NOTES ON TIME IN THE MODERN BRITISH NOVEL (3)

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CHAPTER III
EXISTENTIAL TIME: Time As Perceived

The time of nature as well as its abstract imitation, mechanical time, is homogeneous and invariable. One of the major differences of existential time is perceptual variability, or subjective relativity, which has affected literature in several ways. As the author’s contraction and expansion of time in terms of narrative density it is coeval with the very tradition of narrative; in the experience of the literary character, subjective relativity is equally traditional. In our century, however, both these manifestations of a variable perceptual time have appeared more frequently than formerly. Largely owing to the increasing interest in psychological exploration, the discrepancy between mechanical and psychological time implicit in the contraction and expansion of narrative time is more pronounced in the twentieth-century novel than in earlier periods; the same interest accounts for the heightened awareness of subjective relativity in the portrayal of character. Beside these uses, subjective relativity is also employed for peripheral purposes like the suggestion of mood and atmosphere.

In Conrad’s work, perceptual time is important chiefly as a means of suggesting states of mind, changes in perspective, and atmosphere. Its predominance is due to Conrad’s interest in the single moment as well as in the general tenor of a character’s experience. In this interest, he foreshadows the dissolution of character into a succession of mind, a situation prevalent in much twentieth-century fiction. Conrad, however, gives a sense of character as being firm rather than fluid; it is in accord with this conception that he will often use variability of time perception to suggest a deeper psychic structure rather than merely transitory states.

Whatever the ontological status of time, whether it be a substance, a quality, or a relation, man’s perception of time has always been variable. It is largely determined by individual temperament. Shakespeare, in As You Like It and other plays, shows a full awareness of the subjectivity of time perception: “Time travels in divers paces with divers persons. I’ll tell you who Time ambles withal, who Time trots withal, who Time gallops withal, and who he stands still withal.” Moreover, the individual’s sense of time fluctuates with circumstance and situation. These peculiarities result in a highly asymmetrical pattern of temporal experience; this pattern can, however, be further modified by retrospection, which generally reverses the relations of the asymmetry. An
interval which in the process of living appeared long may in retrospect shrink to nothingness; conversely, a period of time which, when lived, seemed a mere instant may, in retrospect, assume the proportions of eternity.

Although Joseph Conrad is not the first novelist to embody in his work these characteristics of time perception, he attends to them more closely and evokes them more vividly than any of his predecessors in the novel. The main reason for this is undoubtedly the importance of atmosphere and mood in his fiction. The indirect evidence provided by his stories and novels is supported by the master's own voice in Heart of Darkness: "...to him (Marlow) the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine." (48) Although this statement applies to the completed story, it is certainly also relevant to the scenes and episodes which compose that story: if these are without a halo, how can the story as a whole have any? Since these halos are intangible, they are extremely hard both to conceive and create. It is therefore not surprising that Conrad should avail himself of any legitimate means to gain his desired effects. One of these means is the variability of man's experience of time. 3)

It is only natural that this feature should predominate in The Nigger of the Narcissus and the other sea stories, in which a period of tense struggle is followed by one of relaxation. As far as the immediate perception of time is concerned, the possibilities of variation range from the impression of time flight to that of time stoppage. During the first part of the voyage of the "Narcissus," when the ship has a fair wind, time passes quickly, partly because it is dwarfed by the immensity of the seascape, partly because life, regulated by half-hourly bells, is running smoothly. "The days raced after another, brilliant and quick like the flashes of a lighthouse, and the nights, eventful and short, resembled fleeting dreams." (30) When the gale strikes, a total transformation takes place: the uniform time of mercantile routine is replaced by a discontinuous temporal sequence, in which seemingly interminable moments of suspension in the void—moments when the heart stands "still"—are punctuated by instantaneous shocks of renewed contact with actuality, (53) The illusions which Conrad evokes to characterize such situations of intense expectation or suspense—, for instance, the crew's rescue of Jim, trapped in his cabin—are simply staggering. Minutes have seemed years, and the sailors appear like desert wanderers returning to civilized humanity after an age of struggle. It is the more startling to find that after the storm is over, the experienced years have dwindled to nothingness. "All the first part of the voyage, the Indian Ocean on the other side of the cape, all that was lost in a haze, like an ineradicable suspicion of some previous existence. It had ended; there were the blank hours—a livid blur—and again we lived." 4)

