

# Literature, Theory and Time

## My Reflective Journal

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## The Absence of Time: in My Own Experience

(with reference to Caruth's 'Trauma: Explorations in Memory')

Trauma affects people differently. There are many external factors that can determine how one responds, is impacted and manages its effects. Grief isn't a trauma which can be contained, in fact, trauma of this kind can seep into every element of life, bleeding into each element of one's experienced time. It has a powerful ability to put everything else in life into pale comparison – even time. However, this feeling does not end with the traumatic event itself but it continues long after – generating a 'belatedness', as Caruth discusses. Life feels like a dream – you float – and time disappears.

*"Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimensions of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an inability to know it, that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. The repetition of the traumatic event [...] is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing". (Caruth, 1995, p. 6)*

Grief is so psychologically difficult to process that the trauma repeats over and over again as an attempt to comprehend its immensity. Time is absent and ...

Every laugh was deep rooted in pain.

There was no arrangement of words that could even begin to explain.

Not one moment of the day gave relief from each heavy tear.

There was no smile that wasn't concealing a deeper fear.

When time had frozen into an encapsulated brick wall.

There was no time long enough, no time at all.

\* \* \*

Perhaps freezing was a defence mechanism, freezing was how to cope.

Perhaps the body took over to try and gain some hope?

We all were together, yet never felt so apart.

Although we all desperately yearned to be in your heart.

Time seemed central, yet was not felt.

Even though it had us all strapped in with an inescapable belt.

\* \* \*

In April there were warning signs, in May there was the news.

In June came the decline, followed by July that felt refused.

\* \* \*

Nothing could prepare for the agony.

For the simultaneous absence of time and gravity.

Those months, weeks and days felt like a totally separate, infinite lifetime.

Little did we know, we had only just begun a life altering climb.

Watching each piece of you slip away one by one.

This will always be the hardest thing we've ever done.

\* \* \*

Papa said: "I want it all to stop - for time to hurry along".

But equally none of us wanted to hear another clock gong.

Because with each striking second, another moment was lost.

How can time feel frozen, yet still be the boss?

Time please just halt? But this trauma cannot go on.

Time speed and bolt? But then Granny you were gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Frozen in Time: in 'Ballyturk'**

(with reference to Bergson's 'Time and Free Will')

Bergson believes, for the individual, time may speed up or slow down, even though for science, it would remain the same. He expounds that time is experienced differently, meaning there is a "multiplicity to [our] states of consciousness" (Bergson, 1889).

*"If in order to count states of consciousness, we have to represent them symbolically in space, is it not likely that this symbolical representation will alter the normal conditions of inner perception?" (Bergson, 1889).*

The feeling of time almost coming to a halt can be experienced in our day-to-day lives but this feeling can also be evoked through external sources ... such as theatre.

Enda Walsh's play 'Ballyturk' makes you very mindful that time is a human-construct. It can slow down and create a space for illumination. The entire play is situated within one grey, stark, four-walled room with the cast of just three nameless characters. This unusual format creates an atmosphere that is extremely time-conscious, as a result of there being no other focal point other than the time and space by which the characters are increasingly frozen into. Walsh's central tension looks profoundly into the meaning behind our existence, while simultaneously aiding a consideration towards the notions of being, who we are and who we aren't, the struggle

with finding meaning and considering what might be beyond the walls by which we are contained – the walls through which time contains us? This atmosphere alters the linear idea of time and ultimately forces us, as audience members, to think about the subjective experience of both existence and time, while pausing within the play's vacuum of time.

The characters in 'Ballyturk' continually try to comprehend the fundamental perceptions of truth, happiness and existence ... but they eventually find this to be paralysing – as if frozen in time. An example of this is the characters reaction to the arrival of Character Three, they quite literally freeze, while then taking a step backwards, filled with fear, unable to comprehend the mere prospect of their time ending – and of their death. With the sudden invasion of Character Three it's made clear that "time inches by" (Walsh, 2014, p. 39) and their comfort is instantaneously disrupted – everything they knew is altered. Character Three expounds that they're "made from purpose and mistake and controlled by the movement of this planet around a star" (Walsh, 2014, p. 45), this is not only extraordinarily callous, but also leaves a silence that fills the stage and the hearts of the audience – a bookmarking to time itself. Walsh explores the exposing space between imagination and the blunt reality of our short time on earth.

