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# **Philosophy of Time in Contemporary Fiction**

**Henri Bergson Applied to Selected Novels  
by Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis and Alan Lightman**

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When you sit with a nice girl for two hours, it seems like two minutes; when you sit on a hot stove for two minutes, it seems like two hours. That's relativity.

Albert Einstein<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The fiction to be examined in this dissertation has roots traceable back to major early 20th century thinkers Albert Einstein and Henri Bergson. Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity (1905) was crucial in the conceptual movement away from the absolute, clearly measurable definition of time originally held by Aristotle and perpetuated by Isaac Newton's understanding of the Universe and the nature of space and time. David Bohm writes: "With Einstein's theory of relativity and the quantum theory, traditional concepts of motion, matter, and causality changed yet again [after Aristotle and Newton]. For example, the Newtonian concept of absolute space and time, a holdover from Aristotelian notions, was finally found to be incompatible with Einstein's relativistic ideas."<sup>2</sup> Stephen Hawking writes: "Both Aristotle and Newton believed in absolute time. That is, they believed that one could unambiguously measure the interval of time between two events, and that this time would be the same whoever measured it, provided they used a good clock. Time was completely separate from and independent of space."<sup>3</sup> Understanding factors that influence time and examining exceptions to the definite, equally divisible and easily measurable concept of time has been vital to the emergence and expansion of topics in fiction that reflect the human experience of time in new ways. Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity opened the door for modernist and now post-modernist authors to experiment with perceptions of their characters concerning time moving at different rates according to events, emotions and spatial placement.

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Robert Levine in his article "A Geography of Time," *Time and Eternity: the Cosmic Odyssey: Resource Reader of the CS Lewis Foundation Summer Institute, Oxbridge, 14-27 July 2002* (Oxford: OUP, 2002) 79.

<sup>2</sup> David Bohm, *Science, Order and Creativity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000) 29.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Hawking, *The Illustrated a Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam, 1996) 28.

Also in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Bergson was developing his temporal philosophy about the utter breakdown of the human experience of quantifiable time, turning the question into a matter of the quality (rather than quantity) of time as experienced in a myriad of situations.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary authors have continued to be creative with ideas about types of human relationships, social contexts, and mental states that affect the individual's perception of time as it passes through her life. Although the scientific context of the writers under discussion in this dissertation is important, a comprehensive account of the scientific influences of each writer is not the objective. To make a close reading of each of the novels in terms of temporal themes and connections with Einstein's Relativity Theory and (primarily) Bergson's philosophy on time will be undertaken as relevant; however, these two are fundamentally the starting point for an investigation into how contemporary writers of fiction are handling the narrative presentation of time, and it is the activity of close reading and drawing connections between texts that will represent the bulk of this investigation.

Igor D. Novikov, Professor of Astrophysics at Copenhagen University, writes accessibly about Einstein's theory of relativity and its implications for understanding time: "I would say that the most impressive discovery was made at the very beginning of the century by Albert Einstein when he created relativity theory. He showed that there does not exist any 'absolute time,' no unified unchangeable river of time which impartially carries all events occurring in the Universe."<sup>5</sup> Novikov implies that previously it had been assumed throughout science that no matter what spatial factors were concerned, time moved in a continuous,

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<sup>4</sup> The 'Bergson, Henri-Louis' entry in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* declares:

Time, for Bergson, is of two fundamentally different kinds, or better, especially for his later philosophy, appears in two fundamentally different guises. For science, time is essentially particulate. It consists of an infinite, dense set of instants, and science uses the calculus to study the world as it is at these instants. Change is nothing over and above the world's being in different states at different instants, and the transition from one state to another is something science can take no account of except by using the calculus in this way. For experience, however, this transition is the very essence of time, now called duration (*durée*)—we do not live from moment to moment, but in a continuous stream of experience.

Edward Craig, General Editor, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 1998) 733.

<sup>5</sup> Igor D. Novikov, *The River of Time*, trans. Vitaly Kisin, (Cambridge: CUP, 1998) 48.

unbroken, uniform manner, and that this fact was considered observable and easily proven.<sup>6</sup> Einstein was part of the confusion and heated debate of the international scientific community from the moment he published his Special Theory of Relativity of 1905 to the General Theory of Relativity of 1915 and beyond.<sup>7</sup> Einstein demonstrated for the scientific community that time does not move in a uniform manner under certain circumstances. Bergson wrote about the philosophical implications,<sup>8</sup> extrapolating that human experience also does not progress at the same rate in all situations or with all people.<sup>9</sup> Bergson writes in his *Creative Evolution*: “the philosopher must go further than the scientist. Making a clean sweep of everything that is only an imaginative symbol, he will see the material world melt back into a simple flux, a continuity of flowing, a becoming. And he will thus be prepared to discover real duration there where it is still more useful to find it, in the realm of life and of consciousness.”<sup>10</sup> Marcel Proust famously expanded a related concept of duration in consciousness into his 1913 novel, *Remembrance of Things Past*. Although Proust’s fiction is often explicitly linked with Bergson’s philosophy, Proust himself writes that readers should take care, for he does not attach himself so directly with Bergson. Proust writes of his own work:

I should not be ashamed to say ‘Bergson novels’ if I believed this were so, for in any age literature tries to attach itself, after the fact, of course, to the dominant philosophy

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<sup>6</sup> Bohm also writes:

In Newton’s mechanics the order of space and time was taken as absolute [...] However, with Einstein even this remnant of the old order was called into question. In the theory of relativity, the idea of a time that flows uniformly across the whole universe was called into question, for it was shown that the notion of the flow of time depends on the speed of the observer. No longer could a single time order span the entire universe; indeed past, present, and future could not be maintained in the same absolute sense as for Newton” (108).

<sup>7</sup> Hawking 40.

<sup>8</sup> Robert E. Ornstein writes that for his philosophy of the experience of time: “Bergson stressed a relational subjective approach derived from the general ideas of relativity theory.”

Robert E. Ornstein, *On the Experience of Time* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997) 16.

<sup>9</sup> The entry on ‘time’ in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* notes: “With the advent of special relativity one has the beginning of the radical divergence between our intuitive notions of time and those posited by physical theories.” Thus the human experience of time differs from the scientific account.

Edward Craig, General Editor, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 9 (London: Routledge, 1998) 414.

<sup>10</sup> As quoted by Gustavus Watts Cunningham in *A Study in the Philosophy of Bergson* (New York: Longmans, 1916) 35.

of the time. But this would not be accurate, for my work is dominated by the distinction between the involuntary memory and the voluntary memory, a distinction which not only does not occur in Bergson's philosophy, but is even contradicted by it.<sup>11</sup>

Given the amount of commentary that has emerged over the last century connecting Bergson's philosophy with Proust's fiction, it would seem that the latter's opinion on the matter has not been shared. *Remembrance of Things Past* consists of several thousand pages, and Proust worked up to his death over a number of years, increasing his descriptions of memories and interludes to closer describe actual human experience, which can be stretched or put into fast-forward at times.<sup>12</sup> David Harvey writes of the modernists: "Proust, for his part, tried to recover past time and to create a sense of individuality and place that rested on a conception of experience across a space of time. Personal conceptions of time became a matter of public commentary."<sup>13</sup>

Using this inspiration from science and philosophy, modernist novelists like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Proust explored what the new ideas about time meant for the possibilities of narrative form.<sup>14</sup> In much the same way that science in the twentieth century has moved away from traditionally held views regarding the temporal nature of the universe, philosophy has theorized and writers of fiction have expanded the framework of

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<sup>11</sup> Proust continues: "For me, the voluntary memory, which is especially a memory exercised by intelligence and sight, gives us only false shadows of the past; but an odor or a scent recurring in completely different circumstances awakens the past in us in spite of ourselves, and we realize how different this past was from what we imagined we recalled, and that our voluntary memory painted like bad painters, with colors that have no truth." Though Proust did not see his fiction as Bergsonian, the important idea here is the new narrative expression of time that emerged in the early twentieth century and which continues to develop.

Marcel Proust, "A la Recherche du Temps Perdu," *The Creative Vision: Modern European Writers on Their Art*, eds. Haskell M. Block and Herman Salinger (New York: Grove, 1960) 69.

<sup>12</sup> These techniques of Proust's will receive attention in sections 1.2 and 1.5 in connection with Ian McEwan's fiction.

<sup>13</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 267.

<sup>14</sup> Gregory Currie notes that the opposite is also true, that philosophers make use of fiction to argue about the possibilities of time: "Indeed, [apparently] fictional stories have often been used by philosophers themselves as steps in their arguments about time."

Gregory Currie, "Can There Be a Literary Philosophy of Time?" *The Arguments of Time*, ed. Jeremy Butterfield (Oxford: OUP, 1999) 45.

possibilities from there. In the introduction to her *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century*, N. Katherine Hayles writes:

The Twentieth Century has seen a profound transformation in the ground of its thought, a change catalyzed and validated by relativity theory, quantum mechanics, and particle physics. But the shift in perspective is by no means confined to physics; analogous developments have occurred in a number of disciplines, among them philosophy, linguistics, mathematics, and literature.<sup>15</sup>

From the early twentieth century on concern among writers with the human experience in time and representing that experience in literature becomes more widespread. Eleanor N. Hutchens, in an essay titled "An Approach Through Time," mentions such works as Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759—an example that pre-dates this inquiry), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) as prime examples of this focus on time and comments: "what makes a novel good, I submit, is the success with which its materials are molded by time: that is, the degree to which it is convincingly chronomorphic."<sup>16</sup> A successful novel must convince the reader that it has realistic extension in a temporal universe.

As an example of the modernist novels and themes of time that precede the postmodernist novels to be considered shortly I will briefly mention Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. The novel describes a single day (as does Joyce's *Ulysses*) in June in London, and yet over the course of the book, entire lives, habits and relationships between a series of characters are revealed. Woolf explores how describing the activities of a single day can also serve as an account of the whole lives of the characters. Clarissa Dalloway, the central character of the novel, frequently pauses in her preparations for the evening party she will be giving to consider how certain moments in her day remind her of times in the past, and also how significant it is simply to recognize that moments are passing by, slipping through her

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<sup>15</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century* (Cornell UP: Ithaca, 1984) 15.

<sup>16</sup> Eleanor N. Hutchens, "An Approach through Time," *Towards a Poetics of Fiction*, ed. Mark Spilka (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977) 61.



fingers: "Clarissa (crossing to the dressing-table) plunged into the very heart of the moment, transfixed it, there—the moment of this June morning on which was the pressure of all the other mornings."<sup>17</sup> There is an accumulation of history here ("the pressure of all the other mornings" of Clarissa's life) which is a theme to which I will return in section 1.5. Also throughout Woolf's novel Big Ben frequently strikes, moving the narrative along and marking the half-hours, grounding in time the characters in this particular June day though their thoughts carry them to many different points in their pasts via voluntary and involuntary memory (the differentiation which Proust explores so thoroughly in *Remembrance of Things Past*). In section 2.5 we will return to the subject of clocktowers. Woolf's novel is a narrative of "pattern rather than plot," connecting characters who each hear the temporal call of Big Ben though their memories captivate them and also thoughts of death and the future stretch their minds in the opposite direction.<sup>18</sup>

In this dissertation the goal is to present a number of even more recent novels which contribute to the further development of these temporal themes. Specifically, some of the works of Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis, and Alan Lightman are of particular interest. Nearly all of the books to be discussed were written in the last twenty years and demonstrate the further possibilities with regards to describing the human experience of time in fiction. Gérard Genette writes: "so we can characterize the temporal stance of a narrative only by considering at the same time all the relationships it establishes between its own temporality and that of the story it tells."<sup>19</sup> There is much to be gained by considering the relationship between the time of a novel and the time of the story it relates, but there is even more to be gained by observing, as Hutchens notes:

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<sup>17</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Hogarth, 1963) 41.

<sup>18</sup> John Fletcher and Malcolm Bradbury, "The Introverted Novel," *Modernism, a Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (London: Penguin, 1991) 408-409.

<sup>19</sup> Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980) 155.

the cyclic rhythm of the family or regional chronicle; the constant weaving together of past and present through memory, and the steady movement toward an end that seems temporal even in the most radical of our contemporary experiments: through all these the novel gratifies our sense of experienced time, of life as it can be apprehended within a lifetime. Here our sense of time is not of time philosophically conceived but of the passing of time as we know it and yet can never, in the living of life moment by moment, grasp it as the novel enables us to do.<sup>20</sup>

The novel is the perfect forum for experimenting with the human experience of time, and the novels that are discussed in the following four chapters will give any reader new temporal possibilities to consider.

### 1.1 McEwan: *The Child in Time* and *Enduring Love*

One major development to result from Bergson's work and writing on time is the concept of duration (*durée*).<sup>21</sup> In the 1928 Nobel Prize winning address given by Per Hallström, President of the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy, Hallström helpfully interprets the idea of duration as "living time."<sup>22</sup> Bergson's idea is that a scientifically measurable amount of time can seem relative to individuals depending on a variety of

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<sup>20</sup> Hutchens 61.

<sup>21</sup> In the way of a miniature biography of Henri Bergson, James Diedrick writes this:

The French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941) won the Nobel Prize for literature and was highly influential around the turn of the century. The son of a Jewish musician and an Englishwoman, he attended the Lycée Condorcet and studied philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure. He was a secondary school teacher from 1881 until 1898, then professor at the École Normale Supérieure and finally chair of philosophy at the Collège de France. [...] Bergson questioned and extended narrow Victorian concepts of rationality, insisting that matter is subject to the operations of time in a condition that is endlessly provisional.

James Diedrick, "The Fiction of Martin Amis: Patriarchy and its Discontents," *Contemporary British Fiction*, eds. Richard J Lane, Rod Mengham and Philip Tew (Cambridge: Polity, 2003) 258.

<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Hallström defines "living time": "Living time is the realm of free choice and new creations, the realm in which something is produced only once and is never repeated in quite the same manner." (The impossibility of repeating an action might bring to mind the ancient philosopher Heraclitus and his comment about stepping into the same river twice; I will refer to him again in 3.5.)

Horst Frenz, ed, *Nobel Lectures: Literature 1901-1967* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1969) 241.

circumstances.<sup>23</sup> To the human consciousness or subconsciousness, five minutes of anxiety or distress or pain can seem to take hours; likewise a particularly happy or pleasant interlude of a day can seem to pass in a fraction of time as measured by the clock. Pure duration occurs when rather than dividing up the time that is passing into distinct and separate parts, moments seem to overlap and sensations experienced during the present as it continues inexorably forward are impossible to separate from each other but remain part of a qualitative continuity. Genevieve Lloyd writes: "Philosophy attempts to regain in the unity of 'becoming' the perception of a lost truth—real duration which is the very stuff of our life. According to Bergson, mind, rather than falling away from timelessness into duration, has fallen from duration into the false conceptions of time generated out of practical concerns."<sup>24</sup> In *Time and Free Will* (originally published as his doctoral thesis), Bergson writes: "in a word, pure duration might well be nothing but a succession of qualitative changes, which melt into and permeate one another, without precise outlines, without any tendency to externalize themselves in relation to one another, without any affiliation with number: it would be pure heterogeneity."<sup>25</sup> Bergson is adamant throughout *Time and Free Will* that duration is something not possible to measure with a clock. It is this possibility of experiencing time as it moves at various speeds and with shifting effects in the lives of characters in fiction that is the focus of this chapter. To be specifically considered here are two of Ian McEwan's novels where a particular moment changes the lives of the narrators in the beginning of the story, and the rest of the fiction deals with returning to that point in time, circling around it, trying to perceive and re-examine it in memory, and attempting to deal with the consequences in

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<sup>23</sup> While discussing other philosophers' (such as Kant and Locke) conceptions of the human experience of time, Ornstein notes that "the approach adopted here is a relational one with antecedents in the philosophy of relativity-oriented time analysts. Henri Bergson is the prime example, who assumed that time is properly discussed within each individual and that subjective time may speed up or slow down relative to other experiences within the individual or to other individual's experiences" (41).

<sup>24</sup> Genevieve Lloyd, *Being in Time: Selves and Narrators in Philosophy and Literature* (London: Routledge, 1990) 97.

<sup>25</sup> Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 1913 (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2001) 104.

their own lives. It is important to understand and interpret Bergson's point that measuring time is different from the concept of duration. He writes: "it is true that we count successive moments of duration, and that, because of its relations with number, time at first seems to us to be a measurable magnitude, just like space. But there is here an important distinction to be made. I say, e.g., that a minute has just elapsed, and I mean by this that a pendulum, beating the seconds, has completed sixty oscillations."<sup>26</sup>

The two novels under consideration here are McEwan's *The Child in Time* (1987) and *Enduring Love* (1998). In each, there is a moment at the very start that is life-changing for the main characters. In *The Child in Time* it is the abduction of the young daughter of the narrator, Stephen. In *Enduring Love* it would seem to be the preventable death of a would-be hero who falls from a hot-air balloon while attempting to save a helpless child, but actually the moment which the novel hinges on turns out to be a simple glance exchanged between the narrator, Joe, and another bystander (Jed Parry) who is suddenly convinced that it is his mission, in his religious frenzy, to 'save' Joe and bring him to God.<sup>27</sup> This section of this discussion will look at four major techniques McEwan uses to explore the possibilities I have related to Bergson's ideas regarding duration and human perception of time passing. McEwan's works are concerned with making an emotional journey through time, and there are several ways that he uses perception of time to assist the reader in communing with the effect achieved. The two novels take longer to describe the key moments than they actually take to pass, and then gloss over larger amounts of time as the continuum goes on. *Enduring Love* in particular is self-conscious about this narratorial technique.<sup>28</sup> Bergson has some

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<sup>26</sup> Bergson, *Time* 104.

<sup>27</sup> Both with the allusion to the Biblical fall and Jed's evangelical tendencies, there is plenty of tension in the novel between religion and science, as Joe is a freelance science writer, and McEwan's fiction is full of references to hard science and the contradictions it poses for human experience.

<sup>28</sup> Genette calls the technique of extending short moments and condensing longer amounts of time the "Proustian narratives' *increasing discontinuity*" (93). He continues: "But, as we shall see, big scenes in novels, and especially in Proust, are extended mainly by extranarrative elements or interrupted by descriptive pauses,

discussion to lend to the importance of moments that lead to a branching of possible futures, and in these novels there are points where the characters see the possibilities, and then make a choice, or find themselves pushed toward one potential future rather than another; in retrospect the narrators reflect upon the division in time that seemed to appear before them.

The third topic I would like to discuss in this section of techniques used by McEwan is the theme of science that is voiced in each novel. In *The Child in Time* the narrator has a friend who is a physicist and who provides multiple views on time. In *Enduring Love*, the narrator himself is a past student of science who has become a secular science writer. In each novel, a hard view of scientific theories on time underscores the role in the narrative of the qualitative experience of time rather than the quantitative, a distinction that is particularly important to Bergson in *Time and Free Will*. Contrary to the teachings of science, there is occasionally the impression of being outside of time in the novels, as though one has been displaced in time and is intruding upon a series of past moments. There is a sense of being given a look at a point in time where one doesn't belong in order to better understand one's own present. McEwan, though fond of applications of the scientific on time, leaves room for inexplicable human perceptions of duration as well. The final area for examination here is the sense of an accumulated past, a history of moments that build up to equal more than the simple sum of the measurable time that has gone by. Bergson writes:

No doubt it is possible, as we shall show later, to conceive the successive moments of time independently of space; but when we add to the present moment those which have preceded it, as is the case when we are adding up units, we are not dealing with these moments themselves, since they have vanished for ever, but with the lasting traces which they seem to have left in space on their passage through it.<sup>29</sup>

These "lasting traces" of past moments are exactly what McEwan builds his whole fiction upon. Bergson uses the example of a clock striking the hour to make this point about "lasting

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but are not exactly slowed down. And needless to say, pure dialogue cannot be slowed down. So there remains detailed narration of acts or events told about more slowly than they were performed or undergone" (95).

<sup>29</sup> Bergson, *Time* 79.

traces” on the small, immediate scale. Though one may not instantly realize that a clock is striking in the distance, once the consciousness takes note of this fact it is strangely possible to think back and use one’s subconscious to count the strokes in retrospect, thereby determining the hour, though the first strokes were not noticed at the precise moment they were mechanically sounded out.

Each of McEwan’s protagonists struggle throughout the texts to find some way of dealing with the respective tragedy that has befallen them, and seek closure in order to move on to the next stage of their lives—away from the past. Difficult as it is to let go of a moment that has an intense emotional effect on the time that follows in their lives (vastly disproportionate to its scientifically measurable extension), this accomplishment is necessary to the future happiness and return to normalcy for the narrators. In conclusion, a brief examination will be made relating the above techniques used to explore time within the novels and the result these have on helping the stories come full circle in terms of the narrators escaping the effect of the initial distressing moment that is the impetus behind each fiction as a whole. Bergson’s concept of duration is particularly relevant to McEwan’s treatment of moments and passing time in the novels.

In *The Child in Time*, Stephen is a young father who goes grocery shopping one morning with his first-born daughter, Kate, only to mysteriously lose the three year old toddler in the store. Jack Slay, Jr. writes of the *The Child in Time*:

The search for the child in time—both Stephen and Julie’s daughter, Kate, as well as each individual’s youthful essence—is often warm and poignant, a sometimes wild and humorous romp through time itself. McEwan creates a sense of time that is malleable, wondrous, infinitely complex. Time is a vandal: it is the essence that can make one forget the child, the youthful joy of life. Simultaneously, time is also vandalized: characters experience periods that stall in slow motion, that pass in a blur of quickness, that are even altered, with the past coming round to the present. Time, then, serves as an emblem for the complexities and difficulties that exist in everyday contemporary society.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Jack Slay, Jr., *Ian McEwan* (New York: Twayne, 1996) 115-116.

In this novel, time is portrayed as a thief as well as a master of deception. Returning home from the store to his sleeping wife, Julie, Stephen struggles with how to handle this terrible situation, and how to convey the tragic news to her. In one moment of lapsed attention, how can Kate have disappeared? As all his efforts at recovering Kate come to nothing in the days and weeks that pass, Stephen returns again and again to the store in his mind, walking up and down the aisles, attempting to reconstruct the time elapsed during the excursion: when was the precise point when Kate actually disappeared from his definite awareness of her?

He had been back a thousand times, seen his own hand, a shelf, the goods accumulate, heard Kate chattering on, and tried to move his eyes, lift them against the weight of time, to find that shrouded figure at the periphery of vision, the one who was always to the side and slightly behind, who, filled with a strange desire, was calculating odds, or simply waiting. But time held his sight for ever on his mundane errands, and all about him shapes without definition drifted and dissolved, lost to categories (CT 15-16).<sup>31</sup>

Stephen strives for years to come to terms with the loss, and has various experiences along the way that change the way he thinks about time and time passing. These range from a sense of witnessing a time before his own birth, straight out of the memory of his mother, to the sensation of time slowing down during a car crash as many things happen at once, to the timeless irresponsible quality of childhood. The narrative explores Stephen's relationship to and interaction with various understandings of temporal possibility in the imagination and altered reality of a writer of children's fiction who has suffered a terrible loss.

In *Enduring Love*, Joe is a freelance writer on topics in popular science who picks up his long-time partner Clarissa at Heathrow after a six week absence to conduct literary research in the United States. Just as they begin the picnic Joe has planned to celebrate her return, a hot air balloon, drifting nearby, loses control in the strong gusty wind. Without pausing to consider his action, Joe is off and running to assist a man and his grandson. The

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<sup>31</sup> Slay writes: "Unable to penetrate the past, Stephen resists the impulse to surrender, remaining adamant in his battle against time, the ultimate kidnapper of his only child" (119).

boy is trapped in the basket while the older man is dragged along the ground, attempting to keep the balloon connected with the earth. Though other passers-by join in the rescue, there is only one man who manages to hang on as the balloon's ropes are wrenched out of the grips of the half-dozen or so men who attempt to control the basket. It is the moment when John Logan falls from a height he cannot possibly survive that Joe and Clarissa fixate on in the days that follow immediately after the tragedy:

Even as I had that hope we saw him slip down right to the end of the rope. And still he hung there. For two seconds, three, four. And then he let go. Even then, there was a fraction of time when he barely fell, and I still thought there was a chance that a freak physical law, a furious thermal, some phenomenon no more astonishing than the one we were witnessing would intervene and bear him up. We watched him drop. You could see the acceleration (EL 16).

Horrible though this death is, the moment that at first seems as though it will define the remainder of the narrative is not as important as one that comes minutes later and seems initially innocuous. Clarissa and Joe continue to focus on the moment that seems to be the most important in their recent experience, not imagining that another, slightly later moment will carry more weight in their future. On the evening of the accident they sit up late trying to process the experience:

A little while later we were back in our seats, leaning over the table like dedicated craftsmen at work, grinding the jagged edge of memories, hammering the unspeakable into forms of words, threading single perceptions into narrative, until Clarissa returned us to the fall, to the precise moment when Logan had slid down the rope, hung there one last precious second, and let go (EL 30).

Joe recalls feeling, in his initially unacknowledged shock after seeing Logan fall, good to be alive, and is confident that he can offer solace to another would-be rescuer, Jed Parry, who stands nearby watching the group.

Though they share only a brief look, and Joe blurts the first comforting untruth that enters his head, Jed, a devout Christian in need of a mission, reads intensely into this short interaction and becomes obsessed with Joe, who writes: "Had I known what this glance



meant to him at the time, and how he was to construe it later and build around it a mental life, I would not have been so warm. In his pained, interrogative look was that first bloom of which I was entirely ignorant" (EL 20). It is this moment, which seems so normal and innocent, which becomes the source for the obsession Jed develops with regards to bringing Joe into "God's love," as he calls it again and again in the letters that Joe starts to receive three and four times a week (EL 141). It is this moment that Joe gives serious thought to, as Jed's passionate and obsessive attempts to convince his unbelieving subject that he needs to succumb to God continue. Joe's narrative is caught up in a struggle to understand the key moments that have changed his life; he takes extra time and care to describe the turning points, and he is intensely retrospective at times. These narrative habits and their effects on the story in terms of using time will be explored further in the more detailed sections that follow here.

## 1.2 Stretching the Moment

In *The Child in Time*, Stephen returns frequently at the start of the narrative to the time of Kate's disappearance (two years before as measured by the clock), hoping to garner some new information that will help him find her.<sup>32</sup> He finds, to his continuous dismay, that the nature of time is not forgiving; no matter how many times he revisits that morning shopping trip in his mind to try to see something new, his brain cannot provide any additional clues: "Later, in the sorry months and years, Stephen was to make efforts to re-enter this moment, to burrow his way back through the folds between events, crawl between the covers,

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<sup>32</sup> Peter Childs writes: "Kate's disappearance seems to mock any belief that an individual can confidently foresee and plan for the future, despite the fact that life requires each person to attempt to do precisely this." Peter Childs, *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction since 1970* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 173.

and reverse his decision. But time—not necessarily as it is, for who knows that, but as thought has constituted it—monomanically forbids second chances” (CT 14). After all hope of finding Kate via an organized search (“an obsessive hunt”) has departed, Stephen continues to grieve, sure that she cannot be gone forever: “Almost three years on and still stuck, still trapped in the dark, enfolded with his loss, shaped by it, lost to the ordinary currents of feeling that moved far above him and belonged exclusively to other people” (CT 130). Stephen is frustrated to find that it is impossible to return to a point in time and stretch it beyond the original confines of perception, to try to wring more from it than it actually contains. A moment in the present is a different thing in this narrative, however, as Stephen finds out later on during a car crash, when time obediently slows to fit everything in, as many things happen at once.

The point in Stephen’s story when time seems to stretch and slow down is the first time Stephen is driving after Kate’s disappearance, a year later.<sup>33</sup> An accident is about to become unavoidable, and as this fact becomes clear, “in what followed, the rapidity of events was accommodated by the slowing of time” (CT 93). The technique here is to describe a very brief incident in such detail that even the narrative in the fiction is stretched. In his comprehensive theory of narrative, *Story and Discourse*, Seymour Chatman writes:

Verbal expression may last longer [...] than the events themselves. The case of mental events is especially interesting. It takes longer to say your thoughts than to think them, and still longer to write them down. So, in a sense, verbal discourse is always slower when it communicates what has transpired in a character’s mind, especially sudden perceptions or insights. Many authors apologize for the disparity, for the delay caused by words.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Currie writes about the difficulties of making comparisons between time in fiction and in the world outside of the novel, noting that “the time of fiction, and hence the experience of fictional time, is essentially different from the time, and the experience of time, of the real world. For fictional narratives stretch and compress, elide, repeat and reorder the temporal durations of their events, and in doing so they distort, or at least restructure, time” (58). Though it is true that in real life it is impossible for any event to be repeated precisely, as we cannot move backward in time the way fiction can, I would argue that time is often distorted in the experience of the real world outside of fictions, in that it can seem to pass quickly or slowly depending on the activity of the individual at any given time.

<sup>34</sup> Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978) 73.

McEwan is not one of those authors who apologize for the extended description of events. This “delay caused by words” is part of the exploration of the narrative. An author who may be said to have pioneered, and even taken to an extreme, the technique of extending the narrative to take a long and meandering route toward achieving particularly rich descriptions of human experience is Proust. In *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust notoriously continued reworking and inserting passages into the text even on his death, “expanding it from its original 500,000 words to more than a million and a quarter.”<sup>35</sup> As Proust was influenced by Bergson’s writings on time, human consciousness and memory, his works are interesting to consider as the basis for attempts in fiction to come to some representation of the manner in which human memory works and relates to the real world in which we live. Genette writes that Proust worked to make the experience of time in fiction closer to what the reader experiences outside of the novel:

Interpolations, distortions, temporal condensations—Proust, at least when he is aware of them [...] justifies them constantly (according to an already old tradition that will not die with him) by a realistic motivation: he invokes in turn the concern to tell things as they were ‘lived’ at the time and the concern to tell them as they were recalled after the event. Thus, the anachronism of the narrative is now that of existence itself, now that of memory, which obeys other laws than those of time.<sup>36</sup>

*The Child in Time* employs the possibilities of time in the present rather than constantly in the past to complicate the plot and make the story more interesting. The reader has a sense of this particular accident seeming to take much longer than it could have done in time as measured by the clock. Human perception is such that this abnormal elasticity in the temporal flow is perfectly acceptable to the reader. Stephen heads at full speed toward an unavoidable collision with a lorry on a country road and manages to observe the event as it approaches in

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<sup>35</sup> Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 1, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981) introduction ix.

See 2.1 for a temporal connection between Proust and Rushdie noted by Rushdie himself.

<sup>36</sup> Genette 157.

a calm and lucid manner. It is particularly the change in the speed of time for the duration of the accident that strikes him:

Now, in this slowing of time, there was a sense of a fresh beginning. He had entered a much later period in which all the terms and conditions had changed. So these were the new rules, and he experienced something like awe, as though he were walking alone into a great city on a newly discovered planet. There was space too for a little touch of regret, genuine nostalgia for the old days of spectacle, back then when a lorry used to caterpult [sic] so impressively before the impassive witness. Now was a more demanding time of effort and concentration (CT 94).

The moment when Kate disappears is unclear in Stephen's memory, as though the fact that he has no idea his life is about to change means that time flows at an even pace in his perception. This moment, on the other hand, when Stephen is about to collide with a lorry, could clearly be life-ending, let alone life-changing. Thus time becomes extended, broadened: "The whole experience had lasted no longer than five seconds. Julie would have appreciated what had happened to time, how duration shaped itself round the intensity of the event" (CT 95). As several things happen at once, and his impressions of the moments overlap, Stephen has no leisure to process events or define his experience. Bergson writes: "Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former state."<sup>37</sup> Thus, Stephen's experience of the accident is a duration of time that cannot be divided or analyzed; the present cannot be separated from the past in this instance.