A sense of time shrinkage, i.e. of time having swiftly, regularly accompanies in Conrad's novels a life marked by routine activities. Mrs. Travers in The Rescue has the same sense of the fleetingness of the days of her unromantic, but socially eventful, married life as the sailors of the "Narcissus" have in regard to their prescribed sequence of nautical duties. "She was admired, she was surrounded by splendor and adulation; the days went on rapid, brilliant, uniform, without a glimpse of sincerity or true passion, without a single true emotion—not even that of a great sorrow." (152) Before she runs
aways with Dain Maroola, Nina Almayer is oppressed with the same feeling. "It seemed so unreasonable, so humiliating to be flung there in that settlement and to see the days rush by into the past, without a hope, a desire, or an aim that would justify the life she had to endure in evergrowing weariness." (AF, 151) Despite differences in tone and feeling—that is, mood—in these instances, the state of the deeper psyche is virtually identical.\textsuperscript{5} This state is one of non-participation, passiveness. Both the sailors, Mrs. Travers, and Miss. Almayer follow a routine pattern of life, a pattern from which their deep selves are completely excluded. The life of the sailors is dominated by mercantile routine, that of Mrs. Travers by social routine, and that of Miss Almayer by domestic routine. As far as the sailors are concerned, the racing rapidity of the passage of time which they experience, though it strengthens the impression of a superficial mood of contentment, indicates simultaneously that their more fundamental psychic state is one of torpor. This is also the state of Mrs. Travers, who, like the sailors, is superficially content, even gay. But after Lingard has engaged her emotions, time suddenly stops in its flight: "And swiftly and stealthily they (the days) had led her on and on, to this evening, to this coast, to this sea, to this moment of time and to this spot on the earth's surface where she felt unerringly that the moving shadow of the unbroken night had stood still to remain with her forever." (R, I52) The deep, "timeless," part of her psyche has been engaged, and the race of the days is ended.

One might suggest another aspect of these three situations. The time which patterns the lives of these characters is strictly speaking not existential, but mechanical time. The latter is characterized by invariability, homogeneity, and pure succession. These characteristics do apply to the time lived by the sailors, Mrs. Travers, and Miss Almayer. It is even uniformly divisible into horological units, since no moments stand out as more significant than others. This implies there is no recapitulation of the past and but little anticipation of the future. The pattern is one of pure succession, as against interpenetration, a pattern in which the moment, hour, day—or year—when they have passed, have passed absolutely, leaving "not a rack behind." No wonder that Lingard with a simple question scatters Mrs. Travers' past" in the air—like smoke." (R, I54) Sometimes, even, there is no past to scatter, as happens very often when one spends the time at sea. Conrad describes, for instance, the early days of the voyage of the "Patna" as "still, hot, heavy, disappearing one by one into the past, as if falling into an abyss forever open in the wake of the ship." (LJ, I6) This is the natural and inevitable result of a life devoted to a mere practical and immediate adaptation to the physical, social, or domestic circumstances. The constant repetition of the adaptive activities withdraws the mind from itself, so that it exists as a mere instrument of action. Meanwhile, the passionate and intuitive being slumbers. Since it is this latter which informs life with movement, rhythm, and drama, not surprisingly, the monotony of a mechanical routine dominates existence when it is not engaged. That the individual involved in such a routine should feel that time passes quickly is easily understandable, since this time is not only atomic, but literally empty: it leaves no memories.

The contrary impression that time passes slowly is generally induced in Conrad's work by situations of extreme crisis. Conrad's use of this peculiarity of time perception is not always effective. He achieves best results where he supplements it with a mate-
rial time device, like a clock. Under Western Eyes offers the best example of this combination. Razumov has returned from his evening excursion of betrayal and is waiting for Haldin to leave his room. He knows he has committed a fateful act and stands in terror of its consequences. Yet, he longs for the appointed hour of twelve, at which Haldin will depart. But time drags on for Razumov, who in his impatience has taken out his watch and is repeatedly looking at it. "II:57. Slow," he muttered. (61) Because of his suspicion that the watch is late, he is yearning to hear the sound of the town clock. All these devices are here effectively used. The perception of the slowness of time suggests Razumov's acute mental pain in having to wait for the destined moment; the guilt of betrayal is already on his conscience. Conrad uses the watch, and Razumov's manner of looking at it, dramatically to objectify this guilt. Finally, he brings in the town clock to suggest the pathological intensity of Razumov's anguish.