Walsh momentarily removes us from our 'chaotically structured' modern lives, bringing us into a silence, or what Bergson would describe as the slowing of time, "in a life that is so chaotically structured by nature – to continue living – to remain upright and to be able to carry on searching for [...] something which makes you continue without that mindfulness of it all ending at any moment" (Walsh, 2014, p. 45). He questions whether we're "conscious that around [us] life is beginning and ending to the beat of time – that millions of others are walking in the exact same moment that [we are] – travelling with the same purpose but with singular histories – but travelling nonetheless with the same basic need – to keep living" (Walsh, 2014, p. 45). Instead of tackling these truths, we spend a lifetime with "the vain hope of making things that bit more fulfilling – of packing [our] time with experiences some of which will change [us] greatly and

others with no consequence other than wasting a little more of [our] life” (Walsh, 2014, p. 45). Walsh accumulates fundamental questions concerning our existence into one large enquiry – while being contained within the space of the play – and being seemingly frozen in time.

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## **A Hypothetical Meeting of Temporalities: in ‘To My Nine-Year-Old Self’**

(with reference to Deleuze’s ‘Cinema 2: The Time Image’)

Deleuze contemplates how space often evokes time for us. For him, the intellectual and aesthetic focus has shifted from space to time in the modern era. He particularly focuses on cinema and its narrative features, and how flashback can destabilize both the temporal structure of film but also, more generally, in our own minds. He speaks of “sheets of time” (Deleuze, 1989), claiming the past is made of ‘sheets’, almost like a geological formation.

*“The past appears as the most general form of an already-there, a pre-existence in general, which our recollections presuppose, even our first recollection if there was one, and which our perceptions, even the first, make use of. From this point of view the present itself exists only as an infinitely contracted past which is constituted at the extreme point of the already there [...] Between the past as pre-existence in general and the present as infinitely contracted past there are, therefore, all the circles of the past constituting so many stretched or shrunk regions, strata, and sheets” (Deleuze, 1989).*

‘To My Nine-Year-Old Self’ is a poem by Helen Dunmore, which consists of a dialogue between the poet, and her childhood self, Dunmore traces back through her ‘sheets’ of time and speaks to her past. The transitions between past experiences and present realities are intimately studied within this poem. Dunmore exposes a sudden moment of realisation that the transition from being a child to an adult has transpired ... and so she speaks to her past self. Dunmore

fears the child's future because she knows what happens (being in the present) and therefore she also fears her future, moving forward into her later adult life. It is impossible for her to know what is going to happen, as it is for all of us, but this leaves Dunmore feeling particularly unsettled after recently digging up her past: "I have fears enough for both of us" (Dunmore, qtd in Sieghart, 2011, p. 52).

There is strong feeling of nostalgia present here in this poem, suggesting adult life is restricted and scheduled, and so it seems Dunmore wants to go back to the limitless life of a child and "rather run than walk" (Dunmore, qtd in Sieghart, 2011, p. 52) again. She seems to be envious of the life she used to have, leading onto the impression that she is unhappy in her present, adult life. She claims she has "spoiled this body we once shared" (Dunmore, qtd in Sieghart, 2011, p. 52), and realises this damage is not rectifiable, and now out of her control. The poem uses past tense to emphasise the inaccessibility of her childhood self – creating a distance which is painful to read. She hasn't met "that dream we had" (Dunmore, qtd in Sieghart, 2011, p. 52), inferring an absence of such happiness.

Dunmore concludes with a thought-provoking image of absorption. After reflecting through the 'sheets' of her past, she brings this imagined, slightly abstract dialogue to a close ... entering into her present.