As the description of the event continues, Stephen feels himself "beaming messages" to his wife and daughter, simple "pulses of alarm and love." As "time was short, less than half a second," luckily other messages "did not come to mind to confuse him" (CT 95). Stephen manages to avoid the lorry by steering through a space between the other vehicle and a road sign; he feels as though he has plenty of time to make this rapid directional adjustment, though as the clock runs, it was but a few seconds. Afterwards Stephen shares the experience

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<sup>37</sup> Bergson, *Time* 100.

with the lorry driver: "Stephen excitedly told the story of the six-foot gap he had driven through, how time had slowed, and how the road sign had sheared off the wing mirror and door handle" (CT 99). In his wonder at the elastic nature of time in the crisis moment, not only does Stephen momentarily know that Julie would be interested in the sensation, but he wonders what his fellow accident victim thinks about the matter:

'What do you make of it, that thing about time?' [Stephen] asked.

Joe stared through his window at three armed policemen getting into a patrol car. 'I dunno. I was inside once for nearly two years. Nothing to do, nothing happening, every fucking day the same. And you know what? It went in a flash, my time. It was all over before I knew I was there. So it stands to reason. If a lot happens quickly it's going to seem like a long time' (CT 100).

Shaken up by the experience, Stephen returns to his life. This is an extreme example of a situation where perceived duration of the event is different than the amount of measurable time that has passed.<sup>38</sup> Stephen experiences other strange states of altered time that will be considered in additional sections of this chapter. Different types of encountered time figure prominently in the reader's understanding of Stephen's personal emotional journey through the book.

The narrative of *Enduring Love* is more self-conscious than that of *The Child in Time* in its commitment to the full description of significant events that only take a moment to occur, granting them the importance they deserve. Directly to the point, Joe writes: "The best description of a reality does not need to mimic its velocity. Whole books, whole research departments, are dedicated to the first half minute in the history of the universe" (EL 17).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Psychologist Michael G. Flaherty has collected detailed first hand accounts in real life of small portions of time that seem to last far longer and comprise more action than the actual passage of measurable time could account for. Flaherty writes: "Extraordinary circumstances make for abnormal temporal experiences, and the latter bring time to the surface of consciousness. Consequently, the stories people tell about lived duration provide only instances of deviant temporality. [...] From 1983 to 1994, my assistants and I have collected 705 first-person accounts of situations in which the passage of time was perceived to slow noticeably." Flaherty notes on the same page of his book that the stories account for only "deviant temporality" because people do not notice how time passes when it acts as is commonly perceived as normal.

Michael G Flaherty, *A Watched Pot: How We Experience Time* (New York: New York UP, 1999) 41.

<sup>39</sup> The 'big bang' theory concerns an incredibly significant event that took place in next to no time, rather like John Logan's fall from the hot air balloon discussed on this page and the next. McEwan's 'whole book' then

The narrative takes his point to heart for most of the novel. Joe recalls Clarissa handing him a bottle of wine from their picnic supplies as the point in time that his memory trips up over as they are alerted of danger: “This was the moment, this was the pinprick on the time map: I was stretching out my hand, and as the cool neck and the black foil touched my palm, we heard a man’s shout” (EL 1). Giving the moment something of the respect it is worthy of, but more importantly, some emotional distance as he tries to properly recall the circumstances leading up to the tragedy, Joe launches into further explanation. He circles in his narrative, then comes back to the moment: “As I have said, the neck touched my palm as we heard the shout. It was a baritone, a rising note of fear. It marked the beginning and, of course, an end. At that moment a chapter, no, a whole stage of my life closed. Had I known, and had there been a spare second or two, I might have allowed myself a little nostalgia” (EL 8). Racing across the adjacent field, Joe assists in attempting to anchor the balloon as it is buffeted by forceful gusts of wind. He recalls being lifted off his feet along with the other men: “Those one or two ungrounded seconds occupy as much space in memory as might a long journey up an uncharted river. My first impulse was to hang on in order to keep the balloon weighted down” (EL 13). Joe has given so much thought to those couple of seconds by the time he actually records the narrative that they seem to take up more than their share of the universe’s temporal continuum. The seconds were not actually longer than others; they take up more space in *memory* because of their dreadful significance.

Except for one, the men are unable to keep their hold on the balloon and it continues to rise, with only the doomed John Logan maintaining his grip. As mentioned earlier: “there was a fraction of time when he barely fell, and I still thought there was a chance that [...]

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concerns the aftermath of this single event. Time itself can be said to have been created with the ‘big bang’ but the time of the event has proved difficult for science to measure precisely, as Alan Lightman discusses at length in his nonfiction *Ancient Light: Our Changing View of the Universe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991). Of the creation of time he writes: “we can never see further back in time than the big bang, but as time goes on we see more and more of the universe as it was at the big bang” (42). There is this idea of something very large being compressed into something very small, in this case both space and time.

some phenomenon no more astonishing than the one we were witnessing would intervene and bear him up” (EL 16). It is interesting here that Joe calls this a “fraction of time” rather than a moment or a second or even a fraction of a moment. It is as though this tragedy occupies an unnamable amount of time that is perhaps indivisible as part of the flow of the event. Bergson asks: “what is duration within us? A qualitative multiplicity, with no likeness to number; an organic evolution which is yet not an increasing quantity; a pure heterogeneity within which there are no distinct qualities. In a word, the moments of inner duration are not external to one another.”<sup>40</sup> Inner duration, the sense Joe feels of time passing, is composed of moments that permeate each other, in Bergson’s view.<sup>41</sup> They are not “external to one another,” that is, they are not separate entities. Dividing Logan’s fall into parts, a linear progression of seconds, would detract from the overall emotional impression of the horrific time that it takes for him to reach the ground. Joe struggles to deal with the sensation of overlapping parts of time, both during Logan’s fall and with the following events. He writes: “best to slow down. Let’s give the half minute after John Logan’s fall careful consideration. What occurred simultaneously or in quick succession, what was said, how we moved or failed to move, what I thought—these elements need to be separated out” (EL 17). Though Joe wants to disconnect from each other these different things that were taking place both in the real world and in his head during these precious seconds, it is not possible. By defining and ordering the horror of Logan’s death, Joe and Clarissa are attempting to come to terms with an horrific half minute in the only way they know how: through language. Of their conversation that night, Joe writes: “we jumped forward to the moment he let go as we did many other times that evening.” Of their method of handling the events, Joe writes that he and Clarissa approached it over and over: “but we backed away from that moment again and again, circling it, stalking

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<sup>40</sup> Bergson, *Time* 226.

<sup>41</sup> Of Bergson, Flaherty writes: “To be human is to be self-conscious, and therein lies the primordial feeling of duration”(2).

it, until we had it cornered and began to tame it with words.” For these two academic-types, it is necessary to define time with language and to get it under control rather than leave the issue undiscussed. It is a complex task: “Along the narrative lines there were knots, tangles of horror that we could not look at first time, but could only touch before retreating, and then return” (EL 29).

In *Enduring Love*, there is another moment that has such importance that it gets treated the same way in the narrative, stretched out and extended beyond its worth by the measure of the clock. Frustrated by Joe’s failure to respond to his gesture of intended goodwill and conversion, Jed Parry decides to have Joe murdered while he is enjoying a birthday lunch in a public restaurant with Clarissa and her uncle Jocelyn. The hired thugs botch the job, shooting the wrong man, seated at an adjacent table. Joe writes: “what takes a minute to describe took two seconds to experience.” Again, Joe finds it necessary to dissect the time that has passed in order to assimilate the experience: “I have excavated that last half minute and I know two things for sure. One was that the waiter brought us sorbets. The other was that I slipped into a daydream” (EL 170). In attempting to deal with another distressing experience, Joe resurrects what little he can from his memory. By taking the extra time to describe the ordeal of processing the experience, Joe stretches time to include the weight of the drama of being at a table contiguous to a non-fatal, mistaken identity shooting—and also the fact that it was his own death which was intended.

Near the end of the novel when Joe, brought to his lowest point by his desperation to protect himself and Clarissa from the mental instability of Parry, takes a wild shot at Parry and catches him in the elbow, he handles the moment differently (EL 213). The action of shooting happens very quickly, but Joe doesn’t take the time to slow down the narrative and describe this episode the way he has deconstructed previous important and vital thirty second periods. Is this because he is the instigator of the action at this particular point? The two



moments that have received so much scrutiny, specifically Logan falling from the balloon, and Parry's hit men shooting and fleeing the restaurant, did so perhaps because they were out of Joe's control and thus needed to be examined relatively extensively compared to their real duration in time. The act of shooting Parry, seated next to Clarissa on the couch with a knife held to his own throat, is premeditated. Joe doesn't have to describe the breakdown of events that he himself initiated. This one happened as fast as the other two, but because its generation had nothing to do with anyone other than Joe, he doesn't bother with the narratorial analysis hitherto provided so self-consciously.

### 1.3 Dividing Paths in Time

In *Enduring Love*, Joe makes several references to the possibility of other outcomes in the early stages of his narrative as he explores the event that has such a large effect on the rest of his life. As one decision is made or one action is taken, other doors close and negate potential futures. As Joe opens his narrative with the balloon incident, he hesitates to describe the events, hoping in his reluctance to share information that he can convey his sense of distaste for the way that time unfolded itself when there were so many more pleasant possible futures available. He writes: "I'm holding back, delaying the information. I'm lingering in the prior moment because it was a time when other outcomes were still possible" (EL 2). Suddenly those doors slam shut and Joe cannot withhold the narrative any longer. Gone are his hopes of enjoying a wonderful reunion with Clarissa. Ever the secular analyst, Joe struggles to accept that he has less control over his own future than he has always thought. Describing the situation that enters into the story of his reunion with Clarissa, Joe writes:

This was the moment [...] We turned to look across the field and saw the danger. Next thing, I was running towards it. The transformation was absolute: I don't recall dropping the corkscrew, or getting to my feet, or making a decision, or hearing the caution Clarissa called after me. What idiocy, to be racing into this story and its labyrinths, sprinting away from our happiness among the fresh spring grasses by the oak. There was the shout again, and a child's cry, enfeebled by the wind that roared in the tall trees along the hedgerows. I ran faster. And there, suddenly, from different points around the field, four other men were converging on the scene, running like me (EL 1).<sup>42</sup>

There was no other action that could have been taken, even though Joe generally holds himself above base human instincts; here his own disassociation with the higher faculties of reason is undeniable. Though to the reader it seems that the most consideration is being given to this moment of the shout and the danger and the running toward the action in the field, the momentary exchange that actually gives substance to the entire novel comes later: "The encounter that would unhinge us was minutes away, its enormity disguised from us not only by the barrier of time but by the colossus in the centre of the field that drew us in with the power of a terrible ratio that set fabulous magnitude against the puny human distress at its base" (EL 2). Originally Joe thinks that Logan's fall and crushing death is part of a lesson to be learned in mortality, the end of a story. He then writes: "but I see now that in the moments immediately after his fall there were subtler elements exerting powerful sway over the future. The moment Logan hit the ground should have been the end of this story rather than one more beginning I could have chosen" (EL 18). Instead, the fall sets up the context for the brief initial contact between Joe and Jed Parry, and serves as the beginning to the longer-term, more stressful interaction between them. Joe learns to be anxious about the future rather than feeling that the future is an opportunity or that there are multiple possibilities for him to choose between. He allows his concern to override his previous common sense and healthy relationship with the rest of the world:

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<sup>42</sup> The mention of "labyrinths" may bring to mind Jorge Luis Borges' short story, 'The Garden of Forking Paths' (1944).

As guilt was to the past, so, what was it that stood in the same relation to the future? Intention? No, not influence over the future. Foreboding. Anxiety about, distaste for the future. Guilt and foreboding, bound by a line from past to future, pivoting in the present—the only moment it could be experienced. It wasn't fear exactly. Fear was too focused, it had an object. Dread was too strong. Fear of the future. Apprehension then. Yes, there it was, approximately. It was apprehension (EL 43).

With Jed Parry's entrance into his life, Joe's relationship to his world starts to be one of uneasy and maladjusted paranoia rather than rational like his previous dealings with it. His sense that there are various paths in life that he can select lucidly is lost. Bergson writes:

What makes hope such an intense pleasure is the fact that the future, which we dispose of to our liking, appears to us at the same time under a multitude of forms, equally attractive and equally possible. Even if the most coveted of these becomes realized, it will be necessary to give up the others, and we will have lost a great deal. The idea of the future, pregnant with an infinity of possibilities, is thus more fruitful than the future itself, and this is why we find more charm in hope than in possession, in dreams than in reality.<sup>43</sup>

In *The Child in Time*, much attention is given to this potentiality of the future. To Stephen, prior to losing Kate: "the future was, had been, rich" (CT 21). Before leaving that morning for grocery shopping with Kate, Stephen had contemplated an alternative choice that would have bypassed the entire ordeal. Looking tenderly at Julie, curled up in their bed: "for a moment Stephen was tempted to abandon the shopping and set Kate up with some books in front of the television. He could slip between the heavy covers beside his wife" (CT 14). Stephen spends the next several years mourning the loss of this potential, happy future, one that he had never dreamed was too much to expect.

For her part, Julie is unable to take any action to recover Kate, lost as she is in contemplating the tragedy. She retreats to a monastery for six weeks and then returns to their London apartment: "For a while it seemed they would soon begin to touch on the subjects they were at such pains to avoid. / But it could go the other way too, and it did. [...] Their loss had set them on separate paths" (CT 52). Retreating more permanently to a cottage in the

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<sup>43</sup> Bergson, *Time* 9-10.

country, Julie is lost to Stephen as Kate continues to be. However, in a circular plot move, Stephen visits Julie at her cottage after they have lived separately for about two years and, faced with the transitory choice between making love to her and walking past her into another room, makes the decision he has so long wished he made the day he lost Kate, and takes Julie in his arms:

He was holding his breath, the moment was holding its breath. They confronted two possibilities, equally weighted, balanced on a honed fulcrum. The moment they inclined towards one, the other, while never ceasing to exist, would disappear irrevocably. He could rise from the bed now, giving her an affectionate smile as he moved past her on his way to the bath. [...] Or something could be risked, a different life unfold in which his own unhappiness could be redoubled or eliminated.

Their hesitation was brief, delicious before the forking paths (CT 63).<sup>44</sup>

Here McEwan subtly intertwines the potentiality of the future with a reinvocation of the past in a moment that is the present in the story-time of the novel. Bergson writes: “thus the perception of ease in motion passes over into the future of mastering the flow of time and of holding the future in the present” (TFW 12). Unbeknownst to Stephen for nine months, as he and Julie are again driven apart following the brief indulgence of comforting each other physically, Julie has conceived, and the next time he sees her, she is ready to go into labour.<sup>45</sup> As a novelist, McEwan is reluctant to commit himself to any one potential future for his characters, and only reveals the view around the next bend at the last possible moment in the form of a seemingly random action or incident. McEwan leaves space for the other possibilities, the other potential paths characters might follow.

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<sup>44</sup> Here again there is a reference to Borges’ story, ‘The Garden of Forking Paths.’

<sup>45</sup> Of the final scene in the novel where Stephen delivers his second child, Ryan writes: “for one ecstatic moment, mother, child and father are transfixed beyond time, marooned in a trance of untarnished hope. Then the pitiless tide of history floods in and sweeps them on again” (217).

Kiernan Ryan, “Sex, Violence and Complicity: Martin Amis and Ian McEwan,” *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction*, ed. Rod Mengham (Cambridge: Polity, 1999) 203-218.

#### 1.4 Theme of Science and Incongruity of Relating to the Past

McEwan resorts to an unusual narrative technique in *The Child in Time* when he allows Stephen to have a vision along with the surreal sense of belonging outside of time. While walking in the country, on his way to visit Julie at her cottage retreat, Stephen suddenly witnesses a turning point in his own past when he approaches a country pub called The Bell and feels that he knows the place well, though he has never seen it before:

He knew this spot, knew it intimately, as if over a long period of time. The trees around him were unfolding, broadening, blossoming. One visit in the remote past would not account for this sense, almost a kind of ache, of familiarity, of coming to a place that knew him too, and seemed, in the silence that engulfed the passing cars, to expect him. What came to him was a particular day, a day he could taste (CT 56).

Stephen feels strongly rooted in a particular point in time, not just any random moment in the past, but a mysterious and specific crossroads of his own life. This novel sensation fascinates and disorients him and he moves with caution to explore without disrupting the vision: "The day he now inhabited was not the day he had woken into. He was lucid, determined to advance. He was in another time but he was not overwhelmed. He was a dreamer who knows his dream for what it is and, though fearful, lets it unfold out of curiosity" (CT 57-8).

There is a mystical quality to this time and location that Stephen is unable to account for initially. It is a very specific time and place, yet he does not know where or when he is.

The narrative runs:

But the call of the place, its knowingness, the longing it evinced, the rootless significance, all this made it seem quite certain, even before he could tell himself why, that the loudness<sup>46</sup>—this was the word he fixed upon—of this particular location had its origins outside his own existence. / He waited for fifteen minutes, then he began to walk slowly in the direction of The Bell. A sudden movement could dispel this delicate reconstruction of another time. He held himself in (CT 57).

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<sup>46</sup> McEwan creates an interesting contrast here by describing the location as having its own "loudness" when on the previous page in the novel, in the quote I used in the previous paragraph, the cars that pass are "engulfed" in "silence", as though by making no noise they are removed from the time of the scene. Bicycles play a more important role than cars in this place and time when Stephen observes his parents in The Bell.

The realist part of Stephen's consciousness wants a validation for the feeling of connection, a concrete rationalization for the strangeness of the certainty of knowing this place at this time and yet not recognizing it. Luckily for the reader, although Stephen wants an explanation, he does not insist upon it: "He stood for many minutes looking, tempted to turn back, come another time and explore more closely. But it was not just a place he was being offered, it was a particular day, *this day*" (CT 57). Poised at the edge of the unknown, Stephen presses bravely onward rather than lose the opportunity to explore the unique potential of this fantastic setting in time.

Approaching The Bell at last, Stephen sees two young people inside having a passionate discussion. He realizes he is looking at his own parents as they argue over his mother's budding pregnancy; he is looking on as his father attempts to convince his mother not to keep her baby, not to allow Stephen to live. Kiernan Ryan writes: "he has slipped through a rift in the fabric of time itself, and for one awesome, mind-snapping moment he gazes through the window of The Bell into the eyes of his own mother, carrying his foetal self within her womb."<sup>47</sup> Ryan continues: "It is as if Stephen has been plucked from the future to ensure his own survival by intervening in the past."<sup>48</sup> This incident is unusual in *The Child in Time* for although McEwan presents the reader with a number of references to various scientific theories about time and the nature of the universe, this vision-like approach, the sense of belonging outside of time, is unique in its unscientific character. Slay calls this moment "a flaw in time" and writes that an "astonishing distortion of time occurs when Stephen encounters a flaw in time. In an episode of magical realism, Stephen steps into the past and meets his parents."<sup>49</sup> Stephen makes eye contact with the young woman he knows with a childlike certainty is his own mother. Ryan writes: "in the paranormal episode at The

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<sup>47</sup> Kiernan Ryan, *Ian McEwan* (Plymouth: Northcote, 1994) 49.

<sup>48</sup> Ryan, *Ian McEwan* 50.

<sup>49</sup> Slay 124.

Bell, mother and son communicate telepathically across time, need answering need in a moment of violent anachronism.”<sup>50</sup>

McEwan contrasts Stephen’s mysterious experience of inexplicably being outside of time with his reliable and informed source for scientific truths, his physicist friend, Thelma.<sup>51</sup> There are a variety of different views and approaches to science and human time populating and interacting within McEwan’s novels, indicating the author’s quest to explore the dialogue between science and literature on the topic of time and the possibilities for understanding the human relationship to it via the medium of fiction. Some weeks after Stephen has his experience at The Bell, of seeing his parents as they were in the past, young and vital and in the midst of discussing a decision crucial to his very existence, he goes to the voice of science in his life for help with understanding the incident. After explaining the episode at length over dinner Thelma insists on knowing what Stephen makes of it, but he replies: “I don’t know. Its got something to do with time obviously, with seeing something out of time” (CT 117). Here Thelma is allowed to present the voice of science in an extended ramble about a number of possibilities.<sup>52</sup> David Malcolm writes:

Time is not just connected with loss and possible recovery, but also with relativity. Thelma notes that there is a whole range of explanations of the phenomenon of time, and she holds out the hope that in the future radically different experiences of time—linear, commonsense time, physicist’s discussions of time, the time of mystics, dreamers’ time, the complex time schemes of novelists—will be somehow unified. Motifs of relativity abound in the novel.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ryan, *Ian McEwan* 52.

<sup>51</sup> Malcolm calls Thelma “an expert on theories of the nature of time. It is appropriate that she is so, for not only is her husband attempting to reverse time, but Stephen, too, steps out of his own time on one occasion” such as seeing his parents outside of time. Thelma would seem to represent Evelyn Fox Keller, the author of multiple works on gender and science.

David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (Columbia, South Carolina: U South Carolina P, 2002) 89.

<sup>52</sup> Childs writes: “The complexities of life and its unpredictability are at all points in the novel represented by the theme of time, which takes each person out of an unalterable past, through a known stable moment of the present into an uncertain, contingent future. This theme is most fully explored when Stephen recounts his vision to Charles Darke’s wife Thelma, a physics lecturer who details the conjectural possibilities that theoretical science could offer to explain such curvature in time as Stephen’s glimpse of his own past” (175).

<sup>53</sup> Malcolm particularly mentions a scene at the start of *The Child in Time* where motorists are stuck in traffic, being passed by pedestrians, and thus seem almost to be drifting backwards rather than progressing toward their destinations; the movement is relative according to spatial placement. Malcolm 106.

At first Thelma's rant about temporal theory is frustrated, railing at the irresponsible scientific theories presently under discussion in the larger community and commercially available: "all written up for the layman in books of the 'fancy that' variety," as she says:

'Then there are physicists who find it convenient to describe time as a kind of substance, an efflorescence of undetectable particles. There are dozens of other theories, equally potty. They set out to smooth a few wrinkles in one corner of quantum theory. The mathematics are reasonable enough in a local sort of way, but the rest, the grand theorizing, is whistling in the dark. What comes out is inelegant and perverse' (CT 117).

Part of Stephen's major struggle in this novel, his emotional journey in time, needs to be balanced out in the narrative by the scientific explanation, and Thelma gets this back on track in the same conversation with some explication on how it is impossible to know the true nature of time:

'But whatever time is, the commonsense, everyday version of it as linear, regular, absolute, marching from left to right, from the past through the present to the future, is either nonsense or a tiny fraction of the truth. We know this from our own experience. An hour can seem like five minutes or a week. Time is variable. We know it from Einstein who is still our bedrock here. In relativity theory time is dependant on the speed of the observer. What are simultaneous events to one person can appear in sequence to another. There's no absolute, generally recognized 'now'—but you know all this.[...] In dense bodies with colossal gravitational fields, black holes, time can grind to a halt altogether. The brief appearance of certain particles in the cloud chamber can only be explained by the backward movement of time. In the Big Bang theory, time is thought to have been created in the same moment as matter, it's inseparable from it. And that's part of the problem—to consider time as an entity we have to wrench it apart from space and matter, we have to distort it to look at it' (CT 117-8).

Time cannot be considered separately from "space and matter" and remain an accurate reflection of itself as an independent entity. In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson writes: "Time, as dealt with by the astronomer and the physicist, does indeed *seem* to be measurable and therefore homogeneous" (107). The undertone of Bergson's statement is that this manner of dealing with time does not give a satisfactory result. Though Thelma provides the voice of hard science in the novel, she also evokes a certain frustration about the failure of her field,



contemporary theoretical physics, to provide conclusive answers on this centrally important issue of time.<sup>54</sup> In this way the novel proclaims that Stephen's experience of time is more valid and true to the emotional consciousness of human beings than is effectively represented by science.<sup>55</sup> Later in the evening, Thelma laments:

'Think how humanised and approachable scientists would be if they could join in the really important conversations about time, and without thinking they had the final word—the mystic's experience of timelessness, the chaotic unfolding of time in dreams, the Christian moment of fulfilment and redemption, the annihilated time of deep sleep, the elaborate time schemes of novelists, poets, daydreamers, the infinite, unchanging time of childhood.'

He knew he was hearing part of her book. 'The slow time of panic,' he added to her list, and told the story of his near collision with the lorry and how he had freed the driver (CT 120).

Thelma declares that science is not the absolute authority on time, citing Bohr: "Niels Bohr was probably right all along when he said that scientists should have nothing to do with reality" (CT 120). None of the theories of time Thelma is familiar with are adequate to handle the non-scientific "conversations" she refers to, or to explain the experience Stephen had of looking on at an embryonic stage of his own life from a vantage point outside of real time. Stephen's episode at The Bell further illustrates the incongruency between what science is able to tell the world about time, and the way that people actually experience time in different states of mind and various emotional conditions. Bergson writes:

it is generally agreed to regard time as an unbounded medium, different from space but homogeneous like the latter: the homogeneous is thus supposed to take two forms,

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<sup>54</sup> Malcolm writes: "tutorial-like speculations on time and also metaphysical, supernatural experience add to the novel's genre complexity. The former are centered on Thelma and are transmitted through Stephen's perceptions and understanding" (99).

<sup>55</sup> Flaherty offers some comments worthy of Thelma about what is needed in a theory that would explain the individual's abnormal experience of time:

A theory that is meant to account for variation in the perceived passage of time must take into consideration the interplay of different levels of consciousness. The theory that has emerged from my research recognizes that the density of conscious experience is a crucial element conditioning one's perception of the passage of time. In effect, I have argued that protracted duration occurs when conscious information processing is high, synchronicity occurs when conscious information processing is moderate, and temporal compression occurs when conscious information processing is low (138).

This introduction of Flaherty's concept of "density" in "conscious experience" is unique in my research on the topic of time and clearly an idea under development in the realm of psychology. In the future there will likely be further possibility for applying Flaherty's further findings to additional literature, including modernist works by writers like Woolf, Joyce and Proust, not to mention postmodernist literature yet to come.

according as its contents co-exist or follow one another. It is true that, when we make time a homogeneous medium in which conscious states unfold themselves, we take it to be given all at once, which amounts to saying that we abstract it from duration.<sup>56</sup>

Bergson's point is that when science tries to quantify time precisely, the qualities of time are lost. If time is homogeneous and equally divisible into parts, each segment is known and "given all at once." The quality of duration is lost. "Conscious states" are not allowed to reveal themselves at the rate and in the order they choose. For Bergson, science cannot encompass true knowledge of time, and when the attempt is made, something vital about the nature of time is lost. In *The Child in Time*, the contrast between the ordering effort of various theories in science and the emotional relationship Stephen has with time is important in establishing the ineffectuality of the former and the difficulty of the latter. It is indeed the latter which makes the story's interaction with various possibilities in time so captivating.

In *Enduring Love*, Joe is a freelance writer on scientific topics who handles his research subjects objectively. Espousing the particular opinions and fulfilling the needs of the publications he contributes to has proved lucrative and orderly. In order to fill time alone after he realizes that Jed Parry has been following him and watching him work in the London Library, the anxiety of being unable to control his own present sets in. Objective Joe throws himself into his work. The subject happens to be the relationship between narrative and science in the modernist period. Joe tackles a range of ideas in science and literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and forges a link between them: "The dominant artistic form was the novel, great sprawling narratives which not only charted private fates, but made whole societies in mirror image and addressed the public issues of the day" (EL 48). Normally comfortable creating and even forcing relationships between topics such as these, Joe looks back at his work at the end of the evening, including a sizeable section on the aesthetic value of Einstein's General Theory (EL 49) and feels frustrated that science is

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<sup>56</sup> Bergson, *Time* 98.

letting him down: "Counter arguments welled from between the neat lines of text" (EL 50). As Joe grasps desperately for the certainty of the scientific, it recedes: "The less confident I became about this argument, the faster I typed" (EL 49). Much of Joe's difficulty in dealing with what happens to him over the course of the novel stems from this separation of the scientific from the real human perception of natural phenomena. He is able to break it down in a narratorial sense, giving additional attention to important moments and scenes by lengthening his explanation of them as discussed in the first section of this chapter, 'Stretching the Moment.' However in his emotional relationship to events, Joe's objective approach fails. He cannot understand how a few select moments can destroy the happiness and ease of the past seven years, during which he has been involved with Clarissa (EL 3).

Science can explain many things for Joe, but it cannot help him with the core problem of the novel: as Joe's anxiety about Jed Parry increases, his relationship with Clarissa becomes increasingly strained. Joe feels a vague sense that despite their current difficulties, the solid foundation he and Clarissa have built for their love cannot ultimately fail to support them. He recalls the night when he thought they were sure to make a full recovery, lying in bed facing each other and just looking into each other's eyes:

It was like a long and slow remembering, and as each minute passed and we did not speak, our recovery gathered its own quiet strength. Surely the inertial power of love, the hours, weeks and years harmoniously spent in each other's company, was greater than the circumstances of the mere present. Didn't love generate its own reserves? [...] Conflicts, like living organisms, had a natural lifespan. The trick was to know when to let them die. At the wrong moment, words could act like so many fibrillating jolts (EL 144-5).

Confident that the rift between them would heal, Joe continues: "all we had to do was look at each other and remember. Make love and the rest would take care of itself" (EL 145). With perfect storytelling timing, this is the moment Clarissa tells Joe she thinks it's all over between them. Joe is confused, in his dispassionate conviction that he can research his way out of the problem, and find a scientific explanation for the way that a few small moments

have had such a huge destructive impact on his life. Joe needs to realize that science fails to catch up with human experience of time in this fashion. The novel, and Joe's subsequent obsession with getting Jed Parry out of his life so that he and Clarissa can return to the way they used to live, hinges on Joe's inability to deal effectively with the implications of the irrational importance of a few moments early in the narrative. The dialogue in *Enduring Love* between science and qualities of time is thus summarized: Joe finally realizes science has failed him as he looks back and narrates the story, patiently slowing down the narrative at key points of value that he has recognized only after the action has ended.

### 1.5 Accumulating History

The final section in this chapter will discuss a particular aspect of Bergson's philosophy on time as it appears in the two McEwan novels, namely, that each moment in human experience is not measurably the same as the one before, and the one before that. Moments accumulate, and affect characters' experiences accordingly. In the beginning of *The Child in Time*, Stephen returns home without Kate, to a present and a future that excludes her, his first-born child. The narrative runs: "The future was, had been, rich" (CT 21). Suddenly, now, everything has changed. Stephen and Julie must face the loss of their assumptions about the experience of bringing Kate up together: "But that was before time, the heartless accumulation of days, had clarified the absolute, bitter truth" (CT 23). The present moment has lost its meaning without Kate there to complete the family trio. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Bergson writes: "when we add to the present moment those which have preceded it, [...] we are not dealing with these moments themselves, since they have vanished for ever, but with the lasting traces which they seem to have left in space on

their passage through it" (TFW 79). Bergson refers to a sense of accumulating history, where a person's life is made up of the millions of moments that have come and gone, in sequence and yet overlapping and permeating each other, and leaving a sense of the past without the past actually existing in any true or complete way in the present. The emptiness of the present continues to be a theme in *The Child in Time*, as though despite the fact that a previous lifetime of moments has accrued in a person's experience, the cumulative effects of time can become irrelevant when a single moment, here of inattention, outweighs and overshadows all the rest. Each moment is not created equal.