Relativity of perception not only shrinks and expands experienced time and causes the temporal values of direct experience to be transformed by retrospection; it also generates extraordinary illusions of temporal distance. The occasions for these illusions are usually crises of some sort, either physical or spiritual. For instance, sailing up the African river, which brings him into a pre-human, or even pre-animal, past, Marlow remembers his own past as an "unrestful and noisy dream" in another existence. (HD, 93) The enormousness of the illusion becomes evident when one realizes that Marlow feels this way about the events of his proximate past, that is, the time immediately preceding the river voyage. The length of the actual interval is irrelevant; whether it is a minute or a month, it is in both cases inflated to appear like years, or eternities. This, it is true, is a fairly obvious and easy way of suggesting a critical change. It would be difficult only if the writer attempted to describe as closely as possible what actually takes place in the character's psyche during this short, but significant, period of time. Since Conrad is not a stream of consciousness novelist, he cannot, naturally, do this. But he certainly does manage to convey the mood of complete alienation from the past which occasionally one experiences. The captain in The Shadow Line, close to the end of his period of trial, confesses to his diary: "Every stitch of canvas has been on her since we broke ground at the mouth of the Mei-nam, fifteen days ago—or fifteen centuries. It seems to me that all my life before that momentous day is infinitely remote, something on the other side of a shadow." (106) Actually, this experience is more than a mood or an ingredient of a mood, since the latter is commonly transitory. It marks an important stage in the process of maturing; speaking in biological terms, one may say that it has produced a psychic mutation. Obviously such a psychic "jump" expresses itself in a mood, but the jump itself is more fundamental.

A similar experience falls to the lot of Mrs. Travers in The Rescue. She has suddenly, "in a flash of acute discernment," realized the implications of Lingard's story about his political plans. To her, this means an introduction to an entirely new world, existing on the level of the elements of nature. And there is Lingard, too, whose coming to speak to her she conceives as a "tremendous occurrence," since he is the man who a little earlier has whisked away her past. After Mrs. Travers' vivid flash of discernment, "he was speaking again. He had not been silent more than a minute. It seemed to Mrs. Travers that years had elapsed, so different was now the effect of his
words." (163) Although this is same feeling, in a milder form, as that experienced by the captain in The Shadow Line, there is a notable difference between the captain’s state of mind and that of Mrs. Travers. With the first, the temporal illusions are due to suffering unspeakable physical and mental pain. This is not a particularly meaningful experience; it is the natural response to a situation of purely physical challenge. The feeling such an experience leaves behind is that of having aged. In Mrs. Travers’ case, the experience is a momentary flash of insight, exciting both in itself and because of its contents. Although these contents are fateful, she feels exalted: a new life is opened up to her, and it is as if the vision in this life produces a mutation in her psychic development. She has not aged, but matured. This is probably the basic cause of her illusion of a vastly extended temporal distance. Although the description of the illusion in itself cannot give us an impression of her new state, it does, certainly indicate that some important change is taking place in her personality.

Besides a purely perceptual temporal relativity, Conrad also makes use of biological relativity. The former type of variability usually characterizes the time perception of exceptional moments; the latter suggests the impact made on the person by these moments. In most cases this impact is one of premature aging—the tempo of biological time has been accelerated. In Under Western Eyes, for instance, Razhmov on the morning after his betrayal of Haldin wakes up to find himself a nonagenarian. The effect on the reader is one of horror. Similar in quality is the feeling of old age experienced by the young captain in The Shadow Line; at the end of a short voyage it seems to him that several decades have passed since he took over his command. (131) It is interesting to note that in both cases time has passed unnoticed by the characters in question: both the captain and Razumov have lived in timeless worlds. But time has compensated for its apparent absence in immediate experience with a painfully conspicuous presence in its organic and psychic effects. Marlow’s impression in Lord Jim that Jim’s “head looked as if in that moment the youth within him had, for a moment, gleamed and expired” is not different in kind from the sensation of the above characters, although the object of the sensation is not himself, but his friend.6