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### **Time Changing with Age: in 'The Accidental'**

(with reference to Wells' 'The Discovery of the Future')

Wells' idea in 'The Discovery of the Future' is that there are two types of mind, the retrospective, a 'legal or submissive' mind that looks for guides to decide how to deal with the future, and another which is 'legislative, creative, organising or masterful' and attacks the established

order in an active mode. Astrid displays a mind that combines the two – in one sense she is very much concerned with the present – and attacks every moment with precision and detail. Yet she also films everything, in order to leave some kind of legacy, but to also capture the past – so that she can use these ‘patterns’ in her past life as frameworks to then enter into her future.

*“he distinguished two types of mind by their attitude toward time and ‘the relative amount of thought they give to the future of things’. One type is retrospective, a ‘legal or submissive’ mind that looks for precedents to decide how to deal with the future. The other is the ‘legislative, creative, organising or masterful type’ that attacks the established order: ‘It is in the active mood of thought while the former is in the passive’” (Wells, qtd in, Kern, 1983).*

Ali Smith’s novel ‘The Accidental’ shifts in narrative voice throughout, and representing a child’s voice can be difficult. It is common to assume the child to be naïve but Smith does not fall into this trap for the character of Astrid ... she encapsulates perfectly the balance between innocence and total awareness and presence within the world – particularly an awareness of time relative to her age.

Astrid contemplates when was “the beginning things?” (Smith, 2005, p. 7) – she talks very philosophically one moment yet the narrative then jumps into stating that “Astrid [is] yawn[ing]. She is hungry” (Smith, 2005, p. 9). She switches from examining large concepts such as the beginning of the world or imagining if “you went to sit down on a chair and the chair said get off” (Smith, 2005, p. 30) to much finer, more precise insignificant details such as her hand being numb from sleeping on it, and the specific details of “the indentation it made” (Smith, 2005, p.15). Astrid is very much in the present – her philosophical thinking usually derives from something she observes in her surroundings and then almost always jumps back to something far less meaningful and mundane. This inconsistency in thought confirms her age, she is twelve years old, which is quite an interesting time of life. It’s an age whereby children start to take

notice and create meanings for things they had otherwise dismissed – and this narrative stays true to that notion – switching from submissive to legislative.

Astrid is obsessed with filming everything; she carries a camera most places with her. She has a desire to leave a legacy – to show that she was here! It is unusual to be so aware of the inevitability of death at her young age – one would rather expect such wakefulness from someone in the later stages of life. But she is conscious that time is slippery – and so for her, if there isn't anything physical – then did it even ever exist? So, Astrid somehow physicalises time through video. She is very aware of age and aging, clarifying that “she herself is 25 per cent new, 75 per cent old” (Smith, 2005, p. 11), and works out similar statistics for her family – until “she can't be bothered now” (Smith, 2005, p. 11). Astrid is not only very attentive to the past and present but she also thinks about what it will be like “in a hundred of years' time” (Smith, 2005, p. 15), and so, she is likewise alert to the concept of the future.

Astrid's stage of childhood consists of a time whereby one can latch onto specific concepts and become so obsessed with them, yet a few weeks later have forgotten about them and moved on. It is a stage of possibility of everything and anything – the world opens up – it becomes bigger, more interesting and equally more dangerous ...

There are lots of things we do as innocent, naïve children that tests the laws of logic and physics. Laws that we have, at the time, so recently discovered yet have the desire to challenge. Closing the fridge door ... but peaking around the edge to see if we can 'just-try-to-see-if-we-can-catch-the-light-go-off'. And that 'the moon definitely follows the car' as you drive home late at night. Or switching off the light in your bedroom ... but on this particular occasion you decide to see if today is the day that you can balance the switch 'just-at-the-right-point', so that it doesn't turn off and it doesn't turn on – that perfect flat balance that is

similar to balancing on the sea-saw from the park around the corner. But it doesn't work, it never works.

