insecure to let go of his own personality and reputation. While Mr Ramsay’s utmost effort is to “find some

\(^{53}\) One could, therefore, argue that the marriage between the two (Mr and Mrs Ramsay, the novel and the sonnet) mixes poetry and prose, creating the poetic prose Woolf is aiming for in her novel.

\(^{54}\) Indebted for this example to Kumar (96).
crag of rock” and “die standing” (TL 178), Lily is said to “step off her strip of board into the waters of annihilation” (TL 205). This difference is crucial, Marsh explains, as it is this full immersion into reality that will lead Lily to her ‘vision’, i.e. that “in the midst of chaos there was shape” (TL 183). While Mr Ramsay thus tries to impose ‘shape’ and sees nothing but chaos, Lily looks at ‘chaos’ and ‘shape’ is revealed within (Marsh 159-60).

5. Transience and Eternity: The Ravages of Time

As indicated above, intuition, energy and creation are associated with the feminine sphere in To the Lighthouse. The novel seems to suggest that in order to create something new, to reach a deeper insight into the nature of reality, one needs to immerse oneself fully in the stream of life. This, however, also implies that one needs to come to terms with the logic of time, and the death and destruction time brings. As Michael Levenson notes, the distinction in the novel seems to be “between those who battle the current of time in a gesture of fierce denial, and those who, in a spirit of acceptance, learn to swim with the tide” (206-7). Unsurprisingly, this dichotomy corresponds to the gender divide in To the Lighthouse, as it is the women (Mrs Ramsay, Lily Briscoe and Mrs McNab) who ultimately submit to the ravages of time, while the men in the novel cling to permanence as to a “stake in the channel” (Levenson 207).

Mr Ramsay, for example, fears that his achievement in philosophy will fall into oblivion. He is so obsessed with time and the status of eternity, that he cannot enjoy the present moment. This insecurity manifests itself by dashing the hopes of little James “who, sprung from his loins should be aware from childhood that life is difficult” (TL 6). James, although a rebel against his father, is said to belong “even at the age of six, to that great clan which […] must let future prospects, with their joys and sorrows, cloud what is actually at hand” (TL 5). Like his father, he is so preoccupied with a certain ideal (going to the lighthouse) that he cannot accept that time does not conform to his wishes. Similarly, Charles Tansley refuses to accept the evolution time brings as he asserts that “Women can’t write, women can’t paint” (TL 57, 99, 105, 181, 223). As Michael Levenson explains, “all express a refusal to accept the workings of time, which will undo all fixities” (206).
Women, on the other hand, “know intimately the ravages of time” (Levenson 206). Mrs Ramsay tries to protect her children from death and destruction by covering up the boar’s skull in the nursery, yet she knows that her efforts are futile as the beating of the waves make her “think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea” and warns her that ‘it [life] was all ephemeral as a rainbow’ (TL 20). Mrs McNab sees the house deteriorating through the workings of time and tersely notes how “[t]hings were better then than now” (TL 156). Lily, similarly, lets herself be carried along on the current of time as “Down in the hollow of one wave she saw the next wave towering higher and higher above her” (TL 179). Contrary to Mr Ramsay who asks himself “how long he would be read” (TL 123), Lily readily concedes that her painting will be “hung in the attics,” that it will be “destroyed” (TL 204). Looking at her picture, Lily reflects:

That would have been his answer, presumably – how ‘you’ and ‘I’ and ‘she’ pass and vanish; nothing stays; all changes but not words, not paint. Yet it would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be rolled up and flung under a sofa; yet even so, even of a picture like that, it was true. One might say, even of this scrawl, not of that actual picture, perhaps, but of what it attempted, that it ‘remained for ever’ . . . (TL 204, my italics)

It attempts to capture time and evolution, as Lily’s “vision” is precisely this: “that the vision must be perpetually remade” (TL 206).

6. TO THE LIGHTHOUSE: A NOVEL ON TIME, OF ITS TIME

Although To the Lighthouse does not contain many historical references, an analysis of “time” cannot dispense with a discussion of how the novel is situated in its time. This is, in some respects, a point of conflict for Woolf, as she did not wish to write about politics or social conditions as the Edwardians did, but wanted to describe life itself, the eternal passing and flowing of thoughts. Nevertheless, the narrative certainly

55 In her essay “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” Woolf distinguishes between two “camps” of writers: the Edwardians (e.g. “Mr Wells, Mr Bennett, and Mr Galsworthy”) and the Georgians (“Mr Forster, Mr Lawrence, Mr Strachey, Mr Joyce and Mr Eliot”). While the Edwardians described characters by means of their outward appearance and social conditions, the Georgians – according to Woolf – described human character itself. (Collected Essays 319-337)
has historical, social, and political dimensions, as it engages with World War I, the class system, feminism, and the contrast between Victorianism and Modernism.