On the day when Stephen arrives home from an afternoon meeting and another fruitless day of searching to find Julie gone, it is as though their accumulated past together has been rendered meaningless. He feels nothing. Stephen wanders around the flat, then stands looking at the chair where Julie has spent the intervening time between Kate's disappearance and her decision to abscond for a retreat in the country: "At last he stirred himself, took two paces round the chair and sat down. He stared into the dark grate where spent matches lay at odd angles by a piece of tin foil; minutes went by, time in which to feel the chair's bunched material yield Julie's contours for his own, empty minutes like all the others" (CT 25). The time Julie has spent mourning is represented in the grate by the matches which have been struck, burned and then tossed, without actually consuming each other or having any purpose in lighting a fire. It is an activity as pointless as the minutes that passed while Julie sat in the chair. Nothing else material remains of her empty time in the chair while Stephen searched for Kate in vain. The only change when Stephen sits in the chair is its shift to accommodate his shape rather than Julie's. Time is still barren of meaning or importance, for either character, and Stephen is in limbo, waiting to understand why his life has changed.

After the car accident,<sup>57</sup> as Stephen is on his way to visit Thelma and Charles Darke, he stops just before reaching their house, caught up in thinking about his own past: “He was so unhealthily stuffed up with his recent past, like a man with a cold. If he could only live in the present he might breathe freely. But I don’t like the present, he thought, and picked up his things” (CT 103). Stephen continues to be unable to face the changes that have occurred in his life. The past is like a disease, preventing him from moving on.

Before considering *Enduring Love* on the topic of accumulated history, there is another brief scene in *The Child in Time* that is worth examination. Stephen visits his parents, wanting to ask them about The Bell, prodded by the memory-bound experience he has had and the sensation of belonging outside of time. His father has just told him to move on, as though everyone other than Stephen, no matter how much pain they are in, realizes that the present is empty while you linger in thinking of the past (CT 88). His father leaves the room to help with dinner and Stephen is left looking at the residue of his parents’ past: “It was odd, the ease with which a whole past could be fitted into one room, placed out of time and bound by a blend of familiar smells which had no date—lavender polish, cigarettes, scented soap, roasting meat” (CT 89). Here the accumulation of the history of a married life materializes in the contents of a single room. Stephen looks around at objects that he remembers from different periods of his childhood; physical things that represent times gone by and the amassing of countless moments. Sitting down to dinner, Stephen sees in the faces of his parents the ageing effect that Kate’s disappearance has had. Again, one moment of inattention on Stephen’s part, and an entire history of moments for himself and his parents is eclipsed by the tragedy.

A connection that comes to mind when considering this idea of accumulated history may be that of the reoccurring and memory-jarring petite madeleine biscuits for Proust’s

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<sup>57</sup> The car accident in *The Child in Time* was discussed in detail in section 1.2, ‘Stretching the Moment’.

narrator in *Remembrance of Things Past*. Dipping the biscuit in the tea, he writes: “no sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin” (48). Chasing the explanation for this sensation, the narrator Marcel feels something rising up within himself and acknowledges that it comes not from the tea and biscuit in front of him, but from a deeply hidden inner place. He clears his mind, trying to allow the feeling to come forth. He writes: “Undoubtedly what is thus palpitating in the depths of my being must be the image, the visual memory which, being linked to that taste, is trying to follow it into my conscious mind.”<sup>58</sup> It is an absorbing task, attempting to bring a bit of his own history to light, though it might have been lost forever if not for the prompting of the tea and biscuit: “Will it ultimately reach the clear surface of my consciousness, this memory, this old, dead moment which the magnetism of an identical moment has traveled so far to importune, to disturb, to raise up out of the very depths of my being? I cannot tell. [...] Ten times over I must essay the task, must lean down over the abyss. [...] And suddenly the memory revealed itself.”<sup>59</sup> Finally recalling eating the same biscuits soaked in the same tea with his aunt on Sunday mornings as a young boy, a whole forgotten setting from his youth, a complete village and its surroundings springs up into Marcel’s mind.<sup>60</sup> Here there is again a small physical thing that is the key to unlocking a section of a person’s past, a segment of accumulated history that has been buried in the mind.<sup>61</sup> Ending his ‘Overture’ with the

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<sup>58</sup> Proust, *Remembrance* 49.

<sup>59</sup> Proust, *Remembrance* 50.

<sup>60</sup> Currie remains intensely sceptical that this experience with the biscuit and the past and present coming together in Marcel’s mind is anything special (despite Proust’s portrayal of a mundane occasion as monumental), writing: “What, for example, makes Marcel so sure that the experience is that of a fusion of past and present in a timeless being, rather than merely the activation in the present of a memory trace—certainly a very lively one—of a past event?” (47). Currie cannot accept Proust’s vision of this experience in time.

<sup>61</sup> Currie writes about the reflections such as this one involving the madeleine of Proust’s narrator:

such moments disclose the existence of a timeless essence which each one of us possesses and which experiences the fusion of temporal moments from outside time. [...] such experiences, because they

emergence of an entire village from a memory, Proust takes the story back to Combray and the narrator as a boy being given the tea-soaked biscuit by his aunt. The memory is the starting point for the recounting of a childhood that follows in the book. There is a gathering up and pouring out of history that flows from this single associative memory.<sup>62</sup>

In *Enduring Love*, another angle on this concept of accumulated history is an alternative past, with an entire set of social relationships and interactions implicit in it. There is an early and brief instance where Joe still feels that Parry is a “harmless fellow” (61). As Joe tries to understand what Parry is talking about in terms of their connection and the love for each other that he has conceived in his mind, he realizes how odd the interaction is: “How extraordinary it was, to be standing on my own street in my coat, this cold Tuesday morning in May, talking to a stranger in terms more appropriate to an affair, or a marriage on the rocks. It was as if I had fallen through a crack in my own existence, down into another life, another set of sexual preferences, another past history and future” (EL 67). Joe feels as though he has been given an alternate identity, as though he is playing someone else’s role, and is being called to account for someone else’s accumulated history. The sum of the present situation suddenly seems to be comprised of a history of moments that belong to another. There is not any logical way that the life he has lived so far can be made up of parts that now equal this confrontation. Things have gotten too strange too fast to fit the formula of Joe’s history, so he fantasizes that he has fallen into a substitute lifestyle and alternate set of problems.

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bring the past to life, allow an otherwise impossible but aesthetically desirable combination. For in such a case imagination, which is otherwise bound to absent things, can combine with a lively impression of the presentness of what is in fact past (47).

<sup>62</sup> Though I have connected McEwan’s fiction with Proust’s madeleine biscuit and the accumulation of history that can be present in a given object, Stephen Baker makes an unusual connection between Proust’s biscuits and the pickles (or rather, pickling process of memory) that Saleem is so concerned with in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. In section 2.4 this will be addressed.



The final topic of accumulated past to be discussed here is Bergson's argument that time is a quality rather than a quantity, and the human consciousness perceives it as such. He gives the example of a clock striking in the background of one's aural awareness. Though it may be several strokes before the clock is consciously perceived and heard, it is possible to count back, using subconscious awareness, and determine the hour. Bergson writes: "In a word, the number of strokes was perceived as a quality and not as a quantity: it is thus that duration is presented to immediate consciousness, and it retains this form so long as it does not give place to a symbolic representation derived from extensity" (TFW 128). As Joe's awareness of being followed is only starting to emerge, he is sitting in the London Library doing his research and feeling vaguely apprehensive, though he has yet to put a label on his uneasiness and disquiet. Joe struggles to focus:

I myself was comfortable within a large smooth-armed leather chair. In my line of vision were three other members, each with books or magazines on their laps, and all three asleep. Outside, the raucous traffic in St James Square, even the dispatch motorbikes, was soporific in the way that other people's frantic motion can be. Indoors, the murmur of water along unseen ancient pipes and, nearer, a creaking of floorboards as someone, invisible behind the magazine rack, moved a couple of paces, paused for a minute or two, and then moved again. This sound, I realized in retrospect, had been perched on the outer edges of my awareness for almost half an hour. I wondered if I could reasonably ask this person to keep still, or suggest he take a pile of magazines and go and sit in silence (EL 42).

Though Joe takes some time to realize what is disturbing him, he is able to retrieve from his subconscious the required information. The distraction is built on gradually, and culminates with the "restless time-waster" practically running from the reading room: "The swing doors had moved in diminishing pendulum movement, and now there was nothing but molecular reverberation, one step up from the imaginary. Who was the person who had just left? Why so suddenly?" (EL 42). It takes Joe half an hour to realize it is a single person who is disturbing his research by haunting the magazine rack, and it takes the entire day to realize that something is keeping him from focusing properly on his work; that something is his fear.

He writes: “was I so obtuse, not to know fear from the start?” (EL 43). Bergson points out that the awareness of time is a qualitative factor. As time passes and Joe is still in his state of heightened insecurity due to the traumatic events that the novel opens with, he becomes increasingly aware of the connection between the quality of time and his associated emotions when he is self-conscious about what time contains for him. Joe’s experience of becoming aware of the ongoing sounds of a possible stalker (he becomes convinced that Parry was watching him in the library) is a good illustration of Bergson’s point about the striking of a distant clock striking entering one’s consciousness.<sup>63</sup> In terms of short-term accumulation of history, Joe’s story is often concerned with many emotional interactions occurring in short periods of time, and McEwan’s tendency to deal with the emotional journey through time is thus perpetuated.

## 1.6 Conclusions

This chapter has been dedicated to a discussion about the emotional journey in time in Ian McEwan’s two novels, *The Child in Time* and *Enduring Love*. Henri Bergson’s concept of *durée* is applicable here because both narratives are concerned in different ways with how time can be perceived to move at different rates according to what is happening to the characters at various points. Duration is a qualitative thing rather than quantitative (as hard

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<sup>63</sup> Another helpful example is given by L. Nathan Oaklander about being conscious about having a headache:

Consider, for example, the experience of a headache ceasing to exist. It involves first having a headache and at the same time being conscious that one is having a headache. It involves second the consciousness of no longer having a headache. This involves both the awareness of my having various thoughts and feelings, and not having a headache. It also involves the memory of a headache that is not located now, at this moment but is located (or exists TENSElessly) at an earlier moment. In other words, if I am aware at time<sub>1</sub> that I have a headache, and I am aware at a later time<sub>2</sub> that I do not have a headache, and I remember my headache existing at time<sub>1</sub>, then I am having an experience of my headache ceasing to exist.

L. Nathan Oaklander, “Freedom and the New Theory of Time,” *Questions of Time and Tense*, ed. Robin Le Poidevin (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998) 199.

science would have it). Human experience cannot be divided up into equally divisible or even measurable parts (TFW 104). In each story there are very specific moments which, though brief when considered alone, affect the lives of the main characters in large ways.

Discussed in the chapter have been four major techniques that are used by McEwan to explore the possibilities of time that I have related to the writings of Bergson with regards to *durée* and the human perception of temporal flow. By using different ideas about time McEwan is able to give the reader various perspectives and a way of relating to events and thoughts in the lives of the characters. First, the narratives stretch the key moments in order to lend them importance in the stories. Secondly, the novels are self-conscious about portraying alternative futures, discussing what might have happened if the outcome of initial moments in the books had been different, or never happened at all. Bergson has some contributions to make regarding the branching of future possibilities and here his ideas have been applied to the latent division and potentiality of time in every moment, but most especially intense or traumatic ones.

The third topic in the chapter looked at some of the applications of hard science in the novels and the way they are expanded upon in the narratives. It also discussed the contrary existence, alongside the theoretical scientific views on time, of the qualitative perception of time in the lives of the characters. Bergson is concerned with the difference between time being perceived as a quantitative body by science, and yet as a qualitative entity by human experience; one can perceive oneself to even be outside of time, given the right combination of circumstances.<sup>64</sup> Tied up in this analysis is the fourth topic of the chapter, the concept of an accumulation of history for an individual. A lifetime of moments, though measurable by science, are not equal to the sum of their parts. Bergson muses on the importance of the “lasting traces” that are left by moments as they are experienced and then left behind by the

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<sup>64</sup> Bergson, *Time* 75.

human consciousness (TFW, 79). He uses the example of a clock sounding and the mind becoming aware of the sound part way through the announcement of the hour, and being capable of counting back in order to determine the time, though some of the strokes occurred with only the subconscious mind to account for them. In *Enduring Love*, this mental faculty helps Joe become aware of his fear, and he is catapulted into considering his own emotional journey in time.

Though the initial parts of both stories discussed in this chapter are the most important and intense, it is by exploring them and the resulting plots via different techniques relating to time that McEwan effectively conveys to readers an understanding of the trauma that has been experienced by Stephen and Joe and their loved ones. And it is by exploring this journey in time in the narrative that the protagonists are able to escape the tragedies that have befallen them at the start. The narratives must come full circle before the characters' lives can really continue, and this is another sort of alternate future made possible by the closure of the emotional journey in time. Bergson writes:

Now, if some bold novelist, tearing aside the cleverly woven curtain of our conventional ego, shows us under this appearance of logic a fundamental absurdity, under this juxtaposition of simple states an infinite permeation of a thousand different impressions which have already ceased to exist the instant they are named, we commend him for having known us better than we knew ourselves. This is not the case, however, and the very fact that he spreads out our feeling in a homogeneous time, and expresses its elements by words, show that he in his turn is only offering us its shadow: but he has arranged this shadow in such a way as to make us suspect the extraordinary and illogical nature of the object which projects it; he has made us reflect by giving outward expression to something of that contradiction, that interpenetration, which is the very essence of the elements expressed. Encouraged by him, we have put aside for an instant the veil which we interposed between our consciousness and ourselves. He has brought us back into our own presence (TFW 133-4).

Though what McEwan offers in the way of storytelling about the human emotional experience of time may only be a "shadow" according to Bergson, it is still presented at enough angles with regards to the heterogeneity of time as perceived by human

consciousness so as to convince any reader that the story is a sincere one; he or she cannot help but be affected by it and by the various interpretations and applications of temporal possibility.

## **2.1 Rushdie: *Midnight's Children*, *The Moor's Last Sigh* and *Grimus***

Having explored two of McEwan's novels in terms of techniques used to create different experiences of time with reference to Bergson's philosophy of time, in this chapter several of Salman Rushdie's novels will undergo a similar comparison and examination. In Rushdie's case, however, the discussion will start with more of a contrast to the previous approach garnered from Bergson; for often, rather than endowing time in his novels with overlapping or permeating qualities in the lives of his characters, Rushdie uses time in a disjointed and often explicitly metaphorical manner. Instead of allowing time to infuse his narrative in ways that lead readers to understand it to have qualities relative to human experience and consciousness in the world outside his fiction, Rushdie at first glance divides time up and gives it attributes of the marvellous and supernatural. Rushdie himself writes regarding the connection of *Midnight's Children* to Proust. As the novel developed, however, Rushdie changed his purpose:

When I began [*Midnight's Children*] (as I've written elsewhere) my purpose was somewhat Proustian. Time and migration had placed a double filter between me and my subject [...] But as I worked I found that what interested me was the process of filtration itself. So my subject changed, was no longer a search for lost time, had become the way in which we remake the past to suit our present purposes, using memory as our tool.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> The excerpt of Rushdie's comment comes from an interview in *Salman Rushdie: Midnight's Children/The Satanic Verses; A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*, ed. David Smale (Cambridge: Icon, 2001) 73.

While initially Rushdie's goal may have been to give a new examination to the "search for lost time," the thematic changes he made give the opportunity to see an evolving understanding of Bergson's ideas. When Rushdie does give time the opportunity to overlap in a way related to Bergson's conception of time in human experience, there is more a sense of a palimpsest of time being created, where time is a persuasive force that aims to push the past out of its way, or cover it over completely. Indeed, the containment and even destruction of time figures largely in the works to be considered in this chapter. In particular, Rushdie uses various symbols and objects to organize and represent boundaries for his conception of the passage of time in a character's life, or similarly for the division and containment of the three parts of time: past, present and future. Rushdie uses the concrete objects of a trunk, pickle jars, and a broken clock-tower to effectively contain the past and assist in ordering the present for his characters in *Grimus* (1975), *Midnight's Children* (1984) and *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1997). For Rushdie, time is also critical in the sense of a narratorial urgency that he builds upon in each of his novels. The author has a common tendency to give his narrators a deadline for their written perambulations, prodding his story-teller to commit the tale to paper before his body crumbles under the strain of the passing days, as in *Midnight's Children*, or perhaps physically ceases to function because of an internal clock that runs on double-time, as in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Explored here are some of Rushdie's uses of the images of containers for the partitioning of time, as well as the physical object of the clock as ordering time in a larger sense than tracking the hour.

The novel by Rushdie that is most grounded in an awareness of the clock is *Midnight's Children*. The core premise of the story is that 1001 children in India are born in the hour after the stroke of midnight when the country gains her independence from Britain, on 15 August 1947. India is thus reborn herself, and the 581 "midnight's children" who survive until their tenth birthdays possess extraordinary and varied supernatural gifts. The

closer to midnight the birth, that is, the nominally older the child, the stronger and more incredible powers she possesses. The narrator of the novel, Saleem Sinai, was born at the exact instant the nascent country gained her freedom from British rule. R.S. Pathak writes: "right from the beginning, Saleem is conscious of his historical 'centrality.'"<sup>66</sup> He is telepathic, functioning like a radio: able to tune into all of the population of India's thoughts and conversations. Saleem discovers himself capable of convening the other 580 children in his head in a "Midnight Children's Conference," enabling them to communicate with each other and share the wonder of their own existence (MC 247).

It is the mystical power of the hour of midnight which endows the children with their gifts, though in every other respect they are normal Indian children, with religious and social prejudices like their parents which eventually help drive them apart despite the marvellous coincidence of their births, and being tied together by time. Born on the stroke of the hour to an affluent family, Saleem is instantly famous in the newspapers for being the same age as India, to the moment. As Saleem approaches the age of thirty-one, he describes the circumstance of his birth: "And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more ... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came" (MC 3). His own birth acknowledged as synchronous with India's, Saleem also records the importance of his unusual peers: "In fact, all over the new India, the dream we all shared, children were being born who were only partially the offspring of their parents—the children of midnight were also the children *of the time*: fathered, you understand, by history. It can happen. Especially in a country which is itself a sort of dream" (MC 137).

At first remarking on his own birth as though time and the clocks were standing to

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<sup>66</sup> R.S. Pathak, "History and the Individual in the Novels of Rushdie," *Three Contemporary Novelists: Khushwant Singh, Chaman Nahal, Salman Rushdie*, ed. R.K. Dhawan (New Delhi: Classical, 1985) 209.

attention in a “respectful” manner, Saleem is soon postulating that his connection to this particular place and time is more a type of imprisonment. In Saleem’s narrative, Ahmed Sinai, his assumed biological father, is swatted out of the way in favor of an horological paternity in order for the newborn Saleem to be linked permanently to India’s nascence:

A few seconds later, my father broke his big toe; but his accident was a mere trifle when set beside what had befallen me in the benighted moment, because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape (MC 3).

Saleem’s dramatically retrospective story affords the reader knowledge that he was switched at birth by the woman who becomes his *ayah*, Mary Pereira. Determined to prove to her anarchist ex-boyfriend Joseph D’Costa that she is capable of upsetting the precarious balance between social classes in newly independent India, Mary switches name-tags, making a poor motherless infant into a privileged member of the middle class, and dooming another to a life of street poverty when his should have been an easy existence. It is only because of the celebratory confusion induced by the end of time for the outgoing British regime and the new beginning for a self-governing India that Mary has the opportunity to make the switch. This is another way in which Saleem is chained to time along with the rest of the Midnight’s Children, by the circumstance of what he calls his “clock-ridden, crime-stained birth” (MC 4).

*Grimus*, Rushdie’s first published novel, deals with immortality as a core premise, but the interest for the purposes of this discussion lies in the way that people’s bodies and minds can contain the past and be overcome or possessed by it. There are also several examples in the novel of the way that Rushdie uses concrete objects such as a trunk or picture frame to contain the past in a fixed way so that it can be examined by its owner whenever she pleases. In *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, the narrator’s life runs at double-speed, affecting the rate at which he matures and experiences his own present. Palimpsests figure largely in this novel with



regards to art especially, and the re-creation of art as a medium of twisted fantasy as well as truth. In *The Satanic Verses* there are also important themes with regards to palimpsests and understanding the self in time which will be touched upon as appropriate without this analysis becoming overwhelmed by the larger themes of the destruction of time and layering of history and religion taking place in that controversial novel.

In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie draws a parallel between British India's days being numbered and Saleem's need to fill the pickle jars of his personal history before his own days run out because of the increasing decrepitude that disrupts and will ultimately stop his writing process. Thus the first section of this chapter will discuss the sense of narratorial urgency present in *Midnight's Children* as well as *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Bergson questioned if it would be possible to tell from an internal vantage point whether the processes of the universe quickened in pace the way that the lives of these narrators have been artificially sped up (a fact they are very aware of). Also the sense of an accumulation of history is an important issue for Bergson, and for these narrators with a family history to relate. Next a look will be taken at the theme of palimpsests and specifically how this is a different angle on Bergson's ideas about permeating moments and overlapping impressions in human experiences in time. In the following section an angling away from Bergson's ideas will develop as Rushdie's frequent themes of dividing time into physical objects such as trunks, pickle jars, and even the human body will be discussed. This containment of time will be further examined with reference to clocktowers in particular, whether reliable or not. The final section will take a playful look at the ways in which Rushdie's unique uses of time in all three novels under examination are fantastic from a storytelling and history-interpreting (and history-distorting) point of view.

## 2.2 Narratorial Urgency

In both *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh* there is a sense of narratorial urgency that plays an important role in the pace of the stories. Each narrator, Saleem Sinai and Moraes 'Moor' Zogoiby, respectively, has a reason for hurrying their storytelling pace. Saleem perceives that he has a finite amount of time to tell his tale, because his entire body has begun to crack and split apart as though it is a vessel of the past about to spill its contents.<sup>67</sup> If he does not divide up the story and preserve it carefully, it will escape him entirely, and cause his death besides.<sup>68</sup> Moor tells the story of his entire life passing at double-speed, from spending only four and a half months in the womb, to appearing 70 at the chronological age of 35. According to his story, everything happens to Moor twice as fast as it would in the life of any normal person. Hutchens writes: "in every novel the age of a character, his place on the time-line between birth and death, is of the utmost importance, and the kind of truth that is revealed to and by him and the manner of its revelation must have something to do with his age."<sup>69</sup> Saleem and Moor are both writing under an extreme deadline and know that the terminus of their stories will likely coincide with their own deaths.<sup>70</sup> This section will explore the physical effects of time passing so as to brutally affect

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<sup>67</sup> Childs writes: "as a metonym for India, the world's largest democracy, Saleem is fragmenting into 630 million pieces, one for each member of the population, as the country falls into Mrs Gandhi's Emergency of 1975-77" (188). This dissertation is not concerned with giving a complete historical context for Rushdie's fiction, but Childs' remark concerning the significance of number and Saleem's disintegration is relevant considering the attention given to the number of children born at midnight in the novel: 1001, and the number of pickle jars into which Saleem divides his story: 31, one for each year of his life and impending death.

<sup>68</sup> On the point that the story will cause his death, Sabrina Hassumani writes: "But before he comes to his fragmented end, Rushdie has Saleem retell his story, and through memory, recreate a version of history that privileges complexity and ambiguity. The techniques Rushdie uses (giving us 'erroneous' historical information, telling the story in fragments, exposing the process of remembering and retelling) result in exposing 'history' as a hybrid construct." The "hybrid" nature of the history that Rushdie portrays in his fiction is not a topic under discussion in this dissertation, but there is no doubt that the account is high in "complexity and ambiguity." Sabrina Hassumani, *Salman Rushdie: A Postmodern Reading of His Major Works* (London: Associated UP, 2002) 39.

<sup>69</sup> Hutchens 60.

<sup>70</sup> Pathak writes about this narratorial obsession with defining personal temporal placement as the sum of past events and actions coming together to equal something greater in the present, as well as Rushdie's placement of

the physical persons of these two narrators. The theme of time as a destructive force in Rushdie's work is pervasive. The physical deterioration of Moor and Saleem is just the beginning. Saleem watches himself coming apart over time and knows he must hurry to tell his tale:

I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug—that my poor body, singular, unlovely, buffeted by too much history, subjected to drainage above and drainage below, mutilated by doors, brained by spittoons, has started coming apart at the seams. In short, I am literally disintegrating, slowly for the moment, although there are signs of acceleration" (MC 37).

Saleem lends importance to the telling of his tale as well as the greatness of the forces of history that his saga must include—of his family as well as his country—by stating early in his narrative that his body, as a container of time past, is failing. He muses about the "finite quantity of time at my disposal" (MC 39). Without any time to spare, Saleem is quick to launch into the main body of his tale, distracting both the reader and himself from the strange disease that seems to be wasting his body. It is at the end of his story, and as his life draws to a close, that Saleem again considers the rate at which his body is failing him. He must complete his story lest the end come too soon. He writes: "Tomorrow. Or the day after. The cracks will be waiting for August 15<sup>th</sup>. There is still a little time: I'll finish tomorrow" (MC 546). In keeping with the symbolism of time throughout the novel, August 15<sup>th</sup> is the anniversary of India's independence from Britain, as well as Saleem's birthday, of course. Emptied of his tale at last, Saleem wonders at what is happening to him:

And now there is rip tear crunch, and a stench issuing through the fissures, which must be the smell of death. Control: I must retain control as long as possible [...] now that I can, I swear, see the cracks on the backs of my hands, cracks along my hair line and between my toes, why do I not bleed? Am I already so emptied desiccated pickled? Am I already the mummy of myself? (MC 550).

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great worth on the past, quoting T.S. Eliot: "The historical sense, T.S. Eliot remarks, 'involves a perception, not only of the past, but of its presence.' This consciousness of history, he adds, is 'a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, making a person genuinely 'conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.' Rushdie does not minimize the value of the past" (216).

Because Saleem is connected with history at such an implicit level, once he has come to the end of the telling of the role he and others connected to him have played in this section of history, he has drained himself entirely and has nothing left inside to ooze out through the perceived splitting of his very skin. By expelling his past from his body and memory into sectioned story form, Saleem has given everything away, and feels that he has reached the end. He wonders how to finish off the story, and realizes he must predict the future, the next segment of his timeline. And so Saleem describes his own approaching death in a chaotic, Joycean disjointed manner, from his impending 31<sup>st</sup> birthday, and scheduled marriage to his companion Padma, to his destruction from within by the forces of memory and history.<sup>71</sup> The narrative quickly disintegrates into an extended single sentence consisting of a series of images and people from the novel, unfolding from a countdown that leads to the end. Heralded by a countdown at the start, Saleem predicts his life ending in similar fashion:

I am being buffeted right and left while rip tear crunch reaches its climax, and my body is screaming, it cannot take this kind of treatment any more, but now I see familiar faces in the crowd, they are all here [...] they throng around me pushing shoving crushing, and the cracks are widening, pieces of my body are falling off [...] there is a countdown ticktocking to midnight [...] cracking now, fission of Saleem, I am the bomb in Bombay, watch me explode, bones splitting breaking beneath the awful pressure of the crowd, bags of bones falling down down down [...] only a broken creature spilling pieces of itself into the street, because I have been so-many too-many persons, life unlike syntax allows one more than three, and at last somewhere the striking of a clock, twelve chimes, release (MC 551-2).

Saleem pictures himself crushed beneath the “throng” of the people and places that have made up his life, those things which he has spent so much time and care releasing into the story. They now overwhelm him and he comes apart completely, trampled by a whirlwind stampede of the entire population of India of some six hundred million people. The story

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<sup>71</sup> I am particularly thinking of Joyce's *Ulysses* here and a number of sections where the narrative is so chaotic that it becomes nearly unintelligible.

finishes with a countdown into chaos and a disparaging view of the connection of all of India's children to the destructive forces of history.<sup>72</sup>

It is only as Saleem nears the age of 31 that his body begins to give out on him and he is convinced that his undoing nears; thus he records his story before it literally finishes him. In *The Moor's Last Sigh* it is the entire life of the narrator that is impacted by the unusual and specific nature of his own internal time: Moor's body clock ticks at double speed.<sup>73</sup> Rushdie uses here the physical body of his narrator as the vessel for time experienced in fast forward. Moor records: "*I am going through time faster than I should. Do you understand me? Somebody somewhere has been holding down the button marked 'FF', or, to be more exact, 'X2'. Reader, listen carefully, take in every word, for what I write now is the simple and literal truth. I, Moraes Zogoiby, known as Moor, am [...] a man living double-quick*" (MLS 143). Interestingly, Bergson gives brief attention to the question of whether science would be able to tell if everything in the universe were happening two or three times as fast as it does now. He writes:

That the interval of duration itself cannot be taken into account by science is proved by the fact that, if all the motions of the universe took place twice or thrice as quickly, there would be nothing to alter either in our formulae or in the figures which are to be found in them. Consciousness would have an indefinable and as it were qualitative impression of the change, but the change would not make itself felt outside consciousness, since the same number of simultaneities would go on taking place in space.<sup>74</sup>

Bergson concludes that science would not be able to determine or even notice if physical processes were happening in half the amount of time they do now. However, the human consciousness, he declares, would notice that something has changed, as the philosophical

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<sup>72</sup> Rushdie's first published novel, *Grimus*, also ends with the undoing of time in a swirling vortex of unmade reality, not just for one individual, but for all.

<sup>73</sup> There is another coincidence of birth that Moor and Saleem share along with their difficult relationship with time passing in the bodily sense. Moor is born on New Year's Day, the first of the year, while Saleem is of course born in the first hour of India's independence; these narrators are thus uniquely qualified within their generations to share their stories.

<sup>74</sup> Bergson, *Time* 116.

mind can pick up on environmental cues that science is still unable to understand completely or even to register. Moor's body is a single physical instance of one component of the universe that has been set on fast forward while the rest of the world continues in normal time and thus the difference is quite noticeable. Moor gives great attention to this fact, and laments it at length. It seems unfair that Moor should be singled out to mature twice as rapidly as everyone and everything around him, yet it is an integral part of Rushdie's novel. Rushdie's narrators are nothing if not singled out for particular and curious misfortunes that qualify them to tell their unique and bizarre family tales.

The nature of Moor's condition requires him to be exceptionally aware of how he uses the remainder of the time allotted to him: "I'll say it again: from the moment of my conception, like a visitor from another dimension, another time-line, I have aged twice as rapidly as the old earth and everything and everyone thereupon" (MLS 144). As Moor grows, develops, and fails to mature mentally as his aging appearance suggests he should, this "double-quick" existence takes a toll on everyone around him, besides causing considerable confusion in his own mind: "Four and a half months from conception to birth: how could my two-timing evolution have given my mother anything but the most difficult of pregnancies?" (MLS 144). Despite common sense suggesting that a half-length pregnancy would result in a child unprepared to enter the world, Moor writes: "Premature? Post-mature is much more like it. Four and a half months in the wet and slimy felt much too long to me. From the beginning – from before the beginning – I knew I had no time to waste" (MLS 144). This awareness, "from before the beginning," of the abnormally short period of time allotted himself forces Moor to be overly conscious of the passing time, once he gets past the childhood conviction that there is all the time in the world to be carefree and unselfconscious.

During his childhood, Moor is impatient to catch up with himself physically, for example being introduced to sexual rites at what would normally be considered an obscenely

early age. As a youth, it seems to him imperative that he live out his 'childhood' as quickly as possible, in order to get to the adult adventures he feels sure await him as a mature young man. Still, Moor has an ongoing sense of his own mortality, and an awareness of how this rush to get through his early years will impact his later ones; all his years are in short supply, and even as a mentally immature child flailing in an adult body he appreciates the time he has because he can never forget that the clock is constantly menacing his advancement through life. Moor details his progress: "By the age of seven-and-a-half I had entered adolescence, developing face-fuzz, an adam's apple, a deep bass voice and fully-fledged male sexual organs and appetites; at ten, I was a child trapped in the six-foot-six body of a twenty-year-old giant, and possessed, from these early moments of self-consciousness, by a terror of running out of time" (MLS 152). Moor's original seducer, his private tutor-ess, Dilly Hormuz, makes him eager to grow into his body, as she shows him how to use the unwieldy hormone-filled contraption no eight year-old should have to be in control of. Once past this adolescent phase of infatuation, however, Moor's awareness of the clock is renewed and he feels differently about the life that is running away from him in fast-forward. A more serious, adult love convinces him the time he has left should be savored rather than tossed away like the childhood fascination he had with Dilly:

With what hunger and rage I yearned to slow down the too-fast ticking of my unheeding internal clock! Dilly Hormuz never shook in me the child's conviction of his own immortality, which was why I could wish so lightly to throw away my childhood years. But Uma, my Uma, when I loved her, make me hear Death's lightning footsteps as they ran towards me; then, O then, I heard each lethal scything of his blade (MLS 192).