Perhaps most radical in their aberration from normal time perception are the confusions in time perspective which Conrad often describes. These confusions usually occur in situations of extreme exhaustion or terror. In The Nigger of the Narcissus, the men, worn down by fighting against storm and hunger, cannot distinguish between the past and the present. “—the memories were incomparably more vivid than anything actual, and they were not certain whether the murmurs were heard now or many years ago.” (181–82) To James Wait, in terror of imminent death, it is the past and the future that intermix. “He felt untired, calm, and as if safely withdrawn from every grave incertitude. There was something of the immutable quality of eternity in the slow moments of his complete restfulness. He was very quiet and easy amongst his vivid reminiscences which he mistook joyfully for images of an undoubted future.” (NN, 149) The first idea that occurs to mind as one reads this passage is that, obviously, the person is either insane or semi-delirious. But with Jim this is not the case. His illusions may have been spontaneous in their origin, but from that point on he has nursed them with all the desperate love of life that still possesses him. Jim is afraid of death, and be-
cause of this fear has retreated into a purely mental world, where time and death have no sway. To a certain extent, this fear is shared even by the crew, who, although they are in no immediate danger of death, still feel insecure of their temporal position in a life pitted in endless struggle against the elements of sea and sky. Therefore they are pleased with the illusions of James Wait. These illusions have evaporated the idea of death and thus removed the reasons for their fear. But although the grinning death’s head is covered up and the manifest fear has vanished, the original anxiety remains.

In the situations discussed above, the perception of time, however distorted, confused, or peculiar it may be, indubitably exists; Conrad does, however, also describe circumstances in which this perception is non-existent.\(^7\) The Shadow Line probably offers the purest example of such a situation. The young captain writes in his diary: “—the night and the days wheel over us in succession, whether long or short, who can say? All sense of time is lost in the monotony of expectation, of hope, and of desire —”) 97) This example is “pure” because the loss of the sense of time is not psychopathologically conditioned; it has been caused by a state of extreme fatigue and utter despair. This state is not only described; with a masterly gesture, Conrad projects it into the external world as well, as he makes the captain envisage the final running down of the universe of time:

The immobility of all things was perfect. If the air had turned black, the sea, for all I knew, might have turned solid. It was no good looking in any direction, watching for any sign, speculating upon the nearness of the moment. When the time came, the blackness would overwhelm silently the bit of starlight falling upon the ship, and the end of all things would come without a sigh, stir, or murmur of any kind, and all our hearts would cease to beat like run-down clocks.

It was impossible to shake off that sense of finality. The quietness that came over me was like a foretaste of annihilation. It gave me a sort of comfort, as though my soul had become suddenly reconciled to an eternity of blind stillness.\(^6\)

However much the external scene may have done justice to this description, the illusion of the imminent end of cosmic time is primarily a dramatic projection of the captain’s own state of mind, which no longer perceives any temporal message. It is not surprising to find that Conrad places this scene at the point where the crew’s sufferings reach a climax, since going further in the same direction would involve either death or insanity.

With deeper implications Conrad uses this type of timelessness in Under Western Eyes. Here it does not merely suggest a surface mood and atmosphere; going far beyond this, it indicates basic emotional, spiritual, and even cultural states. A very elaborate instance of its use occurs in one of the climactic scenes of the novel. Immediately after Haldin has left Razumov’s room, the latter, knowing that in half an hour or so his friend is going to be arrested for political murder, “looked wildly about, as if for some means of seizing upon time, which seemed to have escaped him altogether.” (65) This suggests dramatically the mood of Razumov, which is one of utter torment. To speak
in Lockean terms, violent and painful emotion has immobilized the mental processes and thereby suspended time perception. Because, however, Razumov is obsessed with the imminent event of Haldin's arrest, he desires frantically to be able to sense, and know, time. On a deeper level, his failure to do so symbolizes a fateful change in his spiritual state: time will no more be of any account or value to Razumov. He does not, of course, realize this himself, a fact revealed by an excuse—that he has no time—which he offers to one of his friends in order to avoid being inveigled into conversation. The reader recognizes in this answer a kind of dramatic irony: Razumov certainly has no time. His personal time will for ever remain at a standstill; it will remain arrested at the point where he betrayed Haldin. Because of this betrayal, a temporal fixation has taken place, which will prevent all further natural growth and development of Razumov's mind and character. This interpretation is borne out by what we are told about his subsequent experience of time. The day after the betrayal, "the room grew dark swiftly, though time had seemed to stand still. How was it that he had not noticed the passing of that day?" (69) Even many years after, when Razumov is staying in Geneva, he lives in a timeless world, particularly when writing the confession in his diary. He wrote day after night, "never looking at the time. (300) That he should thus live and work in indifferent unawareness of time is only natural: Writing his confession he is not in Geneva and the present, but in St. Petersburg at the time of the fateful betrayal. Time has passed him by, and he responds by living as if it is non-existent.