6.1. The Great War

It is especially the second chapter, “Time Passes,” that places the novel in its historical context, dividing the narrative into a pre- and a post-war setting. This is, first of all, made clear by the opening section of “Time Passes” in which the impersonal, narrative presence describes how all the lamps were extinguished and the house was wrapped in darkness:

One by one the lamps were all extinguished, [...] So with the lamps all put out, the moon sunk, and a thin rain drumming on the roof a down-pouring of immense darkness began. Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood. (TL 143)

Only Mr Carmichael’s candle burns “rather longer than the rest” (TL 143), as he is the only one that can be said to prosper from the war, becoming a successful poet afterwards.

Secondly, Andrew’s death, however briefly mentioned, brings in the many horrors and casualties of the Great War, as he dies – so the novel reports – during a shell explosion in France. Still, the unnecessary spilling of blood and the at once heroic and tragic fate of the soldiers and officers is already announced by Mr Ramsay’s perpetual quoting from Tennyson’s poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade” in the first section of the novel, “The Window.” This poem describes the fate of the soldiers who fought in the battle of Balaclava during the Crimean War, a battle that had disastrous consequences. Yet Mr Ramsay quotation, “Someone had blundered” (TL 22, 30, 36, 39) can also be interpreted as an extension of his self-dramatisation and self-doubt, linked with Woolf’s own doubts about her novel writing.

6.2. The Class System and the General Strike

A second dimension that is introduced in the novel is the opposition between the upper and lower classes. This is exemplified by the character of the poor, but educated Charles Tansley, whose scornful and envious class-feeling about the Ramsays appears in passages such as:
For he was not going to talk the sort of rot these people wanted him to talk […]
He had been reading in his room, and now he came down and it all seemed to him
silly, superficial, flimsy. Why did they dress? He had come down in his ordinary
clothes. He had not got any dress clothes. (TL 98-99)

The endurance of the working-classes is also referred to in the novel’s second part, “Time
Passes,” in which Mrs McNab and Mrs Bast have to put up with whatever “kings and
Kaisers” (TL 145) have brought about.

Bowed down she was with weariness. How long, she asked, creaking and
groaning on her knees under the bed, dusting the boards, how long shall it endure?
but hobbled to her feet again, pulled herself up. (TL 149)

Virginia Woolf wrote this part of the novel, “Time Passes,” during the General Strike
of May 1926, when miners’ wages were cut and other workers laid down their tools in
support. For the Woolfs this was a tumultuous period, as their house was suddenly filled
with militants urging Leonard to use his printing press to attack the government (Briggs
176). Virginia, however, could not share Leonard’s sense of commitment. Arguing about
the strike, she wrote, was not “nearly as exciting as writing To the Lighthouse” (D 3: 83).
She added, “I suppose all pages devoted to the Strike will be skipped, when I read over
this book. Oh, that dull old chapter, I shall say. Excitement about what are called real
things, are always unutterably transitory” (D 3: 83).

As Hermione Lee remarks, “in general the politics of this novel’s first draft were
more explicit” (479). Nevertheless, one notices the bodily pain of Mrs McNab and Mrs
Bast getting up every morning, trying to save the Ramsay’s holiday home – symbolical of
Europe and civilisation – from decay and ruin.

Slowly and painfully, with broom and pail, mopping, scouring, Mrs McNab, Mrs
Bast stayed the corruption and the rot; rescued from the pool of Time that was fast
closing over them now a basin, now a cupboard; fetched up from oblivion all the
Waverly novels and a tea-set one morning. (TL 159)
“Yet however idealistic the impulse that created them, the actual portraits of Mrs McNab and Mrs Bast remain stereotyped, even ‘sentimental’,” Julia Briggs notes (176).

6.3. Gender differences and feminism

Gender differences and feminism constitute a third manner in which the novel engages with the period in which it was written. Misogyny, for instance, is attributed to the atheist Charles Tansley, who constantly repeats the phrase “women can’t write, women can’t paint” (TL 57, 99, 105, 181, 223). Yet perhaps more interesting than the opposition between men and women, already discussed with reference to Mr and Mrs Ramsay, is the contrast between women and women in the novel, more specifically between the different roles women take up in society, as exemplified by the contrast between Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. While Mrs Ramsay is the epitome of beauty and in many ways an exemplary wife and mother, Lily has a small “puckered face” with “little Chinese eyes” (TL 21, 31, 120) and is generally averse to marriage. In a way, Lily has to break free from the tradition Mrs Ramsay stands for, in order to establish her own identity as an artist. Yet, ironically, it is precisely when she gains distance from Mrs Ramsay (i.e. when Mrs Ramsay dies) that she comes to appreciate her, recognizing how much her own identity as a woman depends on Mrs Ramsay’s more traditional expressions of femininity. As Anne McMaster puts it:

once her independence is assured, Lily can acknowledge her debts to Mrs. Ramsay. [...] she also comes to two contradictory but equally true revelations: first, that her art depends upon liberating herself from human relations, from Mrs. Ramsay’s prescriptions for her life, and from Mrs. Ramsay herself, and, conversely, that her art of painting is parallel in ways to Mrs. Ramsay’s art of human relations, that her art in fact depends on Mrs. Ramsay herself, and that the vision which allows Lily to complete the painting is a vision of Mrs. Ramsay. (272)

While Mrs Ramsay, in a way, thus stands for the traditional wife and mother, she too possesses certain traits of the modern artist/woman, e.g. the idea that everything is
somehow struck into stability, her sense of patterning, her ruminations about the nature of life and the reliability of memories and knowledge.