By forcing his narrator to face the truth of his truncated time-line, Rushdie imposes on the reader a sense of the imperative nature of the story. The amount of time that Moor has to live his life is only half of the natural span of the reader, who with the inevitable comparison thus feels some measure of sympathy and continues to empathize throughout the fiction.

Moor writes:

I turned seventy on New Year's Day 1992, at the age of thirty-five. Always an ominous landmark, the passing of the Biblical span, all the more so in a country where life-expectancy is markedly lower than the Old Testament allows; and in the case of yrs. truly, to whom six months consistently did a full year's damage, the moment had a special, extra piquancy (MLS 339).

Aware of his audience and convinced that the fascination he holds for his internal clock's movements has captivated the attention of his listeners, Moor is feeling sorry for himself and continues to draw attention to his state. When writing about his life being lived at a double-time pace, Moor conducts an interior conversation that the reader is privy to. Since no one can truly empathize with what Moor is experiencing, he has to internalize the discussion of how his experience is affecting him. He writes:

Speaking for myself, at this late hour? Just about managing, thanks for asking; though old, old, old before my time. You could say I lived too fast, and like a marathon runner collapsing because he failed to pace himself, like a suffocating astronaut who danced too merrily on the Moon, in my overheated years I used up a full lifespan's air-supply. O wastrel Moor! To spend, in just thirty-six years, your allotment of threescore-and-twelve (MLS 53).

At the time of actually recording his tale, Moor is at the very end of his life.<sup>75</sup> It is a very real fear that he will not finish his work before his body gives out on him. He despairs:

*I did not have very long to live. That plain truth hung behind my eyelids in letters of fire whenever I went to sleep; it was the first thing I thought of when I awoke. So you made it to today. Will you still be here tomorrow?* It's true, my squeamish, impatient friend: ignominious and unheroic as it may be to say so, I had commenced living with the minute-by-minute fear of death (MLS 340).

Addressing the reader as someone who cannot understand what it is like to be afraid of death approaching "double-quick," as the narrator records, the concept of time as a freakishly speeded up force contained in Moor's body is reinforced. Moor's flow of time as an individual is a malevolent thing, an uncontrollable, irreversible energy that will not leave his body until it ceases to function as a living entity:

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<sup>75</sup> Just as Saleem is at the end of his life as he hurriedly records his story in *Midnight's Children*.



I felt like a back number; born too fast, born wrong, damaged, and growing old too quickly, turning brutal along the route. Now my face was turned towards the past, towards the loss of love. When I looked forward, I saw Death waiting there. Death, whom Abraham continued effortlessly to cheat, might harvest the son in the immortal father's place (MLS 344).

Moor's frustration here manifests itself in directed resentment toward his father Abraham, with whom time has been patient and gentle. Narratorial frustration with the unfair lot dealt by nature in comparison to one's own family members gives more energy to the storyline. By giving his narrators a physical deadline, Rushdie lends his fictions a large degree of urgency, holding the attention of the reader tightly. A story is more interesting if it can be told only once, and only at this moment in the present. Any delay means the tale will be lost to time and posterity. This theme of the destruction of time is larger than simply concerning the physical bodies of the characters; it permeates inanimate presences in the novels, and connects with religious understandings of eternity as well in *The Satanic Verses*. This theme of the demolition of time will be discussed in the final section. Next a look will be taken at the manner in which they are layered in his different works to add depth to plotlines and to disorient characters in time, placing them outside of the present and into the past or future in various ways.

### 2.3 Palimpsests of Time

*Midnight's Children* opens with the past and the future converging. The old boatman, Tai, rows toward Saleem's grandfather and represents the past, while the place he has come to carry Aadam Aziz to is his future, across the water.<sup>76</sup> As in *Grimus*, water connects

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<sup>76</sup> Ashutosh Banerjee writes about Rushdie's method of presenting a convergence of times in a single symbol or character: "Sometimes [Rushdie] anticipates certain events through a kind of foreshortening achieved by tantalising bunching of past, present and future events through riddle-like references—the element in common

different points in time. Saleem writes of his grandfather that like all Kashmiri men, Aadam is able to see things with his eyes (which are “the astonishing blue of mountain sky”) that other men cannot see. As Tai approaches, Aadam sees “there! like the skeleton of a ghost, just beneath the surface of Lake Dal! – the delicate tracery, the intricate crisscross of colorless lines, the cold waiting veins of the future” (MC 7). That icon of Aadam’s past, Tai, is scornful of what Aadam is in the process of becoming, a Western-style doctor. Between the contempt of the “dilapidated boatman” and the strange unhappy union that will result from the visits of the young doctor to a wealthy landowner’s daughter with her mysterious illnesses, the future is “cold” (MC 8). Saleem writes: “Tai is getting nearer. He [...] who is now bringing my grandfather the message which will catapult him into his future, is stroking the shikara through the early morning lake” (MC 9). Aadam waits on the shore of his past, with his present lapping at the edges in the form of the water, waiting to serve as the medium for transporting him to his future. In *Midnight’s Children* (as well as *The Moor’s Last Sigh*) reflections on connections to the past create a layered historical narrative that Saleem sifts through in order to divide it all into neatly contained parts, represented by pickle jars, as will be explored in the next section.

*Grimus* is concerned with potentialities in time more than the concrete convergence of the past and future as in the example above from *Midnight’s Children*. Multiple different times and their selected inhabitants come together on Calf Island, a potential alternate reality composed of mixed up and overlapping time. Virgil Jones is Flapping Eagle’s guide to Calf Island. In trying to explain how it is possible for the island to exist, Virgil says to Flapping Eagle:

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being just such a fortuitous image or object” (203). Banerjee uses as an example a different encounter with Tai, when Saleem the narrator sees in the boatman’s brandy bottle the foretelling of his father’s struggle with alcoholism.

Ashutosh Banerjee, “Narrative Technique in *Midnight’s Children*,” *Three Contemporary Novelists: Khushwant Singh, Chaman Nahal, Salman Rushdie*, ed. R.K. Dhawan (New Delhi: Classical, 1985) 194-205.

‘Here we all are, a world of living beings and inanimate objects and gusts of breeze, all of us composed of infinitely more empty space than solid matter. Is it not a conceptual possibility that here, in our midst, permeating all of us and all that surrounds us, is a completely other world, composed of different kinds of solids, different kinds of empty spaces, with different perceptual tools which make us as non-existent to its inhabitants as they are to ours? In a word, another dimension’ (52).

Virgil continues: “‘If you concede that conceptual possibility,’ said Mr Jones, ‘you must also concede that there may well be more than one. In fact, that an infinity of dimensions might exist, as palimpsests, upon and within and around our own, without our being in any wise [sic.] able to perceive them’” (G 52-53). It is fortunate that Virgil has all this figured out, because Flapping Eagle is baffled after “he fell through the hole in the Mediterranean into that other sea, that not-quite-Mediterranean, and was carried towards the misty beach in the first light of dawn” (G 37). Their conversation continues, after Flapping Eagle has recovered enough to learn what circumstances and laws of reality make this possible:

‘Perhaps you have come across the theory of potential existences,’ continued Virgil Jones affably. ‘So suppose there were, say, merely four potential past and futures for the Mediterranean Sea. In one of them, there never was nor will be an island such as this. In another the island existed but no longer does. In a third the island does not exist but will at some time in the future. And in the future...he gestured around him...it has existed; and continues to do so.’

He allowed a brief dramatic pause.

‘The dimensions come in several varieties, you see,’ he said. ‘There are a million possible Earths with a million possible histories, all of which actually exist simultaneously. In the course of one’s daily life, one weaves a course between them, if you like, but that does not destroy the existence of pasts or futures we choose not to enter. What has happened to you is that you have fallen into a different historical continuum, in which Calf Island, and all of us, have our being. The place you came from knows nothing of us’ (53).

The different dimensions are layered over each other and an individual normally participates in his native one, but it is possible, here in the world of the narrative, to pass between them if one has some special relationship or knowledge of these multiple realities. Thus the fiction has a selection of potential pasts and futures depending on which reality a character is occupying. A palimpsest of times has been created in the story of *Grimus*, and manifested in the locality of Calf Island.

In *The Satanic Verses* and *The Moor's Last Sigh* temporal palimpsests are more localized in the fiction, rather than being integral to the whole premise of the novel as in *Grimus*. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Moor's artist-mother Aurora uses her art as a way of representing the plurality of India in a multi-layered, idealized way, seeing the present state of the country and the possible evolution of the future. Joel Kuortti writes: "The palimpsest nature of narrative reality comes through very clearly in descriptions of Aurora's paintings."<sup>77</sup> Again there is the leit-motif in Rushdie's work of water dividing different times and connecting the present to a possible future, as mentioned in connection with *Midnight's Children* and *Grimus*. In the first of her 'true' Moor painting series (Aurora uses her son Moor as a model for years, and later he is the inspiration for the evolution of more complex paintings), she depicts two worlds divided: one under water and one on dry land, and creates various contradictions between them:

At the water's edge strange composite creatures slithered to and fro across the frontier of the elements. Often she painted the water-line in such a way as to suggest that you were looking at an unfinished painting which had been abandoned, half-covering another. But was it a waterworld being painted over the world of air, or vice versa? Impossible to be sure.

Aurora tells her son: "Call it Mooristan ... watchtowers and towers of silence too. Place where worlds collide, flow in and out of one another, and wash off away ... One universe, one dimension, one country, one dream, bumpo'ing into another, or being under, or on top of it. Call it Palimpsestine."<sup>78</sup> The separation or confusion between worlds is crucial. It is "the water's edge, the dividing line between two worlds, [that] became in many of these pictures

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<sup>77</sup> Joel Kuortti, *Fictions to Live in: Narration as an Argument for Fiction in Salman Rushdie's Novels*, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1998) 203.

<sup>78</sup> Of this particular exchange between Aurora and Moor, Mark Wormald writes: "It is the function of Moraes's [sic.] extended first-person narrative, co-extensive with the novel rather than contained within it, to ensure that the power endures, and thus to argue a larger case: that such mingled images, confused but familiar metaphors of creativity, are capable of renewing perspectives on the future and the past not just of any one novel or novelist's world but of fiction itself" (200).

Mark Wormald, "Uses of Impurity: Salman Rushdie and Jeanette Winterson," *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction*, ed. Rod Mengham (Cambridge: Polity, 1999) 182-202.

the main focus of her concern” (MLS 226).<sup>79</sup> Later, in frustration after the death of her eldest daughter, Aurora “painted a Moor painting in which the line between land and sea had ceased to be a permeable frontier. Now she painted it as a harshly-delineated zig-zag crack, into which the land was pouring along with the ocean” (MLS 235). Moor writes that along with her maternal grief, Aurora is reacting against what she sees as the terrible future India is headed for, a place where the dreams, the mystery, and the potential futures that the country could achieve in various wondrous directions go hurtling into a possibility-swallowing “abyss” (MLS 236). No longer does Aurora believe in the potentiality of the palimpsest, in uncovering the magical in Indian life. Her dream of “Palimpstine” has come undone.

Looking at the same section of the novel, Damian Grant writes: “as is implied here, the idea of the palimpsest provides a key to the novel: both the literal palimpsest (exemplified by Aurora’s painting ‘The Moor’s Last Sigh’) and the metaphorical palimpsest, as a ‘layering’ or re-presentation or disguise of any other kind.”<sup>80</sup> Grant uses as an example for this latter type, the constant reinvention in time of Moor’s father, Abraham Zogoiby: “So [Abraham] was beginning to paint a new layer over his own past [...] and as a father, too, age had painted a palimpsest-image over the memory of the man who had hugged my newborn form and wept comforting words” (MLS 241). Rising from “humble origins” to control a business empire, it benefits Abraham to keep others unaware of his roots; he allows time and some simple deceptions to cloud the connection between his past and his present. Rushdie’s characters often recreate themselves, attempting to erase their own pasts with a superimposed new surface layer.

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<sup>79</sup> While discussing *The Satanic Verses* and *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, Stephen Baker writes: “the contingency of all truths, selves and histories is both cause for lament [...] and a precondition of art’s ability to show us the truth; this time a truth about truths, and the tricks they perform with mirrors” (155). Aurora as an artist does her best to portray metaphorical truths about the socio-political landscape of modern-day India, as though holding up a modified mirror (symbolized by water, perhaps) to her country’s faults.

Stephen Baker, “Salman Rushdie: History, Self and the Fiction of Truth,” *Contemporary British Fiction*, eds. Richard J Lane, Rod Mengham and Philip Tew (Cambridge: Polity, 2003) 145-157.

<sup>80</sup> Damian Grant, *Salman Rushdie* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1999) 117.

Aurora's lover and fellow artist Vasco Miranda feels enough of an obsession with Aurora's palimpsest-themed work to recreate one of her worlds on a life-size scale for his own fanatical ends. Moorish Spain serving as one of her principal influences, it is in Benengeli, Spain, where Vasco settles to build his vulgar fantasy world. One day after starting to develop an infamous reputation with the media regarding her unusual and often shocking paintings, Aurora presents Moor with a one way ticket to Spain and a passport with a Spanish visa. She tells him to renew it every year, in case he ever needs to flee India and the regime-shaking politics that are undermining the security his wealthy family has enjoyed. Aurora tells Moor to "go find Palimpstine" (MLS 235). The time comes when Moor's story indeed takes him on a journey to Spain, which is itself a trip in time for Moor, on his first flight ever:

'I feel as if I have slipped in time,' I told the friendly stewardess some while later. 'But whether into the future or the past, I cannot say.'

'Many passengers feel that way,' she reassured me. 'I tell them, it is neither. The past and future are where we spend most of our lives. In fact, what you are going through in this small microcosmos of ours is the disorientating feeling of having slipped for a few hours into the present' (MLS 381).

In Umberto Eco's *The Island of the Day Before*, it is possible to swim into the past.<sup>81</sup> Here it is possible to fly into the present, as though it is a position outside of time that it is not normally possible to be a part of. On his way to track down Vasco and the Palimpstine he has created, Moor feels unmoored from his own connection to time. The flight attendant, at the start of their strange interlude, bolsters Moor's comfort level and then disappears, again unnerving Moor. He travels to Benengeli and wonders at this strange town with its timeless qualities: "Physically, too, I felt as if I were in some sort of interregnum, in some timeless zone under the sign of an hourglass in which the sand stood motionless, or a clepsydra whose quicksilver had ceased to flow" (MLS 404). Many foreigners find their way to Benengeli in

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<sup>81</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Island of the Day Before*, trans. William Weaver (London: Secker & Warburg-Reed 1995).

order to lose themselves in time, it seems to Moor. It is a place where time stands still and the past recedes. There is an interval before Moor can find a way to investigate Vasco's hideaway estate, and he writes: "if the stories I'd heard were to be believed, it was a true Palimpsest, in which his present bitter wrath lay curdling over the memory of an old, lost sweetness and romance" (MLS 409). Moor soon discovers that the result is a place where Aurora is both recalled as a living artistic force, and murdered once again in the irony of a place fashioned after her vision yet vulgarly twisted in its interpretation.

For Rushdie, that most everyday modern keeper of hours, the clock, has different faces of meaning that can be reinterpreted seemingly endlessly. *The Moor's Last Sigh* moves inexorably, keeping pace alongside Morae Zogoiby's preternaturally accelerated inner clock, toward a final confrontation in a location where time has stopped in its tracks. Moor speaks to one resident of that strange town of Benengeli who says: "Aren't you listening? They say that everything inside that house has grown stagnant; everything. They wind up the clocks but time doesn't move. The great tower has been locked up for years" (MLS 393). Entering Vasco's domain, Moor is amazed as he wanders through gardens and rooms at the success Vasco has had in recreating Aurora's painted landscapes. He expects them to be peopled by her monstrous creations, moving between land and sea and generating their own contradictions as they overlap and interact with each other. It is not long, however, before Moor starts to notice a shabbiness and dilapidation throughout, and a crassness that betrays the counterfeiting of Aurora's ideas: "For there was something sour here, some envy in the brilliance of the emulation; and as the first shock of recognition wore off, and the day rose up, I began to see the flaws in the grand design" (MLS 409). Moor accuses Vasco of trying to "build my mother's imaginative world around you, to use it like a fig-leaf to hide your own inadequacies" in another layering application to character (MLS 411). The truth emerges despite the effort made at hiding what lies beneath. The final revelation of the palimpsest in

the novel is Aurora's painting of *The Moor's Last Sigh* over the portrait of her murderer. Vasco tells the disbelieving Moor: "if she was killed, she said, she wanted the murderer brought to book. So she had concealed his portrait under her work in progress. Get the picture X-rayed, she said to me, and you will see my killer's face." Moor writes bitterly: "so here, at last, in this time of mirages, this place of sleights, was a simple fact." Looking at the X-rays: "There was no doubt that the canvas was a palimpsest; a full-length portrait could be made out in negative-image segments beneath the surface work" (MLS 416). In shock, Moor recognizes not the villainous Vasco who he was convinced had killed his mother, but his own father. Beneath the many layers in Palimpsest of falsity and fantasy, one truth remains: "The present was a riddle to be solved" (MLS 413). Having uncovered the truth behind Aurora's death, Moor is thrown into Vasco's prison, and as Baker writes: "Moor's survival in Vasco Miranda's fortress is to last the precise duration of the time he takes to write the story of his life."<sup>82</sup> In Vasco's prison, another captive is also spending the remainder of her life, completing the task of exhuming another of Aurora's paintings, a self-portrait. Each painting has "one of [Moor's] parents hidden underneath" (MLS 419). Throughout, *The Moor's Last Sigh* uses the theme of palimpsests to hide the present from the past, or reveal the future in the present. Bergson writes in *Duration and Simultaneity* about passing through time as though it is a series of flat images that are superimposed upon each other as our consciousness traverses them:

I see your 'solid,' as we call it, universe; it is made of the piling up of all your flat images, past, present, and future. I also see your consciousness traveling perpendicularly to these superimposed 'planes,' never taking cognizance of any but the one it crosses, perceiving it as the present, then remembering the one it leaves behind, but ignorant of those which are in front and which enter its present, one at a time, forthwith enriching its past (110).

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<sup>82</sup> Baker 151.



Remembering the 'planes' left behind as time passes creates a layered effect of conscious memory for both Bergson and Rushdie.

## 2.4 Ordering and Containing Time: Trunks, Pickle Jars, & the Human Body

Though the previous section detailed a number of examples in Rushdie's works where layering is used to obfuscate and add sophistication to recountings of personal history, this investigation now turns to a less subtle and much clearer method for dealing with time. Rushdie often organizes and contains time in certain significant physical objects so that the created boundaries enable the characters to handle time (the past, as well as memory) in their own lives.<sup>83</sup> In *Grimus* and *Midnight's Children* trunks contain the past; in *The Moor's Last Sigh* they can contain the future as well. In *The Satanic Verses* and most notably *Midnight's Children*, time contained in towers and clocktowers is something remarkable, with a stolen quality to it. And in *Midnight's Children*, Saleem is particularly concerned with dividing the years of his life into a series of pickle jars. He writes: "I spend my time at the great work of preserving. Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks." By carefully placing each year of his life into a single glass pickle jar, Saleem is mentally able to deal with the output of history his body insists on expunging; as he labours over his great project "history pours out of my fissured body" (MC 38). Trunks, clocktowers, and pickle jars are not the only objects capable of containing time; the human body does as well, and various other small devices, as shall be explored.

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<sup>83</sup> A. Banerjee remarks on several objects as symbols of particular times and connections other than the ones I will focus on in this section: "Prime Minister Jawaharlal's letter to Saleem, Saleem's umbilical cord preserved in brine [...] the spittoon and the washing chest are only a few among innumerable objects which Rushdie uses repeatedly and obsessively sometimes literally as objects, at others, as symbols binding together people and situations otherwise widely apart in time and space" (202-203).

As a physical object capable of both containing and freezing time, Rushdie utilizes trunks in *Grimus* and *The Moor's Last Sigh* as well as *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie habitually creates characters who are inordinately conscious of time, specifically their own: how much has passed, how much they have wasted, and how much they have left. In *Grimus*, Dolores is an inhabitant of the other-dimensional island whose people are gifted with inconceivable longevity. However, having an eternity to contemplate one's personal history as previously lived in a parallel plane of existence isn't conducive to actually living out the rest of time in any kind of healthy manner; eventually the mind can no longer cope in a rational manner. Dolores, a woman advanced in years and maturity, has dealt with this problem by containing her past within a special trunk, usually keeping it undisturbed, out of the way in her hut. Only occasionally does she feel the need to commune with the past, to approach the trunk and consider what it is exactly that she has given up in order to continue living in her eternal present:

Dolores moved jerkily towards the old trunk that lay unopened in the corner. This is where the past sat locked, her past, unchanged, unchangeable. She sat on the ground and embraced the trunk, whispering to it.

'It is yesterday,' she whispered. 'Every day is yesterday, so every day is fixed' (G 50-51).

Dolores has placed her past, including all of her memories, and thus everything that makes up her life, in this trunk, where she can examine it at her leisure. Seldom opened, the trunk enables Dolores to continue living each day as today, uninhibited by her past which she fears will rise up and consume her if she keeps it within herself. Peter Munz writes: "We can see time in shapes or icons rather than just endure its flow or watch it as a seamless web or an undifferentiated continuum because we employ special methods to watch it." Munz continues: "Without this method, both historian and agent could only stand by and watch,

stupefied, the liquid stream of time rushing past.”<sup>84</sup> It is necessary for Dolores to have her personal history contained within another vessel. When Dolores focuses her attention on the trunk in the corner, she feels a sense of grief at facing the symbol of her past. In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson writes: “Sorrow begins by being nothing more than a facing towards the past, an impoverishment of our sensations and ideas, as if each of them were now contained entirely in the little which it gives out, as if the future were in some way stopped up” (11). By keeping her memories all locked up in the trunk, Dolores can contain the pain of her past life before the island gave her an eternal present. Eventually this practice drives her mad, in line with Bergson’s observation concerning the impoverishment of sensation that limits the mind when contemplating the past and ‘stops up’ the future. The narrative continues:

O, it was a certain thing, the trunk, so ponderous, so cob-webbed, so comforting, the trunk with its long-broken locks, never opened, captor of her life. O, it was a wondrous thing to be so sure, to hold her memories so fast. Open it now and let them flood her, washing her in certainties of days and griefs that could not change a jot. The moving finger writes and having writ moves on. Nor all your tears wash out a word of it. [...] The present is tomorrow’s past, as fixed, as sure, the trunk would tell her so. There, the creak, the weight of the lid lifted, the open gape of time (G 57).

It is reassuring to Dolores to have her past fixed and contained so that she can choose whether or not to focus her attention on it at any given point in time. The past has a forbidden quality, as though it is something not to be looked upon very often.

In *Midnight’s Children* there are consequences for opening the trunk containing the past, even if it is unlocked, like Dolores’. As a child, Saleem is searching for a sheet to play a ghost in a family production and unwittingly discovers the moth-eaten sheet his grandparents had consecrated their marriage upon. This was after it served its original purpose in bringing them together as doctor and patient, forced to carry out their interactions solely through the seven inch hole cut in its centre. It was an “old tin trunk which should have remained

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<sup>84</sup> Peter Munz, *The Shapes of Time: A New Look at the Philosophy of History* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan UP, 1977) 36.

cobwebby and closed” (MC 15). Seeking the right kind of prop for the play, Saleem recalls: “and here on top of this cupboard is an old trunk, covered in dust and spiders, but unlocked. And here, inside it, is the answer to my prayers. Not just a sheet, but one with a hole already cut in it!” (MC 29-30). The sheet Saleem pulls out of the trunk is the key to the past union of his grandparents. The beginning of their entire history together is woven into this single object, sitting in a dusty trunk in Saleem’s grandfather Aadam’s room. There is certainly a strong reaction to the emergence of such a private relic when Saleem parades it on stage in front of the family, and never again is he tempted to search through old unlocked trunks, for he has discovered that the past is a dangerous thing to unwittingly unearth.

When Saleem’s mother Amina leaves home with her new husband, Aadam gives his daughter her dowry in a locked green trunk. It is filled with parts of his past: “a museum in which the exhibits represented illnesses cured and lives saved [...] the locked museum of her father’s achievements” (MC 73). Amina is so focused on her present that the trunk remains locked as she settles into her new life (MC 76). Later, her past is effectively stolen from her “one August morning [...] the house had been burgled [...] what was missing [...] the contents of a green tin trunk” (MC 171). Again, the consequences for meddling with the effective containment of the past are heavy: Musa, the old bearer, is found with the missing items and cursed with leprosy following his own oath that he was not the thief (MC 172).

Describing his father Abraham’s childhood in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, Moor recounts an episode involving a poorly locked trunk of some significance. The contents are important for they tell a history of family shame that his grandmother Flory is dedicated to keeping secret. She has hidden the trunk under the altar of the synagogue she makes a living by taking care of, but her son Abraham discovers the box and picks the lock: “What was in the box? – Why, the only treasure of any value: viz., the past, and the future. Also, however, emeralds” (MLS 78). Apparently contained in the trunk is a set of clues to one possibility of Abraham’s

ancestry and ignominious connections. Piecing together the fairytale past from tattered parchment, emerald crown and silver dagger, Abraham declares himself of mixed Spanish Arab and Jewish ancestry, and leaves his mother distraught to run away with a Portuguese Christian, Aurora, who holds “his future in the palm of her hand” (MLS 86). Thus the box contains the pieces of Abraham’s past and the impetus to spur him to his future in exile from his family as surely as his ancestors were cast out and made to suffer.

Bergson writes about the way that humans experience time as a subtly shifting flow. In creating a method of dividing time and physically containing the past it would seem that Rushdie is reacting against Bergson’s idea of human experience as a continuous flow in the temporal continuum, but what he is really doing is giving his characters, and thus the reader, a different angle on the issue. If a character can open a trunk and look inside at the past, the present becomes like an alternate path of existence; it may slow down, but it doesn’t stop altogether. Alternatively, it may keep flowing as normal, though the character is effectively removed from the action of the plot while absorbed in the past. In an initial exploration of the town of K on Calf Island, Flapping Eagle passes a house: “A glimpse through another window: an old woman gazing at a photograph album, immersed in her past. It is the natural condition of the exile—putting down roots in memories” (G 107). Calf Island itself is identical every day for the physical bodies of the people who live there; the bodily process of aging is stopped forever. As Dolores looks in her trunk, time is contained in her focus on the past. As the woman in the window looks at her photo album, the outside world stops for her as she concentrates on the past. However, the outside world does not stop for everyone else; it is the individual only who experiences time in this slowed down or stopped way. Bergson writes concerning the individual human consciousness and its experience of time, so Rushdie’s application of the possibilities of time being contained in a physical way for sporadic contemplation is handled in a similar manner.

The most evenly divided<sup>85</sup> example of time in these several novels is in *Midnight's Children* when Saleem symbolically fills thirty pickle jars with his personal history, one for each year of his life, but each to include as well important events and connected stories from his family past. At first Saleem himself is like a jar filled with history; he makes it his personal mission to expel the past, one year at a time, into a clearly and simply divided set of glass jars, as represented by the thirty chapters. He writes: "while I sit like an empty pickle jar in a pool of Anglepoised light, visited by this vision of my grandfather sixty-three years ago, which demands to be recorded [...] I seem to have found from somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps in my knowledge, so that everything is in my head, down to the last detail" (MC 14-15). During the day Saleem tends pickles themselves and at night he divides his family story into the glass jars: "And my chutneys and kasaundies are, after all, connected to my nocturnal scribblings by day amongst the pickle-vats, by night within these sheets, I spend my time at the great work of preserving. Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks" (MC 38). The preservation of his own history is Saleem's great task.

On the subject of this division and partitioning of time some questions are eventually raised, and Saleem writes: "time has been an unsteady affair, in my experience, not a thing to be relied upon. It could even be partitioned: the clocks in Pakistan would run half an hour ahead of their Indian counterparts" (MC 89). Despite Saleem's best efforts, he cannot divide his story as evenly and easily as he would like. He writes: "The different parts of my somewhat complicated life refuse, with a wholly unreasonable obstinacy, to stay neatly in

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<sup>85</sup> Mita Banerjee notes that this proclamation of evenly dividing up years of a life into pickle jars (also identified as the physical chapters of the novel) draws the reader in, yet is ultimately a farce; on page 384 Saleem speaks of twenty-six finished chapters/pickle-jars and five left to come, but the book has thirty chapters, not thirty-one, as Saleem does not truly reach his thirty-first year. What Banerjee did not notice was Saleem's own note on page 550 that one jar must remain empty because the future cannot be pickled.

Mita Banerjee, *The Chutnification of History* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2002) 186.

their separate compartments” (MC 224).<sup>86</sup> Saleem also realizes at the end of his story as the forces of history finally threaten to complete the job of tearing his body apart at the seams, that the process of storytelling, like that of pickling, changes the nature of that which is preserved in the glass jars. It is noble, he feels, to make the effort regardless, for the sake of posterity: “One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history” (MC 550). As the task of dividing his years and their relationships to history draws to an end, Saleem muses: “One empty jar [...] how to end? [...] Amid recipes, and thirty jars with chapter-headings for names?” (MC 550). Having described in great detail his personal history and that of his family, Saleem decides: “I shall have to write the future as I have written the past, to set it down with the absolute certainty of a prophet. But the future cannot be preserved in a jar; one jar must remain empty [...] What cannot be pickled, because it has not taken place, is that I shall reach my birthday, thirty-one today” (MC 550). Saleem’s attempt to divide the years of his life into so many pickle jars in an effort to get the past out of his body before it destroys him is finished. This is the most discrete and anti-Bergsonian method of understanding time that Rushdie utilizes in the novels considered here.

More closely related to Bergson are the moments when Rushdie keeps time within his characters rather than a physical object. Virgil Jones keeps the agonies of his past contained within his head rather than in a box or a collection of photos. Only because Flapping Eagle’s need is very great does Virgil unblock his memory construct, his ‘survival mechanism,’ to relearn how to travel between and control the dimensions. Flapping Eagle seemed to be in control himself but now needs help to get out or his mind will be destroyed:

Virgil Jones had shut out his past from his mind. He had come down the mountain and forgotten the blank terrors he had fled. They were still there, locked in his head, but he did not see them.

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<sup>86</sup> Pathak writes of *Midnight’s Children*: “A comprehensive concept of history, like Rushdie’s, would include a composite time comprising past, present and future” (217). This description by Saleem of the difficulty of the process of documenting his personal history demonstrates what a daunting task it would be to create a “composite time” such as Pathak mentions.

Now, for Flapping Eagle's sake, he unlocked the prison and like Pandora's uncontrollable sprites his memory came flooding out, grating painfully upon him as it emerged. He had forgotten the pain. So much had been numb for so long [...]

Virgil Jones had sat for an age, running his thoughts over the agonies of his past (G 74).