The second instance of timelessness in Under Western Eyes which I shall mention functions somewhat differently. Razumov is sitting in the office of the general of internal security, and he feels he is being suspected. At this point "the silence of the room resembled—the silence of a deep dungeon, where time does not count and a suspect person is sometimes forgotten for ever." Razumov's feeling of timelessness evokes the atmosphere of the office in all its secret, callous, and sinister inhumanity. In fact, it goes far beyond that; it evokes as well the spirit of Russian politics, social life, and culture—in fine, the spirit of Russia. This needs no further elaboration, since it is obvious that time, with its corollary of growth and development, is equally irrelevant to the kind of life typified by czarist Russia as to the mental state of Razumov.

Although, in Conrad's fiction, man usually loses his sense of time as a result of the numbing effects of physical and spiritual exhaustion, he may experience occasional lapses of the time sense in the most favorable circumstances. These lapses are mostly momentary, and the loss of perceptiveness in one direction is compensated for by increased sensitivity to other aspects of experience, the dimension of time included. For moments do occur in which perceptual timelessness coexists with an almost preternaturally intense and broad awareness of temporal extention. Although this sounds paradoxical, it is nevertheless true. The situation will be cleaner if one distinguishes between time of experiencing and time experienced. Whereas the duration of the former is commonly brief, the latter may span the entire personal past, the present and, in some instances, even the future. In such conditions it is not at all astonishing that the moment of experiencing should appear timeless, since the mind, in this moment, is embracing reaches of time which, by their immense extension, reduce the moment to nullity. Some instances of this situation will be given in a following chapter.
Virginia Woolf plunges us even more deeply into the whirlpools and eddies of existential time than Conrad does; no wonder that her work, together with that of Joyce, has been designated as a "roman du Temps." Her register, to change the metaphor, embraces the scales and modes of time mastered by Conrad, but by means of a highly original, not to say peculiar or eccentric, technique she can play tunes of greater richness and subtlety. Her subject—matter, it is true, precludes the possibility of most of the stark and tempestuously tragic effects that Conrad achieves. As a compensation, one finds in her work, besides the solemn note which Conrad habitually strikes, a playfulness, facetious or fantastic, that reminds one of Bennett and Wells at their best, as well as of Sterne. In every effect, however, her own artistic individuality is clearly perceptible.

The vagaries of perceptual time play their tricks, comic, as well as tragic, from Virginia Woolf's first book, The Voyage Out, to her last, Between the Acts. Most freely and cleverly does she employ them in her Fantasia on time, Orlando, in which the variability of time perception not only distinguishes the fluctuating moods and existential crises of the hero, but also largely shapes the history of culture which the book contains, as well as the style and imagery which the author uses to suggest the various rhythms and tempi of the different historical periods.

The discrepancy between the time of the clock and what Virginia Woolf calls mind—time, a discrepancy entailed by every variety of existential time, is directly indicated in Orlando, where the author is more of an omniscient commentator than in her other novels.

—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 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.

In Orlando Mrs. Woolf seems not only to be investigating the vagaries of time perception, but also to be suggesting its mysteries. That "when a man has reached the age of thirty, time when he is thinking becomes inordinately long; time when he is doing becomes inordinately short" (98) is a plausible enough statement. The reason why Orlando's thinking time so enormously expanded was, according to Mrs. Woolf, mainly the fact that as soon as he found himself "confronted by problems which have puzzled the wisest of men,—his whole past, which seemed to him of extreme length and variety, rushed into the falling second, swelled it a dozen times its natural size, coloured it a thousand tints, and filled it with all the odd and ends in the universe." (99) Like Mrs. Woolf, however, we find it confusing that "the two forces which—dominate our unfortunate numskulls—brevity and diuturnity—" (99) should operate simultaneously. "Life seemed to him (Orlando) of prodigious length. Yet even so, it went like a flash." (100) Here possibly Mrs. Woolf has tried to make time an even more mysterious entity than
it is. The simultaneous sense of expansion and contraction is probably a perceptual illusion due to an almost instantaneous change in point of view; or it may be a deception perpetrated upon the reader by Mrs. Woolf. Actually, what follows the enigmatic statement seems to suggest that the confusion was due to the involvement of two separate percepts or concepts of time, psychological and chronological, in Orlando’s situation. To claim that “even when it (life) stretched longest and the moments swelled biggest and he seemed to wander in the deserts of vast eternity, there was no time for the smoothing out and deciphering of those thickly scored parchments” (100) involves neither paradox nor confusion. That, however, switching from one frame of temporal reference to another can be painful as well as bewildering is indicated by a passage in *The Waves.* The characters, previously