And there it is – put very simply – the first selection of observations, disappointments, and understandings – proving the world isn't as magical as our young brains disguise it to be in the first decade of our lives. Because the light does go off – but you just can't catch the exact moment that it happens. And the moon doesn't follow the car because it is, quite frankly, too busy lighting the night sky to be focussing on one, tiny moving element of the world. And finally, the light switch doesn't balance between the two definite states of 'on' and 'off'.

Delicate, precious, sensitive ... short. Life, living, being here and alive on this planet we call earth isn't an infinity, and as much as our day to day lives can fool us into thinking that we have 'time to do that later on' – that is a false perception that is there to give us a feeling of security – that feeling being false. It and by 'it', I mean life – is merely a shooting star. It is the 'light switch' that as children we spend far too long trying to defy the mechanics of. We are given life and then life is, and will be, taken away, so don't spend too much time hanging around trying to balance that switch so that it is perfectly positioned. Let life decide what your destiny is, let the unknowns remain unknown and let the moon do its job ... because we only have a little time. So, enjoy it – and by 'it' – I mean life.

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### **A Holistic Outlook of the Inevitable: in 'Songs of Innocence and Experience'**

(with reference to Green's 'The Fault in Our Stars')

'Songs of Innocence and of Experience' by William Blake displays the 'two contrary states of the human soul', it is imperative to emphasise here that 'contrary' means opposite. Blake says "the imagination is not a state: it is the human existence itself", and therefore "without contraries is

no progression; attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate, are necessary to human existence” (Blake, 1970). Blake highlights that as human beings we cannot progress without the presence of these ‘contraries’. He believes that they’re essential in order to live our lives to their fullest.

The collection explores the two different perspectives of the world, allowing us to see through the lens of ‘innocence’ primarily, and then from the angle of ‘experience’. It is common that, as humans, we continually question the idea that even if ‘innocence’ and ‘experience’ could meet, the innocent child wouldn’t be able to understand the adult’s perspective because only ‘experience’ allows one to comprehend the time which has passed. The ‘Songs’ examines that for the two realities to co-exist, Blake can re-create the past briefly, yet extremely poignantly through language – perfectly revealing how the power of the Romantic imagination engineers a theoretical, fantastical meeting of these two states.

So, what do we know of innocence and experience? Of past and present? Similar questions and ideologies are explored within the novel ‘The Fault in Our Stars’ by John Green ...

*“There will come a time when all of us are dead. All of us ... there will be no one left to remember Aristotle or Cleopatra, let alone you. Everything that we did ... will be forgotten and all will have been for naught. Maybe that time is coming soon and maybe it is millions of years away, but even if we survive the collapse of our sun, we will not survive forever. There was time before organisms experienced consciousness, and there will be time after. And if the inevitability of human oblivion worries you, I encourage you to ignore it. God knows that’s what everyone else does” (Green, 2012).*

Green asks you to contemplate that ‘you will not be’ – similar to the transition that Blake explores. One can relate ‘innocence’ to childhood, ‘experience’ to loss of childhood, caused by

fear or inhibition. So perhaps, at the time of writing Blake was undergoing this transition – or ‘oblivion’ – resulting in an awakening. There comes a point in our lives, between childhood and adulthood whereby we question our existence, as both Blake and Green do – a time whereby we need to comprehend such ‘contraries’.

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## **Modern Energy as a Fourth Temporality: in Our Anti-Social Network**

(with reference to Berman’s ‘All that is Solid Melts into Air’)

Our lives are innately temporal. Time passes, and simultaneously our lives pass too. But time is also destructive, holding a power which means that everything, including ourselves, is transient and temporary ... a fact that can be easily overlooked ... especially within the accelerated time of the online world.

Marshall Berman discusses this experience of modernity, stating that “to be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, ‘all that is solid melts into air’” (Berman, 2010, p. 15). He explores the tragedy of development, denoting ...