Only by reopening himself to his past is Virgil able to come to Flapping Eagle's rescue, agonizing as the exposure to that past clearly is. In order to forget his past, in the early stages of his life on Calf Island, Virgil committed his memory to a journal, and then sacrificed it to his wife Liv Jones, who is obsessed with the past. Thus he could escape his memory and go down the mountain with Dolores, away from the truth. Virgil writes in the journal: "I shall sacrifice you to Liv in propitiation of the gods. She will probably rend you limb from limb or toss you casually aside, as she did me. That is your future. It may help me forget my past" (G 218). Though the journal is a tool that assists Virgil in locking away his memory till need forces him to reopen it, Liv continues building her hatred and obsession upon its contents. Flapping Eagle learns about the history of Calf Island through Virgil's journals, as recited by Liv. She has committed the writing to her memory in centuries of planning her revenge against Grimus, and so Virgil's version of the past is contained within her head. The journal has been the medium of transfer of memory from Virgil's mind to Liv's, to differing ends. Sitting in the dark, listening to threads of truth as they come together, Flapping Eagle understands the role he is playing in the drama, as the physical reincarnation of Grimus, mistaken by everyone at first as the architect of Calf Island and master of the Stone Rose with its reality shaping abilities. Meanwhile, the contents of the journal have affected Liv: "She was different, Flapping Eagle realized. The recitation, the entire rite, had altered her. She spoke slowly now, distantly, as though in some kind of trance. The past had possessed her. And he, Flapping Eagle, had become a part of that past" (G 219). Possessed by the past, Liv



enacts her sexual revenge upon Flapping Eagle, whom she takes for the Spectre of Grimus.<sup>87</sup> The past has become a quality here that a character can feel and interpret, but not control. Returning again to objects that contain time, or fail to control time, the next section will discuss the way in which contained time may similarly not be under conscious control, with destructive results.

## 2.5 Clocks and Towers: The Unreliability of Time

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Moor writes: "my inside and outside have always been out of sync" (162). His mother Aurora just wishes that someone could "fix the poor boy's clock" as it progresses in double-time (MLS 163). Both characters feel that that regulator of time, the clock, is a standard to be emulated and trusted if possible. Moor's body is running a race against the clock at double speed. Saleem, in *Midnight's Children*, is aware that that clock plays tricks; it is not to be trusted. As a narrator he uses time integrally to create tension within his own story, linked as it is to the clock itself. Working up to the story of the birth of the children of midnight, he writes:

Padma can hear it: there's nothing like a countdown for building suspense. I watched my dung-flower at work today, stirring vats like a whirlwind, as if that would make the time go faster. (And perhaps it did; time, in my experience, has been as variable and inconstant as Bombay's electric supply. Just telephone the speaking clock if you don't believe me—tied to electricity, it's usually a few hours wrong. Unless we're the ones who are wrong [...] no people whose word for 'yesterday' is the same as their word for 'tomorrow' can be said to have a firm grip on the time) (MC 123).

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<sup>87</sup> Allowing the past to engulf him earlier in the story, Virgil is able to assist Flapping Eagle as he is stranded in the dimensions. In *The Satanic Verses*, Saladin goes to visit his father at his shrine-like childhood home where nothing has been changed since his mother died and so his father lives each weekend "in the lost world of the past" (SV 64). Approaching, "Saladin felt the past rush in like a tide, drowning him, filling his lungs with its revenant saltiness" (SV 65). These are other examples of being possessed by the past in some way.

Saleem sees time differently from other characters, linked as he is to the clocks from birth. As midnight on 15 August 1947 approaches in his story: “saffron minutes and green seconds tick away on the clocks on the walls” (MC 132). Any kind of human control of time, the kind Saleem can impose by inserting countdowns into his narrative, is lost when one is connected so intrinsically to time. Although “clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came,” Saleem finds himself “mysteriously handcuffed to history” (MC 3). His life is “clock-ridden” and he senses that he is being used by it (MC 4). This loss of control with regard to the clock comes into play in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* as well, when Moor is thrown into prison and he cannot detect time passing: “Tied down in the dark, I had evidently lost all sense of direction and of the passage of time” (MLS 285). The violent imagery with regard to time continues when Moor becomes a small-time fighter, beating his opponents using his deformed hand with metronomic precision, “like time” (MLS 307). He recalls: “to beat a man is a kind of exaltation, a revelatory act, opening strange gates in the universe. Time and space come away from their moorings, their hinges. Chasms yawn. There are glimpses of amazing things. I saw, at times, the past and the future too” (MLS 308). These are points in the characters’ lives when time is a failed device. It is unreliable and uncontrollable, no matter how precise it may sometimes seem.

In *Midnight’s Children*, during the nascence of the narrator, the monsoon season causes irreparable damage to a local clocktower which begins to stand as a symbol of the end of historical time as India approaches her separation from the British Empire. Saleem’s mother, Amina, feels particularly that it is the child within her womb who causes the strange temporary termination of time in her life:

Trapped beneath her growing child, Amina pictured herself as a convicted murderer in Mughal times, when death by crushing beneath a boulder had been a common punishment [...] and in the years to come, whenever she looked back at that time which was the end of the time before she became a mother, that time in which the ticktock of countdown calendars was rushing everyone towards August 15<sup>th</sup>, she

would say: 'I don't know about any of that. To me, it was like time had come to a complete stop. The baby in my stomach stopped the clocks. I'm sure of that. Don't laugh: you remember the clocktower at the end of the hill? I'm telling you, after that monsoon it never worked again (MC 115).

There is a direct connection between the fast-forward relationship to the clock that Moor has in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, and the brief period in Saleem's life in *Midnight's Children* when Amina feels that Saleem grows so fast that there is not enough time to tend to normal infant needs. Before Saleem is old enough to think about or understand the strangeness of his connection with the clock, his mother does the wondering for him:

Amina, remembering how, during her pregnancy, the weight of her unborn child had held time as still as a dead green pond, began to wonder whether the reverse might not be taking place now—whether the baby had some magical power over all the time in his immediate vicinity, and was speeding it up, so that mother-and-ayah never had enough time to do everything that needed doing, so that the baby could grow at an apparently fantastical rate; lost in such chronological daydreams, she didn't notice my problem (MC 146).

During pregnancy time comes to a stop for Amina; after Saleem's birth he seems to grow at double speed. But the clocktower has actually stopped for good, and Amina feels it has something to do with her son. His personal connection with the structure comes closer to adolescence. The broken clocktower is a refuge, a place outside of time, even a destructive force filled with explosives and the venom of snakes. Within the "tower of crippled hours" Saleem is later, as a young boy, able to eavesdrop on any mind that he wishes in all of India (MC 205). It is a hideout from the fourth dimension of reality, and a kind of stolen time. Saleem is able to travel all around the country, seeing the wonders of India without leaving the clocktower where he has chosen to conceal his secret ability and himself.

Unsatisfied with the destruction of time inherent in the terminated functioning of the clocktower, Saleem relates the use of the structure to further the purposes of another kind of demolition: a minor character, devoted to a vendetta against the Indian class system, has filled the tower with bombs. Luckily Joseph D'Costa is found out, and the police 'Inspector'

remarks to Amina: ““You should see the walls inside that clocktower! Shelves, filled from floor to ceiling with home-made bombs. Enough explosive power to blow this hill into the sea!” (MC 174). In Rushdie’s common practice of giving meaning to most connections in the lives of his characters, Joseph D’Costa is the former lover of Saleem’s ayah Mary, the woman (mentioned in the chapter introduction) who switches two of “midnight’s children”—Saleem and Shiva—thereby causing some measure of time-related havoc herself with relation to India’s class system. At the point in the story under discussion, the not-so-subtle connection is made between the destructive power of time and the physical presence of the explosives inside the broken clocktower. Had his mission been successful, D’Costa would have brought time to an end for any of the wealthy inhabitants of the ex-British housing development close in proximity to the area around the otherwise dead tower at the time of detonation. Time is the destroyer of everything; all of human progress will be obliterated eventually, and some characters in fiction take an active role in hastening this effect. Later, Saleem is inspired by the potential disaster: “In that tower which had once been filled choc-à-bloc with the explosive devices of Joseph D’Costa’s hatred, this phrase (accompanied by appropriate ticktock sound effects) plopped fully-formed into my thoughts: ‘I am the bomb in Bombay...watch me explode!’” (MC 207).

The clocktower, useless as it may appear from the outside with its stilled hands, stands sentinel to the time passing independently of it, in the streets and play areas of the children and families below:

What, no longer capable of performing the function for which it is designed, watched over us that year when even the winter forgot to cool down [...] In short, what was it, tall and blue and flaking, which oversaw our lives, which seemed, for a while, to be marking time, waiting not only for the nearby time when we would put on long trousers, but also, perhaps, for the coming of Evie Burns? Perhaps you’d like clues: what had once hidden bombs? In what had Joseph D’Costa died of snake-bite? [...] When, after some months of inner torment, I at last sought refuge from grown-up voices, I found it in an old clocktower, which nobody bothered to lock; and here, in the solitude of rusting time, I paradoxically took my first tentative steps towards that

involvement with mighty events and public life from which I would never again be free (MC 205).

Hours spent in the “solitude of rusting time” are for Saleem a refuge outside of the normal flow of his life: “I began, whenever possible, to creep unobserved into the tower of crippled hours” (MC 205). It is in the ruined clock tower that Saleem eavesdrops on strangers, seeking relief from the pressure of hearing the thoughts of his family and friends. As a child with extraordinary abilities to read the intentions of family, the secret desires of friends, and have every birthday ruined because surprises were paradoxical, it becomes critical for Saleem to have a place outside of time, embodied by the broken clocktower, to retreat to. He recalls his friends taking over his place of meditation, an action he did not see coming because of a commitment he makes to himself to avoid peering too deeply into the consciousnesses of close friends for fear of seeing or hearing something there that would be hurtful or painful: “On my tenth birthday, Evie, Eyeslice, Hairoil and even Cyrus-the-great stormed my private hiding-place; they occupied the clocktower, and deprived me of its shelter” (MC 247). With his retreat outside of time taken away from him, Saleem decides to forgo trying to fit in with the local kids who have branded him an outcast, because he has found a whole new gang to be a part of. On Saleem’s tenth birthday he discovers the connection between all the Children in his head regarding the hour of their births; they are all celebrating that day. Once the broken down clocktower becomes off-limits for Saleem, he can only communicate with the other Children at midnight for the “sake of secrecy and sanity” (MC 254). So the tower loses its potency as a place outside of time and Saleem’s Midnight Children’s Conference is born. Unreliable in keeping time and unreliable as a place of refuge, the clocktower is disregarded and abandoned, without purpose in time.

## 2.6 Time as a Device to Fascinate and Astonish

Much enjoyment of reading Rushdie's novels comes from his intricate weaving of innovative themes relating to time and imagination that may draw inspiration from sources such as Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Umberto Eco's investigations into semiotics (1979, 1984),<sup>88</sup> Jorge Luis Borges' 'The Garden of Forking Paths' (1944), and Gabriel Garcia Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967).<sup>89</sup> *Slaughterhouse-Five* jumps around in time in Vonnegut's signature science fiction style, asking questions about the nature of time and the ability of humans to move around in this unusual medium, whether in memory or reality. Vonnegut's narrator, Billy Pilgrim, says to himself at the beginning of *Slaughterhouse-Five*: "and I asked myself about the present: how wide it was, how deep it was, how much of it was mine to keep" (18). Vonnegut's qualitative treatment of time reminds us of the previous chapter on McEwan where there was some discussion of Bergson's ideas about human time being experienced as a quality versus scientific time being measured as a quantity.<sup>90</sup> Bergson's perception of time as a qualitative concept may be applied to Rushdie's fiction as well. However, Rushdie also uses time in ways that are distinctly anti-Bergsonian, as previously explored. This section is particularly interested in inventive applications of time as a medium that can affect various possibilities and shape physical realities for Rushdie's characters. Questions such as Billy Pilgrim's are related to Rushdie's explorations of the nature of time. Rushdie often endows his characters with an unusual awareness of their relationship to time, giving them a curious experience of the

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<sup>88</sup> I refer to Eco's two works, *Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979) and *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984).

<sup>89</sup> James Harrison discusses Rushdie's magical realism with reference to Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, writing that in MC: "The mere coexistence in time and space of so many different life-styles, cultures, and modes of perception is bound to lead to a climate of the miraculous." James Harrison, *Salman Rushdie* (New York: Twayne, 1992) 56.

<sup>90</sup> Bergson, *Time* 75.

literary temporal continuum. In *The Island of the Day Before*, Eco writes: “the paradoxes of time can indeed unhinge us” (337). Manipulation of time in Rushdie’s novels is used extensively to comical, entertaining, and even deadly effect. Saleem and Moor in particular can only handle the ravages of time when they dissect, label, and analyze it even as it destroys their lives.<sup>91</sup> In this section the focus is on the fantastic uses of time in Rushdie’s fiction.

In *Grimus*, the device of a “blink” is a blip in the reality called Calf Island, conjured up by Grimus with the help of the Stone Rose, a reality-shaping tool for its possessor. Grant writes that “as the ‘blink’ reminds us, the continuing existence of the island depends, moment by moment, on [Grimus’] conceptualizing.”<sup>92</sup> Without continual concentration and constant re-imagining, Calf Island ‘blinks’ out of existence. At the moment when Flapping Eagle first makes eye contact with Elfrida Gribb, their entire world ceases to exist: “An instant when their eyes met; and at that instant, the universe went out for an instant, freezing the inhabitants of the town in a series of characteristic positions, a tableaux fixed in the aspic of a blink in time” (G 109). If there are no blinks, then time continues to flow as normal for the inhabitants of the island. There is a second “blink” some time later, and it again throws Flapping Eagle and Elfrida together: “It hit them like an electric shock. No living being can be removed from existence and then returned to it without feeling the effects” (G 163). Without the blinks, life on the island would continue as normally as life in a world where people are subject to the ravages of time and pass away to make room for the next generation,

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<sup>91</sup> Patricia Merivale also notes the connection with Márquez, writing of *Midnight’s Children*: “in its multiplied fantasies, its introduction of the supernatural into the everyday [...] its characters fatally crushed by their obsessions, and above all in its apocalyptic vision of the extinction of a family from the earth (standing synecdochically, at its conclusion, for a more general apocalypse), it is indeed a most ‘Marquesan’ book, and its magic is largely a ‘Marquesan’ magic” (84). Supernatural gifts are certainly relied upon in *Midnight’s Children*, particularly in giving Saleem his mechanism for relating the stories of the other Children of Midnight. In section 2.2 of this chapter on ‘Narratorial Urgency’ I discussed the way that Saleem’s prose dissolves into near incoherence as the forces of history “buffet” his body to pieces at last (MC 37, 551).

Patricia Merivale, “Saleem Fathered by Oskar: Intertextual Strategies,” *Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie*, ed. D.M Fletcher (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994) 83-96.

<sup>92</sup> Grant 34.

rather than remaining immortal as the inhabitants of Calf Island are. The interruptions in the temporal flow remind the reader that there is something highly unusual going on here in the conceptualization of the island. Grant writes: “the nature of the ‘blink’ has all the neatness of one of the technical ideas invented by Kurt Vonnegut to make his fictions work, and Rushdie handles it very cleverly—just as he juggles expertly with the different dimensions, his plural worlds themselves.”<sup>93</sup> Vonnegut’s fiction has the same ‘what if?’ appeal to readers that Rushdie’s imagined worlds have. Eco’s narrator in *The Island of the Day Before* is concerned with multiple possible realities and times in the parallel-universe sense of *Grimus*. Roberto, Eco’s story runs: “was the first man in human history to be offered the possibility of swimming twenty-four hours into the past.”<sup>94</sup> Eco’s Island is understood to lie on the other side of the international date line and thus can be thought of as existing one day in the past. Rushdie’s manipulation of time in narrative is more fantastic and convoluted than Eco’s, and less science fiction based than Vonnegut, but related to both.

Rushdie’s imagined possibilities for time are closer to the experience that the reader has, perhaps in losing track of time while reading. In *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, Moor’s parents are on vacation with their three young daughters before his birth when his mother wishes aloud that she could have just one child who would grow up “*really fast*” (141). The location where she utters these words turns out to be of interest, as Moor writes later:

In the dry season before the rains these blessed hilltops seem to float lightly on a shimmering magic haze; after the monsoon, when the air is clear, you can stand, for example, on Matheran’s Heart Point or One Tree Hill, and sometimes in that supernatural clarity you can see, if not for ever, then at least a little way into the future, maybe one or two days ahead (MLS 142).

With fictional possibilities of being able to look at an island in the past and from the hilltops one or two days into the future with “supernatural clarity,” it is natural for Flapping Eagle to

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<sup>93</sup> Grant 31.

<sup>94</sup> Eco 310.



ask Grimus himself about his decision to create Calf Island, an alternate dimension that brings people from different realities and different times together in the same alternative reality and particular time: “This is a game, isn’t it, a game you’re enjoying? An infinity of continua, of possibilities both present and future, the freeplay of time itself, bent and shaped into a zoo for your personal enjoyment” (236). Rushdie’s time is a shifting, swiftly-changing thing. It both serves and confounds characters in his novels depending on their relationship to it and ability or lack thereof to manipulate time. In order to prevent it from getting out of control it must be held and contained. In *Midnight’s Children*, one of the Children has the ability to travel through time. Predicting the future that he has seen for himself, ridiculous as it sounds in the present, Soumitra is rejected by the Children and feels more at home exploring the depths of time in isolation than sharing what he finds with the only group who can possibly (yet refuses to) understand the strangeness of the experiences he is having. Saleem writes: “wounded Soumitra became a regular absentee from our nightly meetings, disappearing for long periods into the spidery labyrinths of Time” (MC 305-6). Soumitra’s perception of time is different from his peers. Different experiences of time can easily cause divisions between Rushdie’s characters. Each narrator in Rushdie’s novels looked at here has a different relationship to time from that of the people he encounters, and is thus distanced from them.

Returning to *The Moor’s Last Sigh* on the theme of fantastic uses of time, there is an interval where Moor, despairing about his past failures in love and his difficult relationship with his artistic and problematic mother Aurora, is sustained by learning to cook during this “null time” (272). His father tells him to slow down: “‘Too much in your life has gone too fast. Do you good to slow down for some period’” (MLS 272). It is the household cook who helps Moor get through this tough time. Ezekiel tells Moor: “‘Joy!’ he cackled, wisely. ‘Baba sahib, sit only and we will cook up the happy future. We will mash its spices and peel its

garlic cloves, we will count out its cardamoms and chop its ginger, we will heat up the ghee of the future and fry its masala to release its flavour. Joy!” (MLS 273). Ezekiel, a skilled cook, has a different relationship to food than most, being concerned with how the ingredients he uses will have a positive effect on the future of the family he nourishes. He continues: “We will cook the past and present also, and from it tomorrow will come.” With all the learning about the foods of his childhood and even the ingredients and materials of his ancestors and how to prepare their modern-day counterparts, Moor feels that “Ezekiel had succeeded in joining me, after a long interruption, to the story of my past.” Ezekiel succeeds in taking care of the young sahib: “With yesterday in my tummy, my prospects felt a lot better.” Rushdie has serious themes concerning time that permeate his novels, yet he is also able to use time in a playful manner, here relating it to food as representative of the past and future in a nourishing way. Unfortunately for Moor, it is not long before he finds out that to treat time this lightly is to allow it to overcome you: disowned from his family for blaspheming them whilst in the throes of passion with his forbidden lover Uma Sarasvati, he laments: “the illusion of the future which Ezekiel the cook had restored to me in his kitchen stood revealed as a chimera” (280). Disaster strikes, turning Moor’s life upside down and showing the dangers of treating time in too light a fashion.

Turning to some of Rushdie’s other methods of treating time in a fantastic manner outright, it is best to focus now on *Midnight’s Children*. First and most importantly, Saleem tells his audience that the *Midnight’s Children* are special because they are a product not only of their biological parents: “the children of midnight were also the children of the time: fathered, you understand, by history” (137). In the summary at the beginning of this chapter a synopsis is given of the overarching connection of the Children with time and history. Saleem in particular forms a personal connection with the hour of midnight. Although his telepathic abilities work at all hours of the day, it is the hour of midnight that he chooses to commune

with the Midnight's Children's Conference. Midnight is Saleem's "personal witching-hour" (MC 203). Because Saleem understands midnight to be the most magical of hours, he maintains the connection of the Children with that hour, once he has become aware of all of them and realizes the coincidence of their births. He calls midnight "our private, silent hour" and writes: "I communed with them every midnight, and only at midnight, during that hour which is reserved for miracles, which is somehow outside time" (MC 254-5). Saleem is the only one able to make the correlation between the assorted gifts and talents of the Children and the hour of their birth; he writes: "Because none of the children suspected that their time of birth had anything to do with what they were, it took me a while to find it out" (MC 237). Once Saleem has realized the connection, he muses about the strong link between the Children and history: "It was as though [...] history, arriving at a point of the highest significance and promise, had chosen to sow, in that instant, the seeds of a future which would genuinely differ from anything the world had seen up to that time" (MC 234-5). The closer to midnight the birth, "perhaps owing to some preternatural power of the moment," the greater the gift the child possesses (234). Saleem's is the "greatest talent of all—the ability to look into the hearts and minds of men" (239). At the other end of the spectrum are those "little more than circus freaks [...]" but for all their marvellousness, these were the unfortunates, the living casualties of that numinous hour" (238). In the middle is the time traveller Soumitra and hundreds of other talents of varying greatness. Saleem muses about what this synchronous hour of birth represents for the present of India, complex and full of potential futures and directions as a new country must be:

Reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real. A thousand and one children were born; there were a thousand and one possibilities which had never been present in one place at one time before; and there were a thousand and one dead ends. Midnight's children can be made to represent many things, according to your point of view; they can be seen as the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of a modernizing, twentieth-century economy; or as the true hope of freedom,

which is now forever extinguished; but what they must not become is the bizarre creation of a rambling, diseased mind (240).

Saleem wants some appreciation for the incredible truth of the Midnight's Children Conference.

As suddenly as Saleem's abilities enter his awareness with a knock to the head, they are lost when his parents decide to take care of his blocked sinuses, a condition which has plagued him for years. Somehow Saleem's ability to transmit and receive access to the minds of his fellow Midnight's Children, as well as anyone else he pleases, is connected to his inability to breathe normally through his perpetually snotty nose. Blockage removed, signal upset, Saleem's life is changed forever because he cannot communicate with his supernatural fellows. He writes that he is banished "from the possibility of midnight children. [...] Midnight's children: who may have been the embodiment of the hope of freedom, who may also have been freaks-who-ought-to-be-finished-off" (MC 364). Though Saleem's constant connection to these embodiments of time has been severed, the narrative is not content to leave him wholly detached from personified time; later in the story as he wanders namelessly from adventure to adventure there is an interlude with a peasant girl and her father chases our protagonist: "a gesticulating peasant with a scythe, Father Time enraged [...] the scythed avenger stumbles [...] And Time lies dead in a rice-paddy [...] they have murdered the hours and forgotten the date" (MC 429). Saleem's group escapes down the river and into the jungle where they submit for a period to the "time-shifting sorcery of the forest" which eventually, having failed to consume them completely, expels them violently in a flood and leaves them "sitting in a drowned rice-paddy" as though they have done penance for killing Time and have been released back into a world where life corresponds to the hours (MC 440). Time has various roles to play in Rushdie's work, as detailed here along the theme of the fantastic.

## 2.7 Conclusions

At the start of this chapter it seemed that the focus of a close reading of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, *The Moor's Last Sigh* and *Grimus* would eventually yield a division between the representation of time in these novels and Bergson's philosophical ideas that have been under consideration in this dissertation so far. It is true that Rushdie deals with time in these fictions differently than McEwan in his two novels considered in the first chapter. To establish the connection of Rushdie's style with Bergson's ideas the discussion began with some issues of layering time and identity in time that Bergson is concerned with. It is clear that Rushdie's approach to handling the theme of time is very different from McEwan with regards to Bergson's philosophy of time. In the first section of the chapter the subject of narratorial urgency was discussed, where the narrators of Rushdie's novels have a detrimental relationship with their own histories and must write their stories before their time, in effect, runs out. In the second section of this chapter, Rushdie's methods of layering the present with different parts of the past and concealing in the present what has happened in the past was discussed. Here more of Bergson's ideas come into play. One idea that often surfaces during characters' retellings of events is that of an accumulation of history, where it is important to understand the anecdotes and descriptions of things that have happened in the past, family connections and ancestry and so forth, in order to relate to what is happening in the present. Bergson wrote about this accretion of moments, which is applicable to the first two sections of this discussion.<sup>95</sup> The more literal image of this idea may be embodied by Rushdie's frequent use of palimpsests, especially in *The Moor's Last Sigh* where the layering of art reflects directly on the personal history as well as social changes experienced by the narrator and his family. The past is often something to be pushed away, as Moor records in

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<sup>95</sup> Bergson, *Time* 79.

his saga when he reaches Benengeli: “the old days had been swept away by this amnesiac, democratic present, which thought of all yesterdays as garbage, to be disposed of as soon as possible” (MLS 326). As in Proust’s writing and Bergson’s philosophy, the past is something that needs to be preserved and used to better understand the workings of the human consciousness. Saleem writes: “one day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history” (MC 550). That is, one day Saleem’s story may be read and understood by the world as the recorded journey through an experience of time that is uniquely his.

In a deliberate and purposeful way, Rushdie’s writing does step away at times from the Proustian or Bergsonian archetype of allowing moments and experiences to permeate and influence each other. Rushdie’s narrators portray the possibilities of containing time and dividing it up in concrete objects or within characters themselves, as discussed in both the third and fourth sections of this chapter. However, it has become strikingly apparent during the course of this investigation that Rushdie’s usages of time correspond to Bergson’s ideas in new ways. Bergson holds that it is not possible to divide time into equal parts, and ideally it is not to be divided up at all in order to extract some meaning related to human experience of such things as memory and anticipation. Thus, when Rushdie’s characters do divide time up, the action is usually conducted not to permanently divide time up into measurable, or quantifiable, parts, but to understand it better or put constraints on it in order to deal with it, as, for example, with difficult events in the past.<sup>96</sup> As there are no perfectly distinct barriers or limits put on the memories contained in trunks or pickle jars other than arbitrary ones

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<sup>96</sup> Sigmund Freud’s theories regarding the repression of memory are of interest here. Generally Freud holds that the unconscious mind finds reason to suppress information, protecting the conscious mind in some way from distressing stimuli. In *Grimus*, with parts of the subconscious memory being deliberately hidden (in physical items such as Dolores’ trunk), this is repression in a different sense from Freud’s, where it is not always possible to retrieve information at will from the subconscious. However, in Rushdie’s other novels examined in this chapter, it often seems more Freudian, as though the narrator has been holding in a lifetime’s worth of distressing memories and painful connections, released suddenly in the form of a story that must take account of every detail and force it to add up to some tale of importance. Certainly the exuberant expression by Rushdie’s narrators (I am thinking specifically of Saleem in *Midnight’s Children* and Moor in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*) of the outpouring of their familial histories is like a Freudian pressure-cooker of accumulated memory. Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, trans. Alan Tyson (New York: Norton, 1965) 4, 274.

(such as birthdays) this action of dividing time up is not contrary to Bergson's ideas as may have been supposed at the start of this chapter. With the concept of temporal division comes the possibility of the end of time, and the following section discussed stopped time with reference to clocktowers and other keepers of the hour. Rushdie's stories hinge upon the intrinsic connection with time, and making it seem that time has stopped lends a new set of possibilities to character and plot development.

In the final section of this chapter it seemed appropriate to finish with a close reading of some of Rushdie's uses of time in the fantastic and mystical sense as this use of mythology and an appreciation of the supernatural in everyday life sets him apart from the other writers examined in this dissertation. His tendency toward science fiction must be considered, but it is not without relevance to the modern world that the reader who is turning the pages inhabits. Just as Bergson's ideas still hold substance and applicability nearly a century on, Rushdie's uses of time to surprise and amaze the reader are useful in gaining a greater appreciation for the mysteries of the clock in the modern day 'real world.'

### **3.1 Amis: *Time's Arrow*, *London Fields*, *Other People* and *Money***

In the previous two chapters a look has been taken at McEwan's fiction in terms of the emotional journey in time and an examination has been made of Rushdie's focus on time as a force of both social and national history, as well as being the tool of the ancestral saga—the temporal interconnectedness of family. McEwan's narrators experience time as flowing at different rates, slowing down or speeding up at particularly important moments, while Rushdie overtly uses time to divide the past from the present in a physical way, among other methods. In *Time's Arrow* (1992), Martin Amis experiments with a narratorial reversal of the

scientific view of the direction of time (as directly correlated to laws of thermodynamics) to effectively portray a man's life lived in reverse. *Time's Arrow* is the most directly temporal of Amis' novels. In this chapter, some of his other novels, namely *London Fields* (1990), *Money* (1985), and *Other People* (1982) will be referred to in connection with time, but the emphasis will remain on *Time's Arrow*. Where McEwan and Rushdie lean heavily on memory and history to relay their stories, Amis creates difficult relationships with the past and future for his characters, leaving them to fend for themselves in the present, as well as to conclude that the present is all there really is. There are sometimes only the clues of the present to help characters relate to their worlds with regards to memory and action, as Amis often creates for his characters incidents with violence, drugs or money that affect the way they relate to the duration of their own lives. Despite the varied approach these authors generally take to time, there are frequent parallels in their work to examine. Amis' novels exhibit connections to McEwan and Rushdie, for example in terms of stretching the moment, or putting a character's life in fast forward to intensify drama.

Waiting, in particular, is a frequent activity of Amis' tensely drawn characters, and their time is sometimes described as "stretched." As in *London Fields*: "For perhaps five minutes of stretched time I waited" (25). Or in *Money*: "I've suffered some long moments, some slow travel, in the latest run of time, but none longer or slower than these" (342). To counterbalance the moments of slowed or stretched time, there are points where things speed up. In *London Fields*, the narrator writes of the classic villain character: "is it just me, or does Keith's hormonal tumult have something to do with reduced life-expectancy? Never very extensive when looked at against an historical mean, Keith's life is now doubly compressed, condensed—and therefore speeded up. His life is on fast-forward, or picture-search" (135).<sup>97</sup> Later the reader learns that Keith has a personal awareness of time as the force that drags

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<sup>97</sup> The parallel in particular to Moor in Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* in terms of a life in fast-forward is clear.



people down, and there is a sense of his need to pack as much action as he can into a small space of time, since he doesn't have much:

It was all about *time*. Time was everywhere present, was massively operational, in the life Keith moved through. He saw how it strafed people...how it blew them away, how it wasted them. He saw the darts players on TV: every year there was always a fresh new face-and after half a season it looked like an old one. In common with Leo Tolstoy, Keith Talent thought of time as moving past him while he just stayed the same. In the mirror every morning: same old Keith. None the wiser. But in his soul he could tell what time was doing. Keith, who had gone through his midlife crisis at the age of nineteen, didn't expect time to leave him alone, no, not for a moment (LF 172).

Only by staying on edge about time does Keith manage to stay alive as a petty thug. He considers himself to be pretty canny, though he is being used in this novel just as everyone else is, for some ulterior purpose. No one in *London Fields* ever gets a break from the action: "Time waits...Time don't wait. It just don't wait. Just marches on. At the double" (173). "Time waits" for no man, and certainly not a poor example of a man like Keith. With the stretched moments and time rushing on at double-speed we have connections with McEwan's stretched moments as well as Rushdie's portrayal of a narrator with his life in fast-forward. Amis places a good deal of importance on the speed at which his characters live their lives; he frequently creates such neurotics and addicts that the reader is just waiting for these intensely messed up people to self-combust; it's "just that some of us live so full, our flames burn so bright, that the years go past not singly but six or seven at a time, like the years of dogs" (LF 461). John Self, narrator of *Money*, muses on his own passing through life at a ridiculous rate:

At sickening speed I have roared and clattered, I have rocketed through my time, breaking all the limits, time limits, speed limits, city limits, jumping lights and cutting corners, guzzling gas and burning rubber, staring through the foul screen with my fist on the horn. I am that fleeing train that goes screaming past you in the night. Though travelling nowhere I have hurtled with blind purpose to the very end of my time (292).<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Childs aptly comments that: "while Amis's characters are addicted to the excesses of their times, the times appear in his work to be addicted to personal and global forms of destruction, all of which will appear on TV" (43). Of the narrators of the novels examined in this chapter, John Self stands alone in terms of an ability to consume recklessly toward an end of personal destruction.