immersed in this world, became aware of another. It is painful. It was Neville who changed our time. He who had been thinning with the unlimited time of the mind, which stretches in a flash from Shakespeare to ourselves, poked the fire and began to live by that other clock which marks the approach of a particular person. The wide and dignified sweep of his mind contracted. (273)

It is the slowing down, or expansion, of perceptual time that predominates in Mrs. Woolf’s work. Like Conrad, she employs it to suggest exceptional, even abnormal, states of mind, but unlike him, and in accordance with her manipulation of cosmic time, she also exploits it for purposes of humor and satire. The typhoid fever which prostrates Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage out* provided an ideal, though gruesome, occasion to describe distortions both in spatial and temporal perspectiveness; these distortions, which have the air of complete authenticity, are the author’s most effective means of making the reader participate, imaginatively, in the horrors of fatal sickness and organic dissolution. Space and time are vastly extended:—the outer world was so far away that the different sounds—could only be ascribed to their cause by a great effort of memory—,” (329–30) and the nights “lasted interminably.” (331) Close before Rechel’s death, her world is described in a manner which recalls the elephantine slow motions of Wells’ “The New Accelerator”: “There were immense intervals or chasms, for things still had the power to appear visibly before her, between one moment and the next; it sometimes took an hour for Helen to raise her arm, pausing long between each jerky movement, and pour out medicine.” (347) Here time is discontinuous, atomized, as well as slowed down.

These pathetic, even tragic, implications of expanding time are absent from most of Mrs. Woolf’s work; more commonly they are superseded by humorous or satirical effects. A happy instance of the latter brightens the generally somber atmosphere of *Between the Acts,* in which Mrs. Swithin enormously extends the boundaries of her present moment “by flights into past or future, (9) occasioned mainly by the reading of Well’s *Outline of History.* When the servant brings her breakfast,

it took her five second in actual time, in mind time ever so much longer, to separate Grace herself, with blue China on a tray, from the leather-covered grunting monster who was about, as the door opened, to demolish a whole tree in the green streaming undergrowth of the premeval forest——she (Grace) felt on her face the divided glance that was half meant for a beast in the
swamp, half for a maid in a print frock and white apron. (9)

As a device of satire, the slowing down of time has a cultural rather than an individual target. It may aim at English culture in general or at the culture of a particular historical period. Here is a description of the spirit of the English Sunday in which Mrs. Woolf uses it.

—Sunday appeared here as there, the mute black ghost or penitent spirit of the busy week-day. The English could not pale the sunshine, but they could in some miraculous way slow down the hours, dull the incidents, lengthen the meals, and make even the servants and page-boys wear a look of boredom and propriety. (225)

On a vastly more ambitious scale, the the same device appears in Chapter V of Orlando, where the spirit of the nineteenth century is evoked. The sense of elephantine rhythms which, according to the biographer, characterized the life of the century is not only directly stated; it exudes from the language as well, especially the imagery. The dominant image is one of insidious dampness, which vitiates the domestic and cultural activities as well as the weather.