6.4. Victorianism versus Modernism

Just as Mr Ramsay is part of the Victorian educational establishment, Mrs Ramsay stands for the Victorian ideal of women, as she is even linked with Queen Victoria herself as she stands “quite motionless […] against a picture of Queen Victoria wearing the blue ribbon of the garter” (TL 17). Both Mr and Mrs Ramsay are products of the Victorian patriarchal system and symbolize Woolf’s own parents. Woolf writes in “A Sketch of the Past” that her mother’s character “was sharpened by the mixture of simplicity and scepticism,” that she was “extremely practical but with a depth in her […] a mixture of the Madonna and a woman of the world” (MB 90). Leslie Stephen, on the other hand, is described as “a typical Victorian” (MB 127). In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf wrote:

Two different ages confronted each other in the drawing room at Hyde Park Gate: the Victorian age; and the Edwardian age. We were not his children, but his grandchildren. […] The cruel thing was that while we could see the future, we were completely in the power of the past. That bred a violent struggle. By nature, both Vanessa and I were explorers, revolutionists, reformers. But our surroundings were at least fifty years behind the times. Father himself was a typical Victorian: George and Gerald were unspeakably conventional. So that while we fought against them as individuals we also fought against them in their public capacity. We were living say in 1910: they were living in 1860. (MB 126-7)

The first part of the novel, “The Window”, with its focus on the family (e.g. the dinner at the end of “The Window”) and marriage (e.g. Mrs Ramsay as a matchmaker) is symbolic of this Edwardian age. In the second and third parts, “Time Passes” and “The Lighthouse,” the traditional values and beliefs are no longer tenable, as the family becomes disintegrated and the focus shifts from Mrs Ramsay to the independent artist, Lily Briscoe.
As Woolf wrote in her essay “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” “in or about December 1910 human character changed” (*Collected Essays* 320). There was a rupture between the past and present, represented in the opposition between parts one and three, “The Window” and “The Lighthouse”. This representation of a rupture between Victorianism and Modernism, between the past and the present might have been harder for Woolf to achieve in this novel than in any other, as *To the Lighthouse* needed to be at once a break with the past and an exaltation of that past in the form a tribute to her parents and childhood. As Hermione Lee writes: “The lost safe house and garden are the traditions of writing from which the new writer has to travel, out into formidable space. But the new writing keeps trying to find its way back into the past, so that there is an odd tension in the book between the experimental and the nostalgic” (482).
CONCLUSIONS

As this dissertation demonstrates, “time” became a central issue during Modernism. The nature of time was questioned and ultimately redefined by both Bergson and Woolf. One important aspect of this reinterpretation of time was the dichotomy between “time in the mind” and “time on the clock” (O 69). Woolf focused on “time in the mind,” as the structure of To the Lighthouse and the concept of ‘moments of being’ make clear. Likewise, Bergson introduced a dualist principle in his philosophy which separated the world of ‘real time’ (la durée) from the world of ‘spatialized’ time or “time on the clock”. Both Bergson and Woolf described the nature of “time in the mind” as fluid, heterogeneous and reversible since the past influenced the present, just as much as the present influenced the past.

The re-conceptualization of time, however, went beyond a distinction between public and private time. Bergson differentiated between two kinds of memory: voluntary and involuntary memory, and developed an evolutionary theory that postulated the existence of a vital impulse (l’élán vital) which could only be grasped through intuition. Woolf made no explicit distinction between different types of memory, although she did question the nature of our reminiscences, as well as the fact that there seems to be no logic in what one does and does not remember. While her female characters are guided by Bergson’s concept of intuition in To the Lighthouse, her male characters seem blinded by intellect and hold an essentially static vision on the world.

Bergson and Woolf are both conscious of the difficulty of translating the dynamic character of time into language. Bergson asserts that, although it is fundamentally impossible to express la durée by means of static concepts like words, one should not give up trying, as language is the best and only means we have to communicate our experiences. As argued in this dissertation, Woolf tries to capture fluidity in her writing by exploiting various linguistic devices such as parenthesis, coordinative conjunctions, colons and semi-colons that do not interrupt a character’s stream-of-thought. Similarly, Woolf’s prose is characterized by a distinctive rhythm and abounds with metaphors of water, light, music and air that signal fluidity to the reader.
These parallels between Bergson and Woolf, however, should not be overemphasized as it is almost certain that Woolf never read Bergson, although there are a number of possible channels by which Woolf might have come into contact with Bergson’s philosophy: e.g. via her sister-in-law Karin Stephen; via fellow Bloomsbury members such as G.E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, Clive Bell, and Roger Fry; via the works of Marcel Proust; or via her friend and rival T.S. Eliot. These, however, do not to lead to any conclusive evidence indicating a direct or even an indirect relationship between Bergson and Woolf. This dissertation, therefore, uses Bergson’s philosophy as a ‘guiding principle’ to study the work of Woolf, as both authors were thinkers in and of their time, concerned with the issues of time as flux, memory and intuition.