It may seem as if Rushdie's narrators, in their early thirties and yet on the verge of death, have lived their lives too quickly, but this is a wanton using up of life's potential on a scale Rushdie does not approach. Amis describes characters who are intense, self-destructive and deeply aware of their time. John Self considers his age in this way: "Today is my birthday. I am thirty-five years old. According to the last good book I read, this means I am half way through my time travel, my travel through time. It doesn't feel like that – it doesn't feel like half way" (M 119). There is no end to the consideration Amis' characters give to time. Only once is the relationship with time conducted in inverted order, in *Time's Arrow*, and this is where this chapter will begin to look more closely at Amis' work with themes of time.

Having touched upon the areas where Amis' work may bear similarities to fiction discussed earlier, the focus of this chapter will start out dealing mainly with *Time's Arrow*, in which time moves differently than in any of the novels examined thus far. It is informative to look at the inspiration for the narrative technique used in the novel, which Amis readily admits come from a section of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*.<sup>99</sup> There will be a section to look at the technique of narrating in reverse and then a discussion of the problems generated with such a method with reference to the thermodynamic arrow of time. The final two sections will deal with two major temporal themes in several of Amis' novels: namely death and stopped time, and time as a commodity in the present.

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<sup>99</sup> Nicholas Tredell notes:

Amis says he borrowed this reverse moment for his plot from [Kurt Vonnegut's novel] *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1970) where Billy Pilgrim watches films backwards of World War II bombing raids over Germany. Each film ends happily with all the fire and destruction safely packed up into the bombs which then disappear into the bellies of the planes and are subsequently returned first to the factories to be taken apart and their components disposed of harmlessly in the earth (132).

Nicholas Tredell, ed, "Wrong in Time: Time's Arrow," *The Fiction of Martin Amis: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000) 126-253.

### 3.2 Roots of Time's Arrow

Arguably, the most important novel Amis has written in terms of the theme of time is *Time's Arrow*, with its unique narrative of a single character's life and actions described in reverse. In literature: "the direction of time becomes the condition under which we cling to belief in the realization of hopes and aspirations, in the opportunity for creation and progress, in effort and striving as a means for personal happiness and salvation."<sup>100</sup> In *Time's Arrow*, all these ideas are turned on their heads as the arrow of time is reversed.<sup>101</sup> Notably, Amis focuses on the present as most important to his characters, and the way that time operates as a sequence rather than a function of the mind in creating connections between past and present in memory. In *Time's Arrow*, free will (a special concern of Bergson's), is thrown out the window, as the storyteller is an observer only and in no way an actor in the sequence of events. Once the story comes together, the reader realizes it involves a life that has already been lived out because the choices made and historical events (as the reader is familiar with them) only make sense in the opposite order from the one the novel progresses in. What the reader has in *Time's Arrow* is an internal narrator who is able to describe the actions his host body is taking without having much idea of the causes or reasons. This narrator asks on the reader's behalf all the questions that come up when trying to get one's head around the concept of time flowing backwards and a life lived in reverse. Bergson regards duration as an

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<sup>100</sup> Hans Meyerhoff, *Time in Literature* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1960) 68.

<sup>101</sup> Before discussing the reversal of the arrow of time it may be helpful here to offer a brief definition of 'time's arrow' as a philosophical term, as printed in the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. The entry reads:

Unlike space, time as we apprehend it has a direction. There is an asymmetry between the past (fixed) and the future (yet to exist). Time's arrow is whatever gives time this direction. Five aspects of the direction are: (i) that according to the second law of thermodynamics, disorder (entropy) increases from past to future; (ii) the universe is expanding in time; (iii) causal efficacy works in only one direction in time, since future events cannot influence past events (see backwards causation); (iv) we remember past events whilst we cannot remember later ones; and (v) we can alter the future in a sense in which we cannot alter the past. A complete understanding of time would enable us to relate these five aspects of time's arrow and to know whether they are true of necessity or only as a consequence of other contingencies (378).

Simon Blackburn, ed, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford and New York: OUP) 1994.

internal conscious process, and in a literary situation where the events of a novel happen in reverse the same idea is applicable, but the reader must first resolve the confusion induced by observing the order of events on a backward timeline.

By taking a person's life and describing it from death to birth, Amis has defined the start and the end at two points in the temporal continuum of the history of the world, flipped this timeline around, thus displacing the reader in time as well as Tod T Friendly. Tod remains none the wiser throughout the story, since he is not an active participant; his choices have all been made and acted upon. All three of the arrows of time as Stephen Hawking outlines them are reversed:

The increase of disorder or entropy with time is one example of what is called an arrow of time, something that distinguishes the past from the future, giving a direction to time. There are at least three different arrows of time. First, there is the thermodynamic arrow of time, the direction of time in which disorder or entropy increases. Then, there is the psychological arrow of time. This is the direction in which we feel time passes, the direction in which we remember the past but not the future. Finally, there is the cosmological arrow of time. This is the direction of time in which the universe is expanding rather than contracting.<sup>102</sup>

It is not unheard of in fiction for individuals to experience the sensation of being dislocated from the psychological arrow of time, but Amis' approach in maintaining the reversal of all three arrows of time is original. The kernel of this idea for a novel comes from Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, where main character Billy Pilgrim is wrenched about in time; at one point time's arrow flips into reverse while he is watching a film:

He came slightly unstuck in time, saw the late movie backwards, then forwards again. It was a movie about American bombers in the Second World War and the gallant men who flew them. Seen backwards by Billy, the story went like this:

American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France, a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen. They did the same for wrecked American bombers on the ground, and those planes flew up backwards to join the formation.

The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk

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<sup>102</sup> Hawking 184-185.

the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes [...] Over France, though, German fighters came up again, made everything and everybody as good as new.

When the bombers got back to their base, the steel cylinders were taken from the racks and shipped back to the United States of America, where factories were operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals [...] The minerals were then shipped to specialists in remote areas. It was their business to put them in the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again.

The American fliers turned in their uniforms, became high school kids. And Hitler turned into a little baby, Billy Pilgrim supposed. That wasn't in the movie. Billy was extrapolating. Everybody turned into a baby, and all humanity, without exception, conspired biologically to produce two perfect people named Adam and Eve, he supposed (73-75).

Billy's "extrapolating" in this scene is similar to what the reader of *Time's Arrow* must do in order to comprehend what is going on in the novel. Life moving from death to birth, the war in *Slaughterhouse-Five* makes more sense in reverse, with harmful minerals being sent away to be hidden forever. This reversal technique in Amis' *Time's Arrow* is in complete novel form rather than semi-lucid interlude. Faced with sequences of action that do not appeal to the common sense of the narrator, uninformed as he must be in order to achieve the effect the novel does, he wonders at Tod's sanity, as though he may be an extra presence in Tod's head caused by a tenuous grasp of reality: "The mad are said to keep a film or stage set in their heads, which they order and art-decorate and move through. But Tod is sane, apparently, and his world is shared. It just seems to me that the film is running backward" (TA 8). The film is of course running backward, just as it seems to Amis' narrator, and just as Billy Pilgrim observed in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.<sup>103</sup> Amis has expanded on Vonnegut's experiment with time, though Vonnegut, as a cursory examination of his works reveals, is actually conducting

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<sup>103</sup> As a side-note looking ahead to the primary author under consideration in chapter 4 of this dissertation, Alan Lightman asks the reader of his (nonfiction) *Ancient Light* to imagine the 'big bang' as a movie playing in reverse in order to understand how the expanding universe as the scientific community understands it today emerged from "a sea of careening subatomic particles": "Imagine a movie of cosmic evolution played backward in time, starting from the present. The universe contracts. The galaxies move closer and closer together and turn into aimless blobs of gas. As the universe grows denser and denser, the gas blobs merge. Individual galaxies and even individual stars lose their identity, and the matter of the universe begins to resemble a gas" (42). This is akin to making sense of a war by watching a film of its brutal events happening in reverse, where they occur much more reasonably; imagining the universe contracting in reverse is helpful for understanding the expansion it is in fact continually undergoing.

an ongoing trial in ways to deal with time. In Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan*, Winston Nile Rumfoord flies his spacecraft into a time anomaly called a chrono-synclastic infundibulum. He becomes able to see time as a line stretching in both directions, and can see everything that has ever happened, and everything that will happen. In his own words: "in the grand, in the timeless, in the chronosynclastic infundibulated way of looking at things, I shall always be here. I shall always be wherever I've been."<sup>104</sup> Nearly thirty years after *Slaughterhouse-Five* (itself published a decade after *The Sirens of Titan*) Vonnegut published *Timequake*, a novel dealing solely with an anomaly of time which is worth a brief examination here.

In *Timequake*, a neatly defined set period of time has already been lived and is now being lived again.<sup>105</sup> The entire world has to live back through the last decade, performing the same actions as the first time around, its inhabitants unable to make any new choices. Free will takes a "ten-year hiatus." In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim gets jerked around in time and has to participate in parts of his past all over again at random, but he still has some free will (as he understands it) when he finds himself in a familiar situation and has to participate in scenes from his past. Both Vonnegut and Amis are experimenting with the possibilities of time, and with the reader's expectations of the novel. In *Timequake*, rather than selective reliving of critical parts of one's life as in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or a complete life lived in reverse, as in *Time's Arrow*, a finite ten year period has been specifically chosen, and free will has been removed from the equation. The narrator recalls: "yes, and when the timequake of 2001 zapped us back to 1991, it made ten years of our pasts ten years of our futures, so we could remember everything we had to say and do again when the time came" (TQ 20). The novel is about reliving the past and then the resulting problems when the decade ends and people are unexpectedly back in control of their actions. Vonnegut's self-

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<sup>104</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Sirens of Titan* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1976) 296.

<sup>105</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Timequake* (London: Vintage, 1998)

professed alter-ego Kilgore Trout writes this in the prologue to his “unfinished memoir *My Ten Years on Automatic Pilot*” by way of explanation:

‘The timequake of 2001 was a cosmic charley horse in the sinews of Destiny. At what was in New York City 2:27 p.m. on February 13<sup>th</sup> of that year, the Universe suffered a crisis in self-confidence. Should it go on expanding indefinitely? What was the point?

‘It fibrillated with indecision. Maybe it should have a family reunion back where it all began, and then make a great big BANG again’ (xiii).

Ten years later less four days, as Trout observes: “‘For reasons best known to itself, though, the Universe cancelled the family reunion, for the nonce at least. It resumed expansion’” (TQ 55). Later Trout writes: “I, too, went from *déjà vu* to unlimited opportunities in a series of actions that were continuous. An outside observer might have said I exercised free will the instant it became available” (TQ 98). When the ‘timequake’ ends suddenly, people literally fall over in the street as they have been so accustomed to being on ‘auto-pilot’ with their every move already mapped out by their past actions. There is again a parallel with *Time’s Arrow* where everyone’s moves are already drawn out, because they have already been acted upon, but here it is the mirror image of the original. Amis’ narrator wonders:

People are free, then, they are generally free, then, are they? Well they don’t *look* free. Tipping, staggering, with croaked or choking voices, blundering backward along lines seemingly already crossed, already mapped. Oh, the disgusted look on women’s faces as they step backward through a doorway, out of the rain. Never watching where they are going, the people move through something prearranged, armed with lies. They’re always looking forward to going places they’ve just come back from, or regretting doing things they haven’t yet done. They say hello when they mean goodbye (TA 42-43).

In these books, Vonnegut and Amis can achieve the unique effect they do in terms of time because they have removed the plots from the normal flow of the temporal continuum, and from *durée*, which Bergson defines as part of a universal, consistently forward moving flow of time.

In fiction it is possible to become unstuck in time and move from point to point in either direction, to live for ten years with profound *déjà vu* as the decade is actually re-lived,

or to even account for a whole life lived in reverse, if you cut and paste sections of time the way Vonnegut and Amis do. The investigation turns here to the effects of reversed time in Amis' *Time's Arrow*, with relation to the scientific basis of this concept, the arrow of time. Of the origin of the concept, Novikov writes in his *The River of Time*:

Once you start looking for a global natural phenomenon which might impose the direction of time flow, the expansion of the Universe appears to be the most likely candidate.

Arthur Eddington even invented a special phrase to indicate the direction of time flow: the 'arrow of time'. Eddington, Hoyle and some others believed that the 'arrow of time' exists, since the Universe does expand. If in the future the expansion is replaced by contraction, then, as these scientists believed, the direction of the 'arrow of time' will be correspondingly reversed (212).<sup>106</sup>

Though this scientific theory has little to offer in the way of concrete proof, Novikov also gives it some thought on a practical level, writing:

Why is it then that time moves in one direction only? We know exactly that this is so for time. We remember the events of the past. Even remote events in the past leave traces in our memory. However, we remember nothing about the future! The past is behind us, it cannot be changed in any way, while the future can be influenced. We know all this both from the accumulated knowledge of science and from our everyday experience. There is no symmetry in the flow of time in nature; physicists say that time is completely anisotropic (206).

Although time flows in only one direction, albeit at different speeds in our perception under various circumstances, Amis has created a forum where he can observe events that cannot be changed, as is true of the past, by writing a novel in reverse. There is an ongoing debate in the scientific world about whether the thermodynamic arrow of time can ever be reversed. Theoretically, if the universe were to cease expanding and contract instead, time would flip into reverse as well. Hawking writes: "If the thermodynamic arrow reversed in a contracting universe, then demolished buildings would rise from the rubble and people would be born old and 'die' young."<sup>107</sup> In *Time's Arrow*, Tod T Friendly wakes up in a hospital bed, and the

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<sup>106</sup> Novikov notes that "This hypothesis would deserve discussion if the expansion of the Universe and the recession of galaxies affected phenomena at each point of space [...] As there is no physical influence, it is difficult to accept that the recession of galaxies may affect the rate of time flow" (212-3).

<sup>107</sup> Hawking 193.



narrator notes a feeling of paralysis and fresh emergence from “out of the blackest sleep, to find myself surrounded by *doctors*” (3). The narrator describes Tod’s life from the doorstep of death to the conviction that “I was definitely becoming stronger” (5). By the end of *Time’s Arrow* the narrator knows, observing from the body of the infant that Odilo has become, that he will soon enter his mother and “she will weep and scream” (164). He even ponders the reality of what will happen once his birth is over and he is in the womb: “Naturally I cannot forgive my father for what he will have to do to me. He will come in and kill me with his body” (164). Now for a closer look at the effect this reversed narration has on the experience of the reader.

### 3.3 Narrating in Reverse

The narrator of *Time’s Arrow* is initially as confused as the reader in trying to interpret the action of the novel. After his initial observational period he begins to ask questions, drawing on an innate grasp of common sense regarding cause and effect and the natural order of things. For example, he exclaims: “Wait a minute. Why am I walking *backward* into the house? Wait. Is it dusk coming, or is it dawn? What is the—what is the sequence of the journey I’m on? What are its rules? Why are the birds singing so strangely? Where am I heading?” (TA 6). Both the narrator and the reader must seek to orient themselves in time as it is initially difficult to understand what seems to be a nonsensical way of carrying on with everyday activities.<sup>108</sup> Amis doesn’t avoid the unpleasantness of what it

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<sup>108</sup> James Diedrick comments on the initial orientation the reader must make for himself in order to understand the novel: “Faced with this confusion, the reader develops coping mechanisms. Conversations in *Time’s Arrow* always run in reverse sequence, for instance, and the reader soon learns to read them from finish to start. Before long, this inverted world becomes comprehensible, because it follows predictable rules. In adapting to its crazy logic, the reader is also preparing to confront another inverted world: Auschwitz and its obscene logic” (135).

would be like to conduct the most basic activities in reverse, and the following description assists the reader in visualizing some of the passages as though Tod is a character in a film seen in reverse, like the Vonnegut description that inspired *Time's Arrow*. The reader is told:

Eating is unattractive too...you select a soiled dish, collect some scraps from the garbage, and settle down for a short wait. Various items get gulped up into my mouth, and after skillful massage with tongue and teeth I transfer them to the plate for additional sculpture with knife and fork and spoon. That bit's quite therapeutic at least, unless you're having soup or something, which can be a real sentence. Next you face the laborious business of cooling, of reassembly, of storage, before the return of these foodstuffs to the Superette, where, admittedly, I am promptly and generously reimbursed for my pains. Then you tool down the aisles, with trolley or basket, returning each can and packet to its rightful place (TA 11).

The first brief conversation between Tod and a woman in the pharmacy is relayed completely backwards, spelling and all. The narrator expresses his relief at finally realizing that these sounds are actually human speech: "I walk away, backward, with a touch of the hat. I speak without volition, in the same way that I do everything else" (TA 7). After the initial 'Dug' and 'Oo y'rrah?' standing in for our forward-reading 'Good' and 'How are you?' the narrator starts relating conversation with the words in an order we are familiar with. The sentences are another matter. As the narrator relates later on: "I have noticed in the past, of course, that most conversations would make much better sense if you ran them backward" (TA 51). The novel would be impossible to read at all if the narrator did not make the concession of putting the words in readable order for the reader's forward oriented mind. Of conversation in *Time's Arrow*, Donald E. Morse writes:

Amis does not continue using reverse spelling—the joke might quickly wear thin—but continues to indicate time's reversal by inverting the order of sentences within each conversation. This technique forces the reader to participate in this backwards running world since only by reconstructing the conversation in reverse can the reader affirm the normal temporal order. The words themselves which Odilo speaks backwards are all predetermined because he has said them all before. But then

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The issue of backwards running sentences is addressed next in this section as the first conversation of the novel presents itself. Auschwitz is discussed in detail in section 3.5 'Death and Stopped Time.'  
James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis* (Columbia, South Carolina: U South Carolina P 2004).

everything in his world—gesture, emotion, action—is completely and fully determined.<sup>109</sup>

From this point conversations are still confusing when read as they stand upon the page, but once reversed, sense can be made of them. The initial (or final) phone conversation with Tod's lover Irene starts with her "“Goodbye, Tod.” [...] “‘Yes?’ said Tod boredly—and hung up on her. He put the phone down and listened to its ringing—its machine persistence. And then its silence. His feeling tone was blank, was clear” (TA 21). Tod has not hung up, he has picked up the phone, and previous to that action, he had no expectation of the coming exchange. Before the conversation he is on a car-wrecking rampage, but afterwards he is left emotionless, to the consternation of the narrator once again.

The journey that Tod is on has been mapped out before because he has already lived his life, and it is now being reviewed by the narrator and the reader. Bergson writes: “But time is not a line along which one can pass again. Certainly, once it has elapsed, we are justified in picturing the successive moments as external to one another and in thus thinking of a line traversing space; but it must then be understood that this line does not symbolize the time which is passing but the time which has passed.”<sup>110</sup> Bergson speaks not of literature, but of real human life. The narrator of *Time's Arrow* never realizes, the way the reader must in order to grasp the mechanism of the novel, that the time he is observing has actually already passed. This ‘line traversing space’ has been reversed. Hawking uses the example of a film clip of a cup falling off a table and smashing into many pieces; run backwards it is instantly realized by the viewer that the jagged pieces of china which gather themselves into the form of a cup and rise from the floor to perch on the edge of the table is action presented in reverse order. Of this scenario, Hawking writes:

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<sup>109</sup> From Donald E. Morse's 1995 essay “Overcoming Time: ‘The Present of Things Past’ in History and Fiction,” quoted in Tredell 128-9.

<sup>110</sup> Bergson, *Time* 181-2.

However, any human beings who were observing the cups would be living in a universe in which disorder decreased with time. I shall argue that such beings would have a psychological arrow of time that was backward. That is, they would remember events in the future, and would not remember events in their past. When the cup was broken, they would remember it being on the table, but when it was on the table, they would not remember it being on the floor.<sup>111</sup>

The narrator of *Time's Arrow*, it could be proposed, is such a being—he remembers the later parts of Tod's life and describes them to the reader, but is unable to recall earlier parts of Tod's life until they 'happen' again. Any point in time that to Tod has already passed by is in the future of the narrator, thus the narrator is 'remembering' Tod's future. In his essay, Morse explains the confusion of the narrator who is observing Tod's life from the vantage point of his brain without any way to influence the course Tod's life takes: "Knowing only duration and mistakenly assuming that he has just commenced rather than re-commenced life, the narrator continually misreads signs and misinterprets events including such decisive ones as death and birth and essential distinctions such as backwards and forwards."<sup>112</sup>

Strangely, the narrator has a pragmatic understanding of the way things ought to work, and is constantly observing that something is amiss. Like the reader, the narrator asks questions about how things work in the universe in which he finds himself. He observes:

When people move—when they travel—they look where they've come from, not where they're going. Is this what the human beings always do? Then love will be like driving, which doesn't appear to make much immediate sense. For example, you have five reverse gears and only one for forward, which is marked *R*, for Reverse. When we drive, we don't look where we're going. We look where we came from (TA 22).

Only in *Time's Arrow* is this questioning of the way time works so fundamentally explicit, naturally due to the fact that it is operating in such an artificially constructed way. Amis' other narrators often wonder about how time works in characters' lives and how it affects them, but not because something seems inherently wrong, as in *Time's Arrow*. The narrator of *Other People* wonders about why Mary has such terrible dreams, and concludes that it is

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<sup>111</sup> Hawking 188.

<sup>112</sup> Quoted in Tredell 128.

“because this is one of the ways the past gets back to you, the thwarting, indefatigable past”

(76). Though Mary’s present is for some time disconnected from her past through a trick of her memory, in her dreams it catches up with her in terrifying forms. Next the narrator muses:

I used to think there was no time like the present. I used to think there was no time *but* the present. Now I know better—or different, anyway. In the end, the past will always be there. The past is all there is: the present never sticks around for long enough, and the future is anybody’s guess. In time, you always have to hand it to the past. It always gets you in the end (OP 76).

Everything that has happened in the past adds up to equal a person’s present situation. Mary doesn’t know at the start of *Other People* what has happened to her, why her past is a blank in her mind, but the action of the novel is all affected by what has happened in the past, things that she has yet to remember. Pondering the swift passing of time in the lives of the infants he sees in *London Fields*, the narrator laments the way that time moves for humans as well as the earth; things become more complicated as time goes on and the amount of disorder in the universe is multiplied:

We’re all in it together now. As is the case with the world situation, something will have to give, and give soon. It will all get a lot woollier, messier. Everything is winding down, me, this, mother earth. More: the universe, though apparently roomy enough, is heading for heat death. I hope there are parallel universes. I hope alternatives exist. Who stitched us up with all these design flaws? Entropy, time’s arrow—ravenous disorder (239).

This subject induces serious despair in the narrator; he realizes that he not only misses things in the past that he will never hear again, but also feels sad about their absence in the future, and he regrets things that will no longer be around in the future, like Nicola, who will orchestrate her own death. The narrator feels keenly the greediness of time, writing: “oh, Christ, no, the hell of time. I never guessed that you lost things coming this way too. Time *takes* from you, with both hands. Things just disappear into it” (LF 239). Time even takes from the narrator in his dreams; he tries to escape the action of the novel by fleeing to America but is drawn inexorably back into London after “one of those dreams where things

happen at the same speed as they do in real life. It included a convincing four-hour wait in Reimmigration.” He wakes up to find he hasn’t even managed to leave England; he is sleeping in Heathrow Airport. Conscious again, he realizes that time is going to continue playing tricks on him, making some things seem to happen quickly and others take forever. As for future dreams: “from now on, each night, it’ll be special relativity—Einsteinian excruciation. So maybe the American dream was a farewell to dreams. And to much else” (LF 263). As for Nicola, her relationship to time is changing as well. Fittingly, in *Time* magazine, she reads:

The confluence [of distances of moon and sun from earth] made gravity put on weight, slowing the planet’s spin and also *slowing time*, so that earth days and nights were now fractionally but measurably longer. ‘Yeah, cheers,’ murmured Nicola, who had only twenty days and nights on earth to go. She tossed *Time* over her shoulder and arrived at her own explanation. Love made the world go round. And the world was slowing up. The world wasn’t going round (LF 332).

Because Nicola is in the process of bringing her life to an end before time can get to her, making her body wrinkled and saggy, she has no need for the cosmic explanations of time. Toward the end of *London Fields* the narrator is harshly reminded of his own mortality and personal relationship to time passing. He writes: “dying reminds me of something, something I’d just got over and successfully put behind me when, all of a sudden, I started dying. Middle age: that’s what...At last you really find out the direction time’s taking. Time’s arrow. Time works!” (LF 432). There is no possibility of escaping time’s arrow. In the eponymous novel it just happens to move in the opposite direction. Nothing can change in a life already mapped out. *Time’s Arrow* is like each Amis novel, it seems, dragged down inexorably by the grinding weight of time, simply in the opposite direction.

### 3.4 Time's Arrow: Toward Decreased Entropy

In *Time's Arrow* the action of the novel flows backwards, toward a more ordered universe where the level of entropy is lower. For every action taken in the real world, the level of disorder in the universe increases.<sup>113</sup> The reverse, as in the novel, is directly against common sense, and even the narrator, with an uncertain relationship to the arrow of time as it should normally flow, can judge that something is wrong in this system. There is a sense of distrust from the narrator about the way that time is flowing in the lives he sees: "Time now passed untrackably, for it was given over to struggle, with the bed like a trap or a pit, covered in nets, and the sense of starting out on a terrible journey, towards a terrible secret" (TA 5). There is something inherently wrong with time flowing backward and the narrator feels uneasy about the developments he observes, such as Tod growing younger and stronger after his initial move from 'the blackest sleep' in the hospital room, no longer deceased but resurrected for the purposes of the novel.<sup>114</sup> He says: "Everything is familiar but not at all reassuring. Far from it. This is a world of mistakes, of diametrical mistakes. All the other people are getting younger too, but they don't seem to mind, any more than Tod minds. They don't find it counterintuitive, and faintly disgusting, as I do" (TA 8).

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<sup>113</sup> While discussing cosmological models of the universe other than the 'big bang' theory, Lightman, in *Ancient Light*, mentions difficulties reconciling theories such as the 'oscillating universe model' with "the second law of thermodynamics, a basic law of physics that requires any isolated system to become more and more disordered until a state of maximum disorder is achieved" (51). Entropy is constantly increasing (at a certain scientifically accepted rate) in the universe we live in. In *Time's Arrow* this law of thermodynamics is turned on its head.

<sup>114</sup> Lawrence Sklar writes about the way that time's arrow is accepted to operate in the world as we know it:

The asymmetric nature of time, the radical difference in nature between past and future, has often been taken to be the core feature distinguishing time from that other manifold of experience and of nature, space. The past is fixed and has determinate reality. The future is a realm to which being can only be attributed, at best, in an 'indeterminate' mode of a realm of unactualized potentiality. We have memories and records of the past, but, at best, only inferential knowledge of a different sort of what is to come. Causation proceeds from past to future, what has been and what is determining what will be, but determination never occurs the other way around" (217).

To the narrator of *Time's Arrow* it seems as though "determination" is indeed acting contrary to intuitive principles of causality; the only time he can shake this sense is during Tod's time at Auschwitz as a Nazi doctor. Lawrence Sklar, "Time in Experience and in Theoretical Description of the World" *Time's Arrow Today*, ed. Steven F. Savitt (Cambridge: CUP, 1995) 217-229.



There are some clues to be found in art and literature, but the narrator never fully puts the pieces together. He says: “Like writing, paintings seem to hint at a topsy-turvy world in which, so to speak, time’s arrow moves the other way. The invisible speedlines suggest a different nexus of sequence and process” (TA, 87). Bergson agrees that the way that time operates must be experienced firsthand: “Real duration is *experienced*; we *learn* that time unfolds and, moreover, we are unable to measure it without converting it into space and without assuming all we know of it to be unfolded.”<sup>115</sup> The narrator of *Time’s Arrow* has to learn about time as it progresses from Tod’s death toward living a more full life with a career, lovers, a wife and family, right through school and childhood. At the start of *Time’s Arrow* when the narrator is trying to make the biggest leaps in understanding what he is observing, he has experienced such a brief amount of time that he is unable to comprehend. In *Other People*, Mary is similarly frustrated by her memory which betrays her by not revealing all of her past to her. Searching for a feeling of connection in her past with the shifting weather which is associated with the changing seasons, she embarks on a visit to a man from her past who may be able to help her. She stops partway there to observe:

Times of year must take you back, she thought—If there are times for you to go back to. Everyone is getting older all the time; they all have big houses in their minds where they can hang around. I’m tired of my narrow stretch, this gangplank of time. I’m tired. I’m tired of these thin shallows, littered with spoons and dishes [...] I want to swim a little deeper now. I can’t go on sucking each passing second dry (OP 132).

Mary becomes exhausted trying to garner information from every moment in her life since her memory has disappeared and she has only a brief section, a “gangplank” of her adult life to help her guess about her own past and personal behaviour patterns. The narrator of *Time’s Arrow* has a similarly small pool of time to draw from at the start, hurtling headlong into an

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<sup>115</sup> Henri Bergson, *Duration and Simultaneity: Bergson and the Einsteinian Universe* (Manchester: Clinaman, 1999) 43.



established adult life, while attempting to understand Tod's behaviour, and he has about as much success as Mary in decoding what is really going on.

The narrator of *Time's Arrow* describes Tod's life as it unfolds in reverse. So he is confused when things that appear to be getting better—for example Tod's previously mentioned increasingly youthful appearance—go unnoticed by those who are experiencing them:

Each day, before the mirror, as I inspect Tod's humanity—he shows no sign of noticing the improvement. It's almost as if he has no point of comparison. I want to click my heels, I was to clench my fist: *Yes*. Why aren't people happier about how great they're feeling, relatively? Why don't we hug each other all the time, saying, 'How about this?' (TA 43).

Of course Tod, moving in the thermodynamically real direction of time that the reader is accustomed to, is getting older and acting depressed about his increasing muscular weakness and balding head. The narrator continues to fail to put the whole picture together. As Keith is described in *London Fields*, where time's arrow moves in the normal, entropy-increasing direction, he struggles with understanding history and the order it expands in:

And the world, and history, could not be reordered in a way that would make sense to him. Some distance up the beach in Plymouth, Massachusetts, there once lay a large boulder, reputedly the first chunk of America to be touched by the Pilgrims' feet. Identified in the eighteenth century, this opening sample of US real estate had to be moved closer to the shore, in order to satisfy expectations of how history ought to happen (LF 9).

There are several points at which the narrator of *Time's Arrow* has a similar series of doubts about the problems generated in the common sense running of the world he is observing from his vantage point in Tod's head. In the first few pages he mentions a terrible secret. In the middle of the novel he brings his focus back to bear for a moment on the mystery that approaches as Tod travels deeper into his own past: "He is traveling toward his secret [...] I *will* know *how* bad the secret is. I will know the nature of the offense. Already I know this. I know that it is to do with trash and shit, and that it is wrong in time" (TA 63). Already having

mentioned more than once that there is something wrong with time, why would the narrator trust the medium to reveal anything he can accept as accurate or true? Just a few pages later he is thinking about watching chess matches in the park and says: “one final tug on the white pawn, and perfect order is restored; and the players at last look up smiling and rubbing their hands. Time will tell, and I put my trust in time, absolutely. As do the chess players, of course, every move legitimated by the slapped clock” (TA 69). The narrator continues to vacillate between time being a reliable concept and something not to be trusted. And the novel’s biggest secret has yet to be revealed, just as the narrator surmises: “Time is heading on now toward something. It pours past unpreventably, like the reflection on a windshield as the car speeds through city or forest” (TA 58).