Thus the British Empire came into existence; and thus—for there is no stopping damp; it gets into the inkpot as it gets into the woodwork—sentences swelled, adjectives multiplied, lyrics became epics, and little trifles that had been essays a column long were now encyclopaedias in ten or twenty volumes. (229-30)

Looking at a monument in St. James’ Park, Orlando felt

as if it were destined to endure for ever. Nothing, she felt,—could ever demolish that garish erection. Only the noses would mottle and the trumpets would rust; but there they would remain, pointing east, west, south, and north, eternally—Already she felt the tides of her blood run sluggishly. (233)

The contrary impression of the speeding up of time figures less frequently in Virginia Woolf’s fiction. Orlando displays its effectiveness as a means of contrasting the cultural rhythms of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries with those of the nineteenth. Living in the century of Pope and Chesterfield, Orlando feels “the hours speed faster and more merrily” (218) than ever and

there was something definite and distinct about—(the twentieth century) which reminded her of the eighteenth,—except that there was a distraction, a desperation—as she was thinking this, the immensely long tunnel in which she seemed to have been travelling for hundreds of years widened; the light poured in; her thoughts became mysteriously tightened and strung up as if a piano tuner had put his key in her back and stretched the nerves very taut; at the same time her hearing quickened; she could hear every whisper and crackle in the room so that the clock ticking on the mantelpiece beat like a hammer. (298)

Here the heightened time sense of Orlando is meant to reflect the herassed tempo of
the century.

Like Conrad, Mrs. Woolf also exploits the relativity of temporal distances, not, however, to characterize extreme states of mind, but rather to satirize cultural pretensions. When Orlando is among the gypsies, she suffers a rude shock on discovering their contemptuous attitude toward her genealogy.

It was clear that Rustum and the other gypsies thought a descent of four or five hundred years only the meanest possible. Their own families went back at least two or three thousand years. To the gypsy whose ancestors had built the pyramids centuries before Christ was born, the genealogy of Howards and Plantagenets was no better and no worse than that of the Smiths and the Joneses: both were negligible. (147-48)

The fact that the deflating agent is a group of gypsies, who are usually thought of as being rootless and traditionless people, in its exquisite irony reduces to absurdity any individual invocation of past cultural and racial glories.

Biological time behaves with no less mysteriousness in Mrs. Woolf's novels than does perceptual time. Most obviously, there is frequently a discrepancy between the chronological and the perceived biological age of her characters;\(^{13}\) secondly, as in Conrad's work, the tempo of biological time is frequently accelerated, especially in situations of crisis. For instance, after Mary Datchet has discovered that the man she loves does not reciprocate her passion, it seems to Katherine Hilbery "as if she (Mary) had lived fifteen years or so in the space of a few minutes."\(^{14}\) More programmatically, but also more playfully, the same idea occurs in Orlando:

It would be no exaggeration to say that he (Orlando) would go out after breakfast a man of thirty and come home to dinner a man of fifty-five at least. Some weeks added a century to his age, others no more than three seconds at most. Altogether, the task of estimating the length of human life—is beyond our capacity, for directly we say that it is ages long, we are reminded that it is briefer than the fall of a rose leaf to the ground. (99)

One may finally note that the entire structure of Orlando, with a hero whose chronological age of thirty and some years encloses a historical period of several hundred years, is based on the idea of relative biological time.

References

1) For an early fictional example of an author's awareness of this element of narrative time, see Fielding's *Tom Jones*. Fielding warns the reader "not to be surprised, if, in the course of this work, he shall find some chapters very short, and others altogether as long; some that contain only the time of a single day, and others that comprise years; in a word, if my history sometimes seems to stand still, and sometimes to fly." (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1953, 69.)

2) Act II, Sc. 2.

3) This does not exclude other functions of temporal variability. Sometimes, indeed, Conrad uses it to indicate more permanent psychical states, both superficial and profound.

4) NN (The Nigger of the Narcissus), 100
5) This does not invalidate the claim that Conrad uses the Variability of man's perception of time to create mood and atmosphere.

6) LJ (Lord Jim), 128.

7) The attitudes to time of savages which Conrad often portrays may give the impression that these individuals lack a sense of time. But one ought to distinguish between perceptual and conceptual timelessness. Certainly, as Conrad says in Heart of Darkness, the savages have no "clear idea of time, as we at the end of countless ages have." (103)

8) SL (The Shadow Line), 108.

9) UWE (Under Western Eyes), 48.

10) That the sense of time should disappear in states of extreme fatigue or pain is easily understandable. In such states, the mind is prevented from exploring either itself or the external world, the two focal points whose polar opposition generates the sense of time.


13) For instances of this type of discrepancy, see VO (The Voyage Out) 243, 325; ND (Night and Day), 14, 23, 42, and MD (Mrs. Dalloway), 11, 294.

14) ND, 290.—See also ND, 471.