*“As members of modern society, we are responsible for the directions in which we develop, for our goals and achievements, for their human costs. Our society will never be able to control its eruptive “powers of the underworld” if it pretends that its scientists are the only ones out of control [...] to imagine and to create new modes of modernity, in which man will not exist for the sake of development, but development for the sake of man” (Berman, 2010, pp. 85-86).*

The past is known, the present is uncertain and the future is unknown. However, the uncertainty of the present and the anxiety attached to the future is magnified within the modern

world. The time of the modern, entangled with the online world of social media, creates a constant 'busyness' whilst supposedly being highly coordinated and interconnected. It is the time of planning, of gaining instant gratification and of setting goals and then achieving them. But as Berman exemplifies, we must see the 'human costs' of such developments. Are we, in fact, losing control? Are our touch screens, actually making us lose touch?

Has technology made us more selfish and separate than ever before? So many of us have big friend lists but so many of us are friendless. All social media platforms claim to connect us ... even in its name it sells us 'sociability' but actually that exact 'sociability' is what it strips us of. Ultimately making our connections weaker, making us part of an anti-social network.

We now measure our self-worth by the number of followers and likes we receive, rather than listening to the opinions of those who really love us, those who can really hug us! We are in a generation of media overstimulation – chats have been reduced to snapchats – videos are ten seconds long. You no longer have to wait to receive a letter in the post, but rather within less than seconds you are able to contact whoever you want, at anytime and anywhere. Everything is high speed, fast pace – formulating a digital insanity – that repels away from humanity. Our attention spans are shrinking, and similarly our attention of the present moment – of present time – is dying. We, as Berman confirms, must 'control this eruption', understand the 'human costs', before it is too late.

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### **Letting Time Be: in 'About Time'**

The film 'About Time' is a romantic comedy-drama, written and directed by Richard Curtis. The plot follows a young man named Tim, who is told that he, like all the previous men in his family, has the ability to time travel, revisiting specifically the past. And so, he goes on the journey of

trying to modify his past in hopes of improving his future, which involves love, trauma and loss. He meets a girl named Mary, falls in love and starts a family. However, as his unusual life progresses, Tim finds that his time travelling ability cannot shield him, and his loved ones, from the difficulties of ordinary life – from the inescapable nature of time itself.

The film begins with a light-hearted approach to the concept of time travel (for example showing Tim going back in time to perfect a kiss with a girl at a party) – however this atmosphere surrounding the concept of changing time gradually transitions into one that is more sincere and serious. It demonstrates that events changed by time travel can drastically impact other events as a result of only a few alterations (for example Tim deciding to prevent his sister's car crash – yet he comes back into the present and realises that the alteration of one event led to the change of another – in this case he no longer had a daughter – but rather a son).

The film slowly and painfully develops inherently difficult questions. Is falling in love really something we should experience as perfect? Or more broadly, is life really about reducing the amount and severity of our mistakes? Or are they both pivotal and necessary for our development? And finally, if you could go back in time would you change anything? Or should we let time run its course naturally and let time be?

As Tim matures with age, entering into the different chapters of his life – the way in which he views his decision making, in terms of time travel, alters. Time travel is no longer used to 'perfect a kiss' but rather to keep his family stable. Until, eventually Tim realises he needs to stay in the present, as his child is nearly born – and so going back beyond time of birth isn't possible without some kind of erasure. However, this realisation brings Tim great pain, as he also used time travel in order to enable conversations with his late Father (who passes away

during the film), and so, “it was the toughest decision of [his] life. Saying yes to the future meant saying goodbye to [his] dad – forever” (Curtis, 2013).

We must embrace the perfection of our imperfect lives – of imperfect time – allowing ourselves to embrace the present and truly live. The film concludes with Tim’s decision to stay in the present, he says: “I just try to live everyday as if I’ve deliberately come back to this one, to enjoy it, as if it was the final full day of my extraordinary, ordinary life” (Curtis, 2013).

“We are all travelling through time together, every day of our lives. All we can do is do our best to relish this remarkable ride” (Curtis, 2013), and we must accept: the absence of time trauma creates, the slowing of time grief pertains, the regret interlocked with age and LET TIME BE.

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