Several times the narrator of *Time’s Arrow* remarks that ‘creation is easy’ and ‘destruction is difficult.’<sup>116</sup> There are various things in the everyday experience of observing Tod’s life that the narrator finds difficult to understand, but he accepts this particular reversed truism without any trouble, and continues to propagate it. While the flow of time is reversed and it is possible to heal with violence, the narrator has divided reactions to the different types of destruction and aggression he observes. Of a rape crisis centre he writes:

The welts, the abrasions and the black eyes get starker, more livid, until it is time for the women to return, in an ecstasy of distress, to the men who will suddenly heal them. Some require more specialized treatment. They stagger off and go and lie in a park or a basement or wherever, until men come along and rape them, and then they’re okay again (TA 31).

There is an extended period of dismantling and making more inconvenient a house that Tod has just moved in to. Viewed in reverse by the narrator, it appears that Tod is taking a perfectly good house and messing it up as thoroughly as possible. He laments:

I knew something was up the minute Tod started selling all the furniture. Throughout the whole process I looked on in wronged silence, like a wife. First every stick of furniture gets carted off, and all my labor-saving appliances, then the carpets and the

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<sup>116</sup> Pages 15, 19, 42, 120

curtains, if you please. Why was Tod punishing me like this? He got a real kick out of it, too, always looking for new ways to uglify the home. On would come the dungarees at the weekend. He prowled around in a simian hunger, searching for things to splatter and deface (TA 59).

The narrator interprets Tod's actions as perverse; why would anyone go to so much trouble to cause so much damage, to make a house uninhabitable? It should seem contrary to common sense that aggression has healing and restorative powers. Not only does the narrator of *Time's Arrow* acknowledge that violence is therapeutic, he confides, "but we all know by now that violence creates, here on earth" (TA 150). Earlier, the narrator observed, "things are created in the violence of fire. But that's all right. Gravity still pins us to the planet" (TA 42). From acceptance of violence as a creative force the narrator must come to some understanding about death and the point at which the reader sees people in the novel coming back to life, out of "the blackest sleep" as the narrator himself has experienced (TA 3). The next section will take a look at issues of death in the novel. Though Tod's work as a doctor, continually inflicting injury on his patients, makes little sense to the narrator, when Tod begins to deal in death, some sense of purpose is found.

### **3.5 Death and Stopped Time**

The central moral dilemma of *Time's Arrow* is that Tod's past career has included a stint as a Nazi doctor at the Auschwitz concentration camp. This is the terrible secret that the story has been heading toward. The narrator interprets the murders committed by the Nazis as well as the medical experimentation as beneficial acts. This device operates in the same way as Vonnegut's WWII film that runs backward while Billy Pilgrim watches:

Amis's solution to this problem lies in following Vonnegut's model of the bombs which suck up fire and inventing a life lived in reversed time which in turn create the

almost diabolical illusion of accomplishing good works. Thus Odilo *removes* gas pellets from the death camp showers and returns them to the camp pharmacy [...] this process renders [the atrocities] part of the reader's immediate experience since in the re-reversing time as read the reader must impel time forward towards the full banality of its horror, for of all the potentialities which become possibilities, only one will be actualized. Thus historical reality is brought back to consciousness through imagination.<sup>117</sup>

The section of the novel where Tod engages in the activities conducted at Auschwitz is the only part where the order of things make sense to the narrator. Representing this historical failure of a stretch of time when atrocities were committed on a scale never before seen, there is a description of "the stalled clock at Treblinka."<sup>118</sup>

Every station, every journey, needs a clock. When we passed it, on our way to inspect the gravel pits, the big hand was on twelve and the little hand was on four. Which was incorrect! An error, a mistake: it was exactly 13:27. But we passed again, late, and the hands hadn't moved to an earlier time. How could they move? They were painted, and would never move to an earlier time. Beneath the clock was an enormous arrow, on which was printed: Change Here For Eastern Trains. But time had no arrow, not here (TA 142-3).

Erected to reassure passengers that time has not forgotten or abandoned them, the façade of a train station at Treblinka has only two dimensions. The narrator continues: "indeed, at the railway station in Treblinka, the four dimensions were intriguingly disposed. A place without depth. And a place without time" (TA 143). The people who arrive on the train may not at first realize that they are in effect lost in time. Bergson writes: "but 'to find out what time is' is to note the simultaneity of an event, of a moment of our life or of the outside world, with a clock reading; it is not, in general, to record a simultaneity between clock readings."<sup>119</sup> Bergson's point is that people buy clocks in order to tell what time things happen to them, not to compare the times of different clocks, which is a meaningless activity. Every event in the lives of those who disembark at Treblinka station corresponds to the time displayed by the painted clock hands, four o'clock. Every violent action in the concentration camp takes place

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<sup>117</sup> Tredell 133.

<sup>118</sup> The "stalled clock" is first mentioned on 140 in *Time's Arrow*.

<sup>119</sup> Bergson, *Duration* 60.

at the same time, and therefore outside of time, because time doesn't move in this place. While Tod waits in limbo to receive clean identification papers in the underground of New York City, the narrator comments: "Time passed. Time, the human dimension, which makes us everything we are" (TA 68). Neither the Nazis nor their prisoners are fully human in time, because the interaction between them is so horrific that it must take place outside of time. It is not possible to relate to the self without time as a medium.<sup>120</sup> There is no continuity of self in time for the inhuman Nazis or the dehumanized Jews and other victims.

In *Other People* there is a related issue of the continuity of time within the self, where Mary struggles to place herself within time. Initially she has difficulty determining what her relationship with time is, and what value it has to her, because her memory is withholding her past from her conscious mind:

For quite a time her thoughts insisted on being simultaneous. They worked themselves out like this.

At first she didn't know where she was or how she had got there. She assumed that this was what memory was doing to her, subtracting day after day so that she would always have to start from the beginning, and never get ahead. Then she remembered the day before and (this was probably an earlier thought, the second thought perhaps) the day before reminded her of the idea of memory and the fact that she had lost hers. And she had lost it, she had still lost it, and she still didn't know what exactly this entailed. She sent light out into the corners of her mind...but time ended in mist, some time yesterday. She wondered what happened when you lost it, your memory. Where did it go, and was it lost for good or were you meant to be able to find it again? (OP 20-21).

*Other People* starts out: "her first feeling, as she smelled the air, was one of intense and helpless gratitude. I'm all right, she thought with a gasp. Time—it's starting again" (OP 13). Then the reader is told, "the first hours were the strangest. Where was her sense of things?" (OP 14). These "first hours" are those that Mary is conscious of after she has lost her memory and therefore become displaced in time. Her sense and understanding of time is disjointed, and her relationship with the present is altered because of the loss of her past. The novel is

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<sup>120</sup> Meyerhoff 35.

largely concerned with Mary's interactions with 'other people,' as she has no ability to filter any impressions of what type of people she encounters or if she has known them previously. Having lost her past, she cannot remember the people she already knows, and because her relationship with time has changed her manner and the way her face and eyes look, people she knew before take her for someone else also. Mary's relationship with time develops through the novel at an adult level in similar fashion to *Time's Arrow*, where the narrator spends so much time pondering what is going on in time with his host, Tod. As the novel is "A Mystery Story," Mary spends the course of it discovering her relationship with the person everyone knew before, Amy. They are one and the same girl, yet with different relationships to time because of mental illness, after a fashion. Meyerhoff writes of the changing self in time with reference to Heraclitus' famous statement that it is not possible to step in the same river twice as it is always flowing and changing and becoming something different: "The same puzzle obviously applies to the river of time within ourselves; again, it is difficult to see how we can dip into the same river of our own selves, whether past or present, if the moments we catch are always different. What we are, we are only in and through time; but we are also constantly changed in and by time."<sup>121</sup> The final chapter of *Other People* is called "Time." At the end, Mary, now Amy once again, wakes up at home in her bed and the description of her feeling is identical to the one Mary had at the start of the novel: "Her first feeling, as she smelled the air, was one of intense and helpless gratitude. I'm all right, she thought with a gasp. Time—it's starting again" (OP 206). Amy's father is downstairs winding the grandfather clock, symbolically restarting time.

In *Time's Arrow* the narrator's description of the "stalled clock at Treblinka" divides the horror of Tod's time at Auschwitz from his stint at Schloss Hartheim: "I got to see the famous 'railway station'—which was a prop, a façade" (142). Schloss Hartheim is an

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<sup>121</sup> Meyerhoff 29.

institutional building where Tod and other medical personnel handle an influx of patients who are insane, blind, or otherwise handicapped. Here the narrator once again loses his feeling of direct contact with Tod and any understanding of Tod's actions making sense in the realm of the Nazi death camps. Traveling away from Treblinka, the narrator feels that Tod is completely alone and the world has again stopped making sense (149).

### 3.6 Time as Commodity of the Present

Amis' novels present time as a commodity; it possesses financial value and can be easily wasted. Also, having money helps time pass. Characters are concerned with how to use time for personal benefit. There is widespread conflict between time as commodity and the importance of understanding the self with reference to the present moment.<sup>122</sup> This division between the concept of the value of one's time and the money it is possible to earn (and afterwards waste while passing the time) and the concept of the value of the present and the importance of considering that the present is in fact all there is in one's life, gives depth to Amis' characters.<sup>123</sup> Fresh from awakening in the hospital after an unidentified traumatic event, Mary wanders through the haunts of "tramps" on the street, and compares the dismaying blank that is her past to the way tramps spend their time: "but time ended in mist,

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<sup>122</sup> Bohm writes that in modern society, "the significance of time is all-pervasive." Most people are very concerned with how they use their time and "a great deal of pride is taken in the organization of time, and to follow time is to be regarded as virtuous. People should not 'waste time,' for 'time is money' and punctuality is a sure sign of inner discipline and order" (224).

<sup>123</sup> Rather than 'depth' given to Amis' characters as a result of the value of time, Kiernan Ryan sees the exchange as strange and tragic. He comments on McEwan's *In Between the Sheets*, which is not under discussion in this dissertation, and writes that the narrator "reminds us of the market force-field that underpins McEwan's act of writing and our act of reading, the fetishized commodity between our hands. While reading Amis too, we are rarely allowed to forget the bizarre transaction that we have entered into: paying someone for inventing a story in which these poor souls are put through all this grief for our amusement, to pass the time" ("Sex" 213-14). As this section continues I mention a number of places where Mary, the main character of *Other People*, realizes that money is needed to make the time pass.

some time yesterday” (OP 20). Her understanding of time and money burgeons, originally distorted before moving toward more socially conditioned concepts of time:

Tramps just don’t want to sell what other people sell—they just don’t want to sell their time.

Selling time, time sold: that’s the business we’re all in. We sell our time, but they keep theirs, but they don’t get any money, but they think about money all the time. It’s an odd way of going about things, being a tramp. Tramps like it, though. Being a tramp is increasingly popular, statistics show. There are more and more tramps doing without money all the time (23).

Much of the beginning of *Other People* deals with Mary’s temporal education. Bergson writes: “real duration is *experienced*; we *learn* that time unfolds and, moreover, we are unable to measure it without converting it into space and without assuming all we know of it to be unfolded.”<sup>124</sup> Mary must learn to interpret what time means to her and to her memories that she has lost and to the new memories she is building from scratch. She struggles to understand duration and the passing of time in her new life. After further interaction with the world where people occupy themselves with socially acceptable and monetarily rewarding occupations, Mary realizes that “it was only tramps who chose to waste their valuable time” (OP 69). Yet she still has little idea of how to use her own time. It isn’t long before Mary ends up in a halfway house for women where her understanding of the value of time continues to develop, as she notes:

You had to be out by nine. You couldn’t come back until twelve. Time was slow on the streets when you had no money. Time took forever.

Mary was looking for a job. She didn’t know whether you found them by moving or by staying still. Where were they? Who gave them away? She had all this time to sell, but didn’t know who might want to buy it. She thought about the jobs she had seen other people doing, and the special kinds of time they had to sell (OP 68).

With her abruptly truncated memory, Mary struggles to assign value or meaning to her time.

Even with the ability to fully reflect on one’s past experiences, Bergson writes:

To tell the truth, it is impossible to distinguish between the duration, however short it may be, that separates two instants and a memory that connects them, because

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<sup>124</sup> Bergson, *Duration* 43.



duration is essentially a continuation of what no longer exists into what does exist. This is real time, perceived and lived. This is also any conceived time, because we cannot conceive a time without imagining it as perceived and lived. Duration therefore implies consciousness; and we place consciousness at the heart of things for the very reason that we credit them with a time that endures.<sup>125</sup>

With such a brief time of renewed consciousness, Mary is devoid of comparative ability regarding the past. She cannot be certain that she has had any “time that endures” because she has no access to her memories which would allow her to connect instants the way Bergson describes. Picking up on cues from her environment she determines that she needs some activity in order to make all the time she finds on her hands pass while she waits for her mind to put together the missing pieces, enabling her to renew her relationship with duration in her own life. Employment is to Mary the ideal way to accomplish several things: first, to determine what her time is worth in dollar amounts; second, to keep the time she has from dragging as she will keep herself occupied; and third, to keep the rest of the time she has when not working from dragging as she will have money, which she has decided is what makes time pass: “Time was passing so slowly. She had no money left to help time on its way. You needed money to make time pass: that was how money got its own back in time. And time was taking forever” (OP 73-4). Meyerhoff writes:

For the social meaning of time deeply affects the status and value of the self. If the value of time is measured by what is produced and consumed, and if the individual’s life is envisaged as nothing but an accumulation of these socially useful moments of time, the status of the self is obviously threatened. Instead of being endowed with intrinsic value, the self is of purely instrumental, technological value, just like any other commodity. Caught within the formidable pressures of time and the social world, the self is reduced to the status of what it can produce, accomplish, and achieve, or whatever other terms may be used to designate this purely instrumental relationship.<sup>126</sup>

Amis’ characters often struggle to understand the idea of the self as intrinsically valuable rather than as a commodity in terms of the value of time. In *Money*, the central

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<sup>125</sup> Bergson, *Duration* 33.

<sup>126</sup> Meyerhoff 114.

character, John Self, defines himself completely in terms of money *in* time. Halfway through the novel he says: “Time is money. God damn it, Felix, I’m a busy man” (M 199). Conversely, after handing Mary “two or three times what she earned in a week,” her new acquaintance Jamie asks Mary: “what’s money, anyway? It’s only time, after all” (OP 140). Despite the past having value in terms of money earned, and the future having its potential earning possibilities, there are times when these characters realize the importance of the present, as it is the only time you can truly count on. With her blank past and uncertain future, sometimes the present is all Mary can handle. The narrative reads: “Mary was too full to eat, though she had eaten little that day. Not only food fills you up. Sometimes the present is more than enough; sometimes the present is more than you can keep down. She drank the tea and tried to prepare herself” (OP 113). Certainly earlier in *Other People*, when nearly everything she perceived seemed new to Mary because of her lost past, the present is everything to her. The reader learns that in some ways the loss of the past is not a handicap to Mary, but gives her a unique perspective:

Ironically, she enjoys certain advantages over other people. Not yet stretched by time,<sup>127</sup> her perceptions are without seriality: they are multiform, instantaneous and random, like the present itself. She can do some things that you can’t do [...] She knows how many times she has looked at her hands—a hundred and thirteen at the left, ninety-seven at the right. She can compare a veil of smoke sliding out of a doorway with a particular flourish of the blanket as she strips her bed. This makes a kind of sense to her. When the past is forgotten, the present is unforgettable (53).<sup>128</sup>

When taking his focus off the present which is lost and the future which is unknowable, John Self admits the true value of the present as well:

It’s all so far back in my time travel. Points of a journey do not matter when the journey has no destination, only an end. On the streets the women click—they are ticking through their time [...] It happened, but now this is happening. Like the vanished Vera the past is dead and gone. The future could go this way, that way. The

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<sup>127</sup> An introduction was given earlier to the stretching of time in 1.2; Mary perceives more details than ‘other people’ because she has so little to compare her experience to in her mind.

<sup>128</sup> Ryan writes of Mary’s ability to see the world through new eyes: “This grants us a violently estranged view of what passes for normality. The cruel absurdities of daily living strike us afresh through the eyes of a woman uncontaminated by what almost everyone blindly accepts” (“Sex” 216).

future's futures have never looked so rocky. Don't put money on it. Take my advice and stick to the present. It's the real stuff, the only stuff, it's all there is, the present, the panting present (M 198).

The reader is reminded of Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim coming "unstuck in time" in *Slaughterhouse-Five* when John Self talks about his experience of a trans-Atlantic flight. Time even seems to move in the wrong direction; *Money* predates *Time's Arrow* by about six years.<sup>129</sup> Amis is continually developing these themes of time; as John Self writes: "I slept. I slept for many hours, or I think I did. And when I woke up I was—I was sprung free from time. My readings and coordinates are still out there among the jetslime and earphones and weather gods of Atlantic space. Time is travelling. Night and day are moving past me in the wrong direction. I am falling behind" (M 221). At the very end of *Money* John Self finishes his descriptive analysis of his life in terms of time and money, and is surprised by what he finds. He writes: "*you know, during that time of pills and booze, during that time of suicide, my entire future flashed through my head. And guess what. It was all a drag! My past at least was—what? It was...rich. And now my life has lost its form. Now my life is only present, more present, continuous present*" (M 366). As the novel is subtitled, "A Suicide Note," the reader is left to surmise that John Self has decided never to enter his future, depressing as he is convinced it will be, but will remain in the present moment, living each day as it comes. In a comment published opposite the first page of the novel, Amis notes the importance of simply drafting a note while contemplating suicide as a move toward abolishing the self, but not actually physically perishing: "Usually the note is the thing. You complete it, and then resume your time travel."

Meyerhoff writes that "the awareness of continuity as an essential ingredient of selfhood is invariably part of the literary portrait. In this connection, the intimate, reciprocal relationship between time and the self becomes most manifest; for the awareness of

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<sup>129</sup> *Other People* is even earlier, from 1982, while *Money* was published in 1985, and *Time's Arrow* in 1991.

continuity within the self is correlative with the aspect of continuity or duration in time.”<sup>130</sup>

Meyerhoff writes at length of the importance of understanding the self in time, where time is necessary in order to organize memory and the past and to regulate all the various moments of experience, integrating them into a cohesive whole. Suicide is an end to the individual’s “awareness of continuity” and destroys the concept of self in the present, for the full duration of time. The possibility of committing suicide as a way of asserting oneself in the present moment comes into play more than once in Amis’ fiction. The narrator of *Time’s Arrow*, struggling to understand Tod’s inner torment in the hospital he is employed in in New York City, wonders where this life will end, as Tod seems desperate. He notes that the amount of time people have on this earth is fixed:

I am not fond of these paradoxes, if paradoxes they are; and I don’t expect everybody—or indeed anybody—to see it my way. But you can’t end yourself, not here. I am familiar with the idea of suicide. Once life is running, though, you can’t end it. You’re not at liberty to do that. We’re all here for the duration. Life *will* end. I know exactly how long I’ve got. It looks like forever. I feel unique and eternal. Immortality consumes me—and me only (TA 88).

Observing his host Tod attempt to hang himself in an Italian monastery some years later/earlier, the narrator says: “to show good faith, or to show something, he even tried a thing with...you know: the chair, the belt suspended from the rafter. It didn’t work, needless to say. As I took the trouble to explain earlier, you can’t do that. You can’t do that, not once you’re here” (TA 108). It is not possible to annihilate the self in the time of *Time’s Arrow*. Each of Amis’ novels struggles with this concept of the value of the self in time, in different ways. A suicide attempt is the swiftest approach to devaluing time, negating it while doing away with the self. While other novels examined in the larger scheme of this investigation have celebrated or despaired over the self in connection to the past and future, Amis’ novels tend toward the desire to end this connection with time altogether.

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<sup>130</sup> Meyerhoff 35.

### 3.7 Conclusions

Over the course of this chapter an examination has been made of ways that Amis handles time in several of his novels and most particularly *Time's Arrow*. While taking a look at McEwan's tendency to use time as a mode of progression through an emotional journey, the connections with Proust and Bergson were straightforward. In *The Child in Time* as in *Remembrance of Things Past*, the present would not be complete without its myriad and unexpected connections to the past in ways that stretch or warp the moment that the self exists in. Rushdie's dealings with time are more complicated, while he continues to use the past to build up an understanding of history as well as layer truths for the present. However, Rushdie separates himself from the ideas examined so far by sometimes dividing time up in order to deal with it in sections, or to allow characters to handle portions on a whim, or as a method of containing the past in connection with ordering the present. Amis approaches the issue of time from a completely new angle.

Taking his cue from Vonnegut, Amis focuses for the most part on the present. There is an insistence on locating characters very much in the action of a present moment. Amis consistently shows an overarching interest in the terminal point of the lives of his characters. Meyerhoff notes: "To find a way of arresting or reversing this irreversible flow of time toward death thus becomes the most significant quest in the life of man—a quest for some basis in experience or human existence which is untouched by this aspect of time, which is beyond and outside time."<sup>131</sup> In *Time's Arrow*, Amis does effectively reverse the arrow of time in the narrative, ending Tod's life at the moment of conception when he physically ceases to exist rather than at the time of death, which is where the story begins. Amis' characters are much alike for their tenaciousness, their struggle to understand themselves in

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<sup>131</sup> Meyerhoff 74.

the present they find themselves in. In the introduction to his *Einstein's Monsters* (1988), the text reads:

All times are different, but our time is *different*. A new fall, an infinite fall, underlies the usual—indeed traditional—presentiments of decline. To take only one example, this would help explain why something seems to have gone wrong with time—with modern time; the past and the future, equally threatened, equally cheapened, now huddle in the present. The present feels narrower, the present feels straitened, discrepant, as the planet lives from day to day (17).

This sense that something has “gone wrong with time” permeates Amis’ fiction. His characters struggle to locate themselves in time, to discover ‘the nature of the offense’.

Meyerhoff writes:

That time manifests itself in human experience under the aspect of change, mutability, and transitoriness is another truism. That the direction of time in human experience is determined by the prospect of death appears to be another safe generalization. But whether the temporal succession of moments in experience discloses a legitimate meaning of eternity; or whether time in experience has the qualities of duration, continuity, and identity within the structure of the self is much more difficult to say. There is no doubt that literary works, and insights, have frequently shown these qualities and their significance in human lives; no doubt that duration, dynamic fusion, continuity, and identity are often depicted as strictly correlative aspects of time, self, and the structures of the literary work itself.<sup>132</sup>

The “human experience” of Amis’ characters is often desperate. The clock makes frequent appearances as a disorienting factor. The reader is thrown off by the direction of time in *Time's Arrow*, and the narrator never quite reaches the conclusion that things are running backwards in time, though the reader cannot fail to eventually grasp what is happening in the novel.

The significant aspect of *Time's Arrow* for this investigation is Amis’ use of an alternative method in looking at time. Derived from Vonnegut’s ideas, the displacement experienced by the self in time in these reversed narratives means that the present takes on the central focus to a greater extent than in the novels of McEwan or Rushdie. Amis’ reversal of the story behind an entire life is unique in its thoroughness, and disturbing in what can be

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<sup>132</sup> Meyerhoff 133.

revealed about a life when played out from the end all the way to the very beginning. Earlier there was some discussion regarding McEwan's handling of potential futures and the richness of the unknown time in a human life for the very fact that it has yet to be explored, specifically in *Enduring Love*. Bergson comments about the 'intense pleasure' of hope, which lies in the many potential directions the future is capable of taking. As quoted in the McEwan chapter, Bergson writes: "the idea of the future, pregnant with an infinity of possibilities, is thus more fruitful than the future itself, and this is why we find more charm in hope than in possession, in dreams than in reality."<sup>133</sup> *Time's Arrow* is so bleak because there is no possibility of anything in Tod's life turning out any differently from what the narrator helplessly observes. There is only one path that can be taken when the arrow of time moves in reverse, and Amis' novel is thus limiting at the same time as it introduces an innovative way to experience time. Time is "the human dimension, which makes us everything we are" (TA 68). There is anything but an 'infinity of possibilities' when a lifetime is traced in reverse. Like Hawking's broken cup rising off the floor to reassemble itself and Vonnegut's late night WWII movie showing bombs rising into the bellies of planes, there is only one path that *Time's Arrow* can take once the journey has commenced. Bergson's concept of duration has been negated here in the lost aspect of free will; once started, the single path Tod's life can take has no possibility of redemption. Rather than finding time to be rich and meaningful as the previous novels we have looked at do, whether positively or negatively, Amis' novels ultimately find human time to be empty, a desolate landscape to be endured.

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<sup>133</sup> Bergson, *Time* 9-10.

#### 4.1 Lightman: *Einstein's Dreams*

The authors of the books examined in the previous three chapters have each taken several ideas about the human capacity to interact with the passing as well as the processing of time, and maintained and adapted these temporal themes throughout one or more novels. This chapter will draw together previous chapters, relating the narrative techniques to a fourth author and his first work of fiction. Alan Lightman's *Einstein's Dreams* (1994) constructs a pattern in which it is possible to propose as many as thirty different ways that time could be humanly perceived.<sup>134</sup> These thirty dream segments, set up as individual chapters, each take place in a world like the one the reader is familiar with, yet with some unique way of relating to the passing of time. A. Polikarov writes: "among these problems [of time] of particular interest is the question of the essence (the nature) of time: as a substance, an attribute, or a relationship, the question of the relationship between the concept of time and some basic philosophical categories such as matter, motion, space, causality, etc."<sup>135</sup> There is no unifying plot or character development beside the premise that these are a series of calendar-dated dreams that Albert Einstein could have had as a young patent clerk, before becoming a celebrated scientist; it is the attempt to understand the possibilities of time that is important and to which Polikarov refers.<sup>136</sup> Lightman has dated the dreams as occurring between April and June of 1905 to correspond with the time when the historical Einstein was in the process

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<sup>134</sup> Lightman is the only trained scientist of the four authors considered in this dissertation. His fiction is heavily influenced by his professional connection with the sciences and he has written a number of books on physics that present a human connection to science, making it easier for those outside the discipline to incorporate hard scientific ideas into their understanding.

<sup>135</sup> A. Polikarov, *Science and Philosophy* (Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 1973) 123.

<sup>136</sup> Lightman clearly admires Einstein for overcoming major obstacles in his young career and coming out with a theory that contradicts basic assumptions the physics community had accepted since the time of Isaac Newton. In an essay, "Time Travel and Papa Joe's Pipe," Lightman writes: "the manner in which time flows, as we now understand it, was brilliantly elucidated by Albert Einstein in 1905. First of all, Einstein unceremoniously struck down the Aristotelian and Newtonian ideas of the absoluteness of time, showing that the measured rate at which time flows can vary between observers in relative motion with respect to each other."

Alan Lightman, *Dance for Two: Selected Essays* (New York: Pantheon, 1996) 40-41.



of understanding the workings of time and developing his Special Theory of Relativity.

Lightman writes of Einstein's creative leap:

Nothing is more basic than time. Time is change. Time is mealtime, time is waking and sleeping, time is sunrise and sunset.

Although in our minds time seems to flow at a fidgety rate, we know that there are timekeeping devices outside of our bodies, ticking seconds off at regular intervals. Clocks, wristwatches, church bells—all divide years into months, months into days, days into hours, and hours into seconds, each increment of time marching after the other in perfect succession. And beyond any particular clock, which might sometimes run slow or fast, we have faith in a vast scaffold of time, stretching across the cosmos, laying down the law of time equally for electrons and people: a second is a second is a second. Time is absolute.

In 1905, Einstein proposed that time is not absolute. Einstein claimed that the rate of flow of time depends on the motion of the clock. A second as measured by one clock corresponds to less than a second as measured by another clock in motion with respect to the first. In other words, time is relative to the observer. Astoundingly, this proposal has been confirmed in the laboratory.<sup>137</sup>

Lightman has written accessibly for the non-scientific audience in nonfiction books like this one about Einstein's work, and in *Einstein's Dreams* he presents the imaginative possible development of Einstein's ideas in a form which appeals to readers of fiction as a way to conceptualize this breakthrough in the understanding of temporal reality.

As with Proust's related extrapolation from Bergson's philosophy regarding the human connection between time and experience, Lightman has used Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity for insight into a fictitious exploration of the possibilities of human experience in various temporal settings. Lightman was inspired by physics to elucidate on possibilities in time that Einstein might have considered as alternatives to the reality we know in this world, and has portrayed these possibilities in short dream-sized bites.<sup>138</sup> Perhaps inspired by Bergson, Proust constructed a very human reading of the sensations and

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<sup>137</sup> Alan Lightman, *Great Ideas in Physics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992) 109-110.

<sup>138</sup> In an essay called "Four Fingers in a Hundred Cubits," Lightman details in a more scientific and verifiable (via journals and later statements by historical figures who were involved) way the processes Einstein's thinking underwent while he was still a patent clerk in Bern between publishing his Special theory of Relativity in 1905 and the General theory of Relativity in 1915. This chapter appears to be the roots of a further fictional effort on Lightman's part (59-69).

Alan Lightman, *A Modern Day Yankee in a Connecticut Court, and Other Essays on Science* (New York: Penguin, 1986).

emotional truth that are part of the human experience of time in a non-scientific way, and used the philosophy to develop a lengthy and all-encompassing portrayal of the experience of time in one individual's life. There is far more variety in Lightman's approach, but less depth in each separate chapter; these 'dreams' leave plenty of room for the reader to ponder the implications of a new temporal paradigm.

Some of the dreams contain variations on time that the reader can understand and apply in the world outside of the fiction, while others are farfetched in a charming and imaginative way. Lightman maintains the dreamlike mood by throwing in casual objective details yet holding back on more than a few specifics of place or mannerism that would make the reader unable to hold and believe in the images as a series of dream worlds.<sup>139</sup> Without the physical laws and scientific truths regarding time in the world outside of the fiction, these are some of the possibilities for social patterns and daily routines, presented serially with each musing individually on the possibilities of time in worlds often fundamentally (yet subtly) different from the one the reader knows. Lightman holds great respect for the scientist who laid the foundation for the further development of human understanding of time in experience. He writes: "at the time he formulated his theory of relativity, Einstein was 26 years old and a clerk in a patent office in Bern, Switzerland. To claim that time is not what we think it is—that time does not flow at an absolute rate—took enormous courage, self-

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<sup>139</sup> In Lightman's *Dance for Two*, there are two essays that have this distinctive quality of withholding detailed information in order to generalize an understanding of the world the interactions take place in. The first, "Smile," describes in excruciating detail the biological processes that a man and a woman (both nameless) undergo upon laying eyes on each other, but ends by declaring that though science can detail and define the physical changes that occur (blood pressure rising, ocular dilation, the precise amount of time each process takes), what is unclear is why the man chooses to go and stand next to the woman. This is what Lightman calls 'A Sense of the Mysterious' in a more recent collection of essays, pointing out that though science can explain almost everything about physical phenomena, it will never be able to fully define what it means to make human choices. The second essay, "Mirage," from *Dance for Two*, describes an exotic city that occupants cannot leave, since in the distance during the day they constantly see the distant shimmering likeness of a second city which encircles the one they occupy, and the 'Mirage' recedes from the viewer, step for step, if he sets out to explore the vision. This is an essay devoid of names or character development, just like the individual chapters of *Einstein's Dreams*, which develops instead a particular place and understanding of the physical world for the reader to meditate upon.

confidence, and free thinking.”<sup>140</sup> Lightman continues in this tradition of free thinking related to physics by using fiction as a forum for exploring other potentialities of time, and gives Einstein muse-like responsibility as the vehicle for presenting these possibilities. In this chapter I will connect Lightman’s various applicable chapters with the books examined in the three previous chapters in terms of theories of time.

#### **4.2 *Einstein’s Dreams* and McEwan’s Emotional Journey in Time**

The chapter of *Einstein’s Dreams* most closely related to Ian McEwan’s *The Child in Time* where the lost potential of a moment affects the rest of the protagonist’s life is the third chapter. Lightman presents a man who thinks of a woman and must decide whether to go to her or not. Three decisions are made simultaneously and three new worlds split from this one point.<sup>141</sup> In the first, he does not go to her, and loses that opportunity. In the next, he goes to her and they grow passionate about each other and move in together and the man’s life is completely changed. In the last, he goes to her but nothing of import happens; they drink tea and talk and then he leaves and nothing is lost or gained. In *The Child in Time* the moment that Stephen decides to go to the grocery store with Kate rather than stay with Julie and make love to her is the one that haunts him. Of the man who makes three decisions in the same moment in the third chapter of *Einstein’s Dreams*, Lightman writes:

These three chains of events all indeed happen, simultaneously. For in this world, time has three dimensions, like space. Just as an object may move in three perpendicular dimensions, corresponding to horizontal, vertical, and longitudinal, so an object may participate in three perpendicular futures. Each future moves in a different direction of time. Each future is real (ED 21-22).

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<sup>140</sup> Lightman, *Great Ideas* 111.

<sup>141</sup> This is also along the lines of the theme of dividing possibilities in Borges’ ‘Garden of Forking Paths.’ The contemporary interest in storylines where there is a division of possibilities may also be seen in film, for example ‘Sliding Doors’ (1998) and ‘Memento’ (2000).

The fascinating thing about this world is that the people know that there are three different worlds created at every point of decision, and argue about it, bringing the question of free will into the equation: "In time, there are an infinity of worlds" (ED 22). Stephen does not have the luxury of living alternate possibilities in separate worlds when his decision to go shopping with Kate results in the loss of his daughter forever.

Lightman's most recent novel, *Reunion* (2003), deserves a mention here as it deals with time more directly than either of his two intermediate works of fiction, *Good Benito* (1995) and *The Diagnosis* (2002). *Reunion* has connections related to the splitting in time of a moment in order to follow different paths, as well as the emotional journey in time. The main character, Charles, is a middle aged professor who decides to attend a university reunion thirty years after graduation. While speaking to Michael, a former classmate, about a chance meeting years earlier with a girl in a park who Michael felt a strong connection with, but never pursued, Charles ponders the opportunity lost in terms of time: "Momentous choices constantly bombard us, but we are usually unaware of them at the time" (R 39-40). Regret is an emotion strongly connected in this novel with the passage of time.<sup>142</sup> The forum is well-chosen, for reunions are typically a place to express satisfaction, rather than regret, with the way one's life is progressing. Charles ponders Michael's experience:

On that spring day in May, without warning, Michael's life gushed into a break point, like a river rushing to the mouth of two branching channels, splitting, half flowing into one channel and half into the other. But the junction was sudden, and Michael didn't realize he'd made a turn until very far downstream. Could he possibly have tested both channels, then paddled upstream to choose the happier path? But the current was too strong. Time flows only one way. I seem to remember Kierkegaard or

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<sup>142</sup> Lightman has written in two separate essays about his disappointment with the limits of a scientific career; the average age of performing Nobel Prize-winning work for a physicist is 36 years old. Lightman writes in "A Scientist Dying Young" (1984): "in childhood, I used to lie in my bed at night and fantasize about different things I might do with my life, whether I would be this or that, and what was so delicious was the limitless potential, the years shimmering ahead in unpredictability. It is the loss of that I grieve" (177). Lightman declares himself fortunate, as in his early career he was able to focus on physics and once the momentum for science gave out, he turned to his other strength and passion, fiction writing.

Alan Lightman, *A Sense of the Mysterious: Science and the Human Spirit* (New York: Pantheon, 2005).

somebody saying that life can be understood only looking backward, but it can be lived only going forward (R 40).

Just as Stephen tortures himself by returning to the moment of his decision to leave Julie sleeping, Charles looks back at what may have been a turning point in Michael's life. While at the campus again Charles finds himself re-living part of his own final year and recalls sitting outside on the campus lawn, hearing "the chapel bell chiming the hour. What hour? The hour of everything past. The hour of the branching channels ahead" (R 79). Charles could be hearing either the chapel bells of his final year of university, or the same chapel bells of his thirtieth reunion; time overlaps here.<sup>143</sup> Toward the end of the novel Charles wishes he could speak to his earlier self:

I want to warn him. 'The channel branch is ahead.' But what a silly idea to think I can warn him. His future is already past. We cannot change what has happened, can we. We cannot talk to ourselves at a prior moment in time. Still, I want to warn him. He is so fragile, like her. But his heart is more open. Although he thinks he is happy, he is suffering. He has suffered, he is suffering, he will suffer, I am dizzy with present and past. And future. What year is it? (R 160).

Like McEwan's handling of the emotional journey in time, in *Reunion*, Lightman explores the instinct to return to the past and make some small change that would affect a whole future life.<sup>144</sup>

In *Einstein's Dreams* there are two other chapters to mention in conjunction with McEwan and the emotional connection to time. In one the reader again sees time compared to a river, but here instead of branching at points of decision, time gets caught up on some debris or temporal breeze which displaces it and doesn't allow it to flow uniformly. Thus people sometimes get diverted back to the past and live in fear of affecting the future with

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<sup>143</sup> Slay describes McEwan's *The Child in Time* in a similar way, noting that "images of time also serve to unify the novel. Stephen [...] is constantly slipping into the past of memories through his structured daydreams. Throughout the novel, then, there is a continuous shift from the present to the past and back again. Likewise, there are many references to the seeming instability of time and how it often shifts according to perception; Stephen Lewis is especially susceptible to the shifting qualities of time" (118). In Lightman's novel, *Reunion*, Charles is equally susceptible to the "shifting qualities of time."

<sup>144</sup> Readers well versed in classical tragedy may note the connection with Oedipus and the idea of one small action or omission resulting in a completely different path in life, to disastrous ends.

their present actions. One woman is afraid of setting off a chain of events which will prevent the birth of the man credited with helping to form the European Union in 1979: “She crouches and waits for the stream of time to carry her back to her own time” (ED 16). Time-travelers do their best to stay unnoticed, invisible. Of any such unfortunate person, displaced in the universal temporal flow, Lightman writes: “if he makes the slightest alteration in anything, he may destroy the future [...] He is an exile of time” (ED 16).<sup>145</sup> The people who know that small actions may drastically affect the future are paralyzed with fear and feel jealous of the people who are living in the right time because they have free will and can act without caring or knowing what the results of their actions will be.

The characters of McEwan’s *Enduring Love* experience a moment which changes their lives along with their perception of time passing. One of *Einstein’s Dreams* also portrays a world where a moment can change everything: “This is a world of changed plans, of sudden opportunities, of unexpected visions. For in this world, time flows not evenly but fitfully and, as consequence, people receive fitful glimpses of the future” (86-87). According to a momentary vision of the future, people reshape their entire lives to correspond to what they have seen: “Indeed, what sense is there in continuing the present when one has seen the future?” (ED 87). Alternatively, some attempt to deny this elimination of their free will, and act as though many futures are possible, asserting emotional control as far as they are able. In the end all the people find themselves in the future glimpsed at some point in the past, whether they attempted to refute it or not. It is worse for those without a preview of their own lives: “For those who have not had their vision, this is a world of inactive suspense. How can

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<sup>145</sup> It is not only in fiction that Lightman addresses the implications of time travel. He writes:  
Being a scientist myself, I know that time travel is quite unlikely according to the laws of physics. For one thing, there would be causality violation. If you could travel backward in time, you could alter a chain of events with the knowledge of how they would have turned out. Cause would no longer precede effect. For example, you could prevent your parents from ever meeting. Contemplating the consequences of that will give you a headache, and science-fiction writers for decades have delighted in the paradoxes that can arise from travelling through time (*Dance* 40).

one enroll in university without knowing one's future occupation?" (ED 88). The questioning continues with: "who would fare better in this world of fitful time? Those who have seen the future and live only one life? Or those who have not seen the future and wait to live life? Or those who deny the future and live two lives?" (ED 89). For some, a single moment is enough to change an entire life, while others either wait for their moment, or choose to go blindly toward the future with no challenge to their understanding of time. Such emotionally charged questions permeate *Einstein's Dreams* as well as McEwan's novels.

#### **4.3 *Einstein's Dreams* and Rushdie's Layered and Generational Time**

Each of Salman Rushdie's novels examined earlier used family time as a background for the life of the main character, presenting a cause and effect relationship with the past and present within the same family. In *Grimus*, Flapping Eagle and his sister Bird-Dog are given the gift (or curse) of immortality early in their lives, and eventually retreat to an island where only immortals live, as a way of escaping the drag of what should be a mortal existence. One of the episodes in *Einstein's Dreams* supposes that everyone lives forever. Some people are paralyzed by this fact, doing little because they suppose they have eternity to learn new trades and languages. Others seize the opportunity to do everything, because they will have enough time to learn every language and every type of employment. For each of these types of people, called the 'Laterers' and the 'Nowers', there is the handicap of having all of one's relatives still alive to give advice about the path the later generation's lives could or should take. Ambition becomes diluted when a child cannot seek advice from a parent without that parent then asking their parents and grandparents: "Where every action must be verified one million times, life is tentative" (ED 121). No one can make a decision for themselves. As

happens in *Grimus*, eventually the instinct for suicide comes out in some individuals: “Such is the cost of immortality. No person is whole. No person is free. Over time, some have determined that the only way to live is to die. In death, a man or a woman is free of the weight of the past” (ED 121). Both Lightman and Rushdie’s novels lead to the conclusion that to be immortal is not to be free.

Another of the dream episodes with a connection to the idea of generational images in time as well as two-dimensional containment of time, as in Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, begins like this: “imagine a world in which there is no time. Only images” (ED 75). Although the list of images this dream contains are laid out as flat two-dimensional images they contain their own pasts within them; they cannot be presented as totally free in time. The images contain both depth and extension in time despite being like a snapshot moment.<sup>146</sup> “An osprey framed in the sky, its wings outstretched, the sun rays piercing between feathers.” The presence of the sun connotes time passing though the moment is fixed: “A father and son alone at a restaurant, the father sad and staring down at the tablecloth. An oval window, looking out on fields of hay, a wooden cart, cows, green and purple in the afternoon light.” Here are more generational images, and seasonal ones as well, the idea of an approaching harvest containing time in and of itself: “An old man in the kitchen, cooking breakfast for his grandson, the boy gazing out the window at a white painted bench.” Despite a lack of action beyond that presented immediately in the flat description of an image, time exists in the relationship between family members at different stages of life: “A strange face in the mirror, gray at the temples.” Here is the suggestion that time can pass in an individual’s life practically unnoticed, till one day a good look is taken in the mirror and the extension of time having passed can surprise and unnerve.

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<sup>146</sup> The following images are from pages 76-79 of *Einstein’s Dreams*.



In one of the last chapters of *Einstein's Dreams*, Lightman writes of "a world of countless copies." Each person, each action, and each moment is repeated: "for time is like the light between two mirrors. Time bounces back and forth, producing an infinite number of images, of melodies, of thoughts" (ED 165). Yet with every bounce of time, the image produced retains less detail, becomes an echo, and eventually fades. There is a young man playing the violin, strangely connected to the copies of himself: "He feels the others. He feels himself repeated a thousand times, feels this room repeated a thousand times, feels his thoughts repeated. Which repetition is his own, his true identity, his future self?" (ED 165-166). There is a layered effect achieved here, with the difficulty being in determining which image is the original, and thus the originator of the echoes. In Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* there is much depth achieved with the theme of palimpsests as well, for example in the creation of 'Palimpstine'; the question is, which incarnation is more true, the paintings by Moor's mother Aurora or the physical location in Spain created by her devoted Vasco where the paintings are brought to life?

Similar to the dream of 'countless copies,' the gifts of the power of midnight are reinterpreted a thousand times in the births of *Midnight's Children*, radiating outwards as the hour passes minute by minute. There comes a time also when each of the children becomes aware of the others' existence. As the minutes of that initial hour pass, the gifts bestowed by the hour upon the Children lessen in importance, moving from Saleem's telepathy granted on the stroke of midnight all the way to mere circus tricks given to the children born almost sixty minutes later, with a range of abilities in between. In *Midnight's Children* the question of who is the original, with a thousand reinterpretations incarnated in the other individual children, is impossible to answer because no one knows for certain who was born first, Saleem with his telepathy and marvelous nasal capability, or his rival, Shiva of the deadly knees and predisposition toward judgment of perceived sinners. The novel hints rather

broadly that the two were switched at birth, allowing for a mix-up of social class as well as the confusion of birthright. Saleem feels his connection to all the other children of midnight and wonders at what his powers mean to 'his true identity, his future self'.

From immortality to the imposed limitations of generational relationships, from the time contained in the layering of flat images to copies bouncing from mirror to mirror and fading into the distance, these are some of the connections between Rushdie and Lightman in terms of time.

#### **4.4 *Einstein's Dreams* and Amis' Arrow of Time**

Martin Amis' novels often centre around cause and effect and the value of time. The chapter of *Einstein's Dreams* most directly related to *Time's Arrow* comes about halfway through the book. Lightman writes: "in this world, time flows backward" (102). In four short pages Lightman presents the same idea of time moving in reverse which propels Amis' novel, starting with the physical example of the rehabilitation of a piece of fruit: "A mushy, brown peach is lifted from the garbage and placed on the table to pinken. It pinkens, it turns hard, it is carried in a shopping sack to the grocer's, put on a shelf, removed and crated, returned to the tree with pink blossoms" (ED 102). There is a key difference between the fictions, however. In Lightman's chapter, people understand the nature of time flowing in reverse. They look forward to the past, in a sense. One elderly man stands beside the grave of a friend, but he feels no grief: "He looks ahead to the day when his friend's lungs will be strong, when his friend will be out of his bed and laughing, when the two of them will drink ale together, go sailing, talk" (ED 106). Another man receives the Nobel Prize for physics, but during the ceremony thinks of the time to come when he will be doing his most important work as a

young man in a cramped office: “The anticipation of that rush of the blood, that time when he will be young and unknown and unafraid of mistakes, overpowers him now as he sits in his chair in the auditorium” (ED 105-106). The people of this world already know their futures, as though remembering what we understand to be the past; for them it is yet to come. Lightman has presented yet another way of viewing time’s arrow; the people of this ‘dream’ apparently know both the time that has passed and that which is yet to come, while Amis’ novel *Time’s Arrow* does not allow for the recognition of either with its disembodied narrator who helplessly observes the world pass in reverse and attempts to make sense of it.

Another of the chapters of *Einstein’s Dreams* plays with the idea of cause and effect, proposing that these two concepts may not always be linked. Things that seem to happen for no reason at all are later justified by some strange turn of events: “But by what bizarre connection, by what twist in time, by what reversed logic?” (ED 40). Scientists are helpless, “their logic, illogic” (ED 41). Perhaps rather than cause being preceded by effect, the natural order of time as a line from past to future has become ruptured: “perhaps cause lies forever in the past while effect in the future, but future and past are entwined” (ED 38). Artists are thrilled because the order of events makes no sense: “Unpredictability is the life of their paintings, their music, their novels. They delight in events not forecasted, happenings without explanation, retrospective,” while scientists are seen as irrational, and tear their hair out with frustration (ED 41). The narrative explains that in the end this order of things poses little problem to the general populace for “most people have learned how to live in the moment. The argument goes that if the past has uncertain effect on the present, there is no need to dwell on the past. And if the present has little effect on the future, present actions need not be weighed for their consequences. Rather, each act is an island in time, to be judged on its own.” People act on their true feelings rather than future expectations, because there is no benefit to be had by being dishonest, materially or emotionally: “It is a world of impulse. It is

a world of sincerity” (ED 42). In Amis’ *Time’s Arrow*, cause and effect were consistently reversed as the whole order of time ran backward through the novel. In Amis’ *Other People* the theme of memory loss contributed to the confusing relationship between cause and effect at the start of the novel, and Mary had to ascertain for herself the relationship between the two. Lightman presents a world in which people can be truly honest with each other because they have no way of predicting how their actions will affect their own futures.

The eleventh dream Lightman provides for Einstein turns the arrow of time around once again, but in a new way from that of Amis’ *Time’s Arrow* or the cause and effect confusion Lightman has presented thus far: “In this world, the passage of time brings increasing order. Order is the law of nature, the universal trend, the cosmic trend. If time is an arrow, that arrow points toward order. The future is pattern, organization, union, intensification; the past, randomness, confusion, disintegration, dissipation” (ED 68). The chapter describes untidy homes which clean themselves, gardens which never need weeding, and even the wondrous reappearance of misplaced socks. This chapter brings back to mind the experience of Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five* while watching a WWII film in reverse, where the rubble of destroyed buildings springs back into shape as bombs lift into the bellies of airplanes to be taken back to bases and dismantled, their components hidden in the earth in a move toward increased order. In Lightman’s chapter, however, it is not that time is moving from future to past, it is that the universal law brings order as the future of the cosmos. Stephen Hawking argues that people who observe smashed cups rising from the floor to a whole state on a tabletop would also have a psychological arrow of time that operated in reverse from how we understand it: “That is, they would remember events in the future, and would not remember events in their past. When the cup was broken, they would remember it being on the table, but when it was on the table, they would not remember

it being on the floor.”<sup>147</sup> Lightman describes a broken vase acting similarly at the sound of lightning striking in a storm in this chapter. This is not how the people of this chapter are in terms of their awareness of their world. In the world of Einstein’s dream: “philosophers have argued that without a trend toward order, time would lack meaning. The future would be indistinguishable from the past” (ED 68). Time’s arrow moves in reverse from how the reader understands it outside of the world of the novel, but the ‘psychological arrow’ that Hawking mentions operates in a familiar way. Speaking of the psychological state of the inhabitants of this world, there is a yearly phenomenon that rejects the orderliness of the universe:

For in springtime the populace become sick of the order in their lives. In spring, people furiously lay waste to their houses. They sweep in dirt, smash chairs, break windows [...] In spring, people meet at unarranged times, burn their appointment books, throw away their watches, drink through the night. This hysterical abandon continues until summer, when people regain their senses and return to order (ED 69).

In a universe tending toward order, this is the equivalent of spring cleaning, a brief period where the people try to reverse the forces of order in their lives.<sup>148</sup>

The last of *Einstein’s Dreams* to be mentioned in connection with Amis and the value of time describes a world where everything is in motion, even the houses and places of business, all on rails or otherwise moving as quickly as possible about the city. It has been discovered that time passes more slowly for things in motion. It is possible to gain several minutes per day on a neighbour if one’s house is outfitted with a faster motoring apparatus, and thus the value of houses is based on their speed: “For the faster a house travels, the more

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<sup>147</sup> Hawking 188.

<sup>148</sup> Much like Hawking’s scenario of a cup breaking when it hits the floor recently mentioned, Lightman offers a layman’s series of examples to help the non-scientist understand ways in which entropy increases all the time more easily than it decreases:

Intuitively, the second law of thermodynamics makes sense. If you start with a deck of cards arranged by suit and number and drop it on the floor, the odds are great that the regathered cards will not be arranged in good order. On the other hand, if you start with a randomly ordered deck and shuffle it 10 times, the chances are extremely small that the resulting cards will be arranged in ascending order. Similarly, eggs often break but never reform; skywriting fades but never comes back; unattended rooms gather dust but do not get clean. Any isolated system evolves in a one-way direction from order to disorder (*Ancient Light* 63).

slowly the clocks tick inside and the more time available to its occupants” (ED 92). As Einstein predicted, time passes relative to people in motion. Above and beyond residential significance, a business can achieve success by adhering to the principle of moving as quickly as possible: “Since time is money, financial considerations alone dictate that each brokerage house, each manufacturing plant, each grocer’s shop constantly travel as fast as possible, to achieve advantage over their competitors” (ED 92). The theme of time equaling money is one seen often in Amis’ novels. The people of this chapter who decide to ignore things moving more quickly than they do, rather than looking out the window to compare speeds, are the ones who find some happiness, just as conversely it is the people of Amis’ fictions who are most obsessed with time that end up miserable and incomplete.

#### **4.5 *Einstein’s Dreams* and Bergson’s Free Will**

In one of the final chapters of *Einstein’s Dreams*, there is a world where time has no fluidity; it is totally predetermined. Disturbingly, the people are fully aware that they have no free will. Every movement and every achievement has nothing to do with the people of this world because every moment is already certain and no action can change this. People can think of changes they would like to make, for example a ballerina thinking she should have slightly changed her routine, but they know that no change can be made and so there is no sense of enthusiasm about even what might be considered to be special activities. There is no conviction in the carrying out of obligations or performance at events. The description of this reality has a depressing finality to it: “for in this world, the future is fixed./This is a world in which time is not fluid, parting to make way for events. Instead, time is a rigid, bonelike structure, extending infinitely ahead and behind, fossilizing the future as well as the past.

Every action, every thought, every breath of wind, every flight of birds, is completely determined, forever” (ED 159-160). In *Time and Free Will* Bergson writes:

What makes hope such an intense pleasure is the fact that the future, which we dispose of to our liking, appears to us at the same time under a multitude of forms, equally attractive and equally possible. Even if the most coveted of these becomes realized, it will be necessary to give up the others, and we will have lost a great deal. The idea of the future, pregnant with an infinity of possibilities, is thus more fruitful than the future itself, and this is why we find more charm in hope than in possession, in dreams than in reality (9-10).<sup>149</sup>

The people in this dream can take no pleasure in their hopes for the future, for there is nothing they can do to change the path that time will take. ‘Reality’ holds no ‘charm’. In a few short pages Lightman illustrates effectively the dismal concept of a world in which it is not possible to alter even the smallest modicum of time via some exercise of free will. The dream goes on: “in a world of fixed futures, life is an infinite corridor of rooms, one room lit at each moment, the next dark but prepared. We walk from room to room, look into the room that is lit, the present moment, then walk on. We do not know the rooms ahead, but we know we cannot change them. We are spectators of our lives” (ED 161). To be merely an observer of one’s life is the opposite of Bergson’s philosophy. Free will is tied up in the possibility of acting to change the course of the future. Without the possibility of changing time to come there is no enjoyment to be had in passively awaiting the arrival of future moments. This dream ends however with a suggestion that there is more depth to this world and the issue of free will than a surface understanding permits. A man walks along knowing he owes money to his friend, yet has been spending it on himself. He feels no guilt because he knows he cannot change his own actions, and so he has a sense of freedom in that way. The chapter declares that “in a world of fixed futures, there can be no right or wrong. Right and wrong demand freedom of choice, but if each action is already chosen, there can be no freedom of

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<sup>149</sup> As previously quoted in 1.3 in connection with the disappearance of Kate and Stephen’s perceived impoverishment of his future, and also very applicable here.

choice. In a world of fixed future no person is responsible” (ED 161-162). It is interesting that the text runs: “each action is already *chosen*” (emphasis added), implying that there could have been an alternate route, but some higher power has decided just how everything will play out in advance. In the end this is just another of Einstein’s fictional dreams to be discarded as a potential theory of time during the period when the historical figure was actually developing his Special Theory of Relativity.

#### 4.6 Conclusions

*Einstein’s Dreams* is a creative exploration of the possibilities of the human perception of time. However, throughout the collection of dreams the reader is being set up to expect that there is only one theory of time that can be accurate. The book starts with the comment: “out of many possible natures of time, imagined in as many nights, one seems compelling. Not that the others are impossible. The others might exist in other worlds” (ED 6-7). The reader is conditioned to expect that there is only one dream which will make sense and which is understood to take place in the world outside of the book, just as the real Einstein settled on his Special Theory of Relativity as the one true physical reality of time. What is achieved by offering this exploration in the form of a fiction is that the final understanding of the workings of time turns out to be more like Proust’s adaptation of Bergson’s philosophy. That is, there may be one generally accepted scientific theory to describe time, but the perception of individual humans regarding time can take many different forms. Lightman offers descriptions of worlds where time is unlike anything the reader has seen in fiction to the knowledge of the author of this dissertation. Some further possibilities deserve a brief mention.



One chapter reasons:

Hypothetically, time might be smooth or rough, prickly or silky, hard or soft. But in this world, the texture of time happens to be sticky. Portions of towns become stuck in some moment in history and do not get out. So, too, individual people become stuck in some point of their lives and do not get free (ED 63).

The reader can empathize; everyone knows someone who dwells on the ‘glory days’ of high school for example, or perhaps belonged to a University sports team—they are ‘stuck’ in that time in their minds: “The tragedy of this world is that no one is happy, whether stuck in a time of pain or of joy. The tragedy of this world is that everyone is alone. For a life in the past cannot be shared with the present. Each person who gets stuck in time gets stuck alone” (ED 65). A later chapter supposes that time is a sense which appears differently to every individual: “In a world where time is a sense, like sight or like taste, a sequence of episodes may be quick or may be slow, dim or intense, salty or sweet, causal or without cause, orderly or random, depending on the prior history of the viewer” (ED 115). It is difficult to imagine time seeming ‘salty or sweet’ but the other possibilities seem like functions of memory, where some people are able to keep things in order in their heads, and others lose track of how exactly things happened.<sup>150</sup> Again, this chapter is applicable to experience outside of the novel; the fiction simply presents a novel interpretation of individual perception.

Speaking of functions of memory, one chapter depicts a world where people have no ability for making memories. Each person carries a self-authored notebook with the history of their lives written down inside so that they may open it in the morning to discover their occupation, and again they open it in the evening to see where they live. It is possible to read the book every day to discover just what one’s past has contained. Every moment is fully appreciated as though it is completely different from every moment that has preceded it: “Without memory, each night is the first night, each morning is the first morning, each kiss

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<sup>150</sup> One of Bergson’s great themes is that of time as a quality rather than a quantity (*Time* 73).

and touch are the first.” People are polite all the time because they are uncertain of the history of individual relationships: “A world without memory is a world of the present. The past exists only in books, in documents” (ED 82). There comes a point in each person’s life when the book is too long to reread every day. Some choose to look at the early parts of their lives, imagining their youth. Others read only the more recent parts in order to appreciate the more mature person they have become. Some abandon the books altogether and live without memory. The value of the present moment comes into question when it is sacrificed to the desire to know the content of the past.

There are additional comments to be made about *Einstein’s Dreams* in terms of philosophy of time in contemporary fiction separate from the several other authors that have been looked at in this dissertation. This small volume is of great interest simply for the sheer number of alternative understandings of time it presents. The paradox that is finally drawn from Lightman’s first work of fiction is that while the reader is set up from the start to expect that it is only in fiction that these various worlds can exist, at the end of the book more than one conception of time seems applicable to the experience of the reader. The “other worlds” that are suggested in the prologue do not seem so far away; in fact it is more likely that they overlap with the one we know, their relative truth waxing and waning at various times in the life of the reader. The chapter describing a Great Clock which, once invented by men, must be worshipped in the Temple of Time, all other time-keeping devices banned, may be an exaggeration, but there are certainly individuals who treat time with great reverence and respect (ED 148-149). The chapter describing the slowing of time as its centre is approached takes place in a world different from ours, but certainly time in human experience can seem to slow and almost stop completely based on extreme circumstances: “As a traveler approaches this place from any direction, he moves more and more slowly [...] For this is the center of time. From this place, time travels outward in concentric circles—at rest at the

center, slowly picking up speed at greater diameters” (ED 70). Even the final chapter, where time is anthropomorphized as a nightingale that people try to catch in order to have more time in their lives, brings to mind the desperate measures that many people take in an attempt to slow the time in their lives. This is not just fiction, but a way to help the reader better understand the personal relationship with time that each of us is involved in throughout our lives, for it is impossible to ignore or to live without being affected by time.

### **Final Remarks**

This dissertation started with the application of Henri Bergson’s philosophical ideas regarding human perception of time to works by four contemporary authors of fiction. At the close of his speech awarding Bergson the Nobel Prize for Literature, Halström said “we are indebted to him” because “he has released a creative impulse of inestimable value, opening a large access to the waters of living time, to that atmosphere in which the human mind will be able to rediscover its freedom and thus be born anew.”<sup>151</sup> Using Bergson’s philosophy as a point of origination allowed for the exploration of ways in which McEwan, Rushdie, Amis and Lightman make use of the various properties of time to advance (or halt) plot, develop (or stunt) character, and bring the reader a number of stimulating possibilities for the understanding of time in fiction. While each of the four chapters included its own ‘conclusion’ section to summarize before the exploration as a whole proceeded to consider additional works, I will reiterate here the path this study has taken in order to bring the current discussion to a close. Bergson’s philosophy “released a creative impulse” as Halström said, and from Virginia Woolf and James Joyce to McEwan, Rushdie, Amis and Lightman,

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<sup>151</sup> Horst 245.

there have been many different directions explored in terms of the possibilities of temporal narrative.

Starting with McEwan's *The Child in Time* and *Enduring Love*, Bergson's concept of *durée* and the quality of time versus measurable quantities of time were important. A discussion of four techniques of key importance in these two novels followed. Crucial moments in the narrative were stretched to reinforce the understanding of their importance. The potentiality of certain moments also received attention, in recognition that the future is not certain and alternate possibilities do exist, as though there is a branching of potential realities. The third topic in this first chapter dealt with the difficulty of allowing science to attempt to quantify human experience with regard to time, when there are qualitative aspects hard science cannot account for. Finally, the chapter looked at the accumulation of moments in a life of an individual and how they are not necessarily equal to their measurable extent, as science would have it. Bergson would allow for the impact that certain moments may have on the human mind, their power extending further in practical application than their quantifiable scope. Each section deals in its own way with the overarching theme that McEwan perpetrates of the emotional journey in time.

In the second chapter, I focussed on Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, and *Grimus*. Narratorial urgency was the first topic under discussion, as Rushdie's narrators have an unfortunate tendency to have a deadline looming over them in the form of their own impending death. Palimpsests and the layering of time were examined next, with reference to Bergson's ideas once again regarding the accumulation of history and the layering of various facets of the past, present and future. In the third section there is a focus on Rushdie's technique of dividing time up in order to contain it, but also in order to better understand it and the relationship between different parts of history. Initially this division of

time seemed a definite departure from Bergson's portrayal of permeating moments but ultimately I have concluded that Rushdie's method is simply a slightly different manner of relating an individual's personal history to that of the larger world and the other entities within it. The next section dealt with stopped time as well as the unreliability of time-keeping devices in several of Rushdie's novels, indicating that the individual himself is better off relating to time in some internal fashion, as clocks cannot be depended upon. Finally, as Rushdie so often creates an almost mythical role for time, the chapter closed with an examination of time as a manifestation of the fantastic in everyday fictional life.

In the Amis chapter, the focus on time consists very much of examining the present, rather than the future that for Bergson holds so much hope. As *Time's Arrow* is Amis' novel dealing most directly with time, the first section discusses the roots of the story, which are in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Continuing from there is a section further exploring the way in which *Time's Arrow* operates consistently as a reversed narrative. The third section addresses difficulties inherent to narrating in reverse, as there are frequently stumbling-blocks to making the flow of the story coherent when the universe in actual fact moves toward increased entropy. The next section deals with the stopping of time and the effect achieved on morale and memory, both of which depend on the continuing operation of time. Discussed in the final section is the theme in Amis' works, including *Money*, *Other People*, and *London Fields* in addition to *Time's Arrow*, of the value of time as a commodity of the present.

In the fourth chapter on Lightman there is a section for each major postmodern author discussed thus far. As *Einstein's Dreams* is composed of thirty individual dream segments, those most applicable to the works and themes discussed in the three previous chapters are connected as appropriate. In the first section of this final chapter of this dissertation several of the dreams are linked to McEwan's emotional journey in terms of time. In the second section

the focus is on Rushdie's palimpsests in time and also his themes of the generational importance of time with reference to three of *Einstein's Dreams*. Next several of the dreams which have traces of Amis' *Time's Arrow* are brought to the attention of the discussion with regard to the reversal of time in narrative. Finally, Bergson's preoccupation with free will is examined in connection to a particular dream in Lightman's collection which holds that the future is fixed and cannot be altered and so a sense of hopefulness about life is lost to the people of such a world.

Lightman's novel, *Einstein's Dreams*, is the most condensed fiction in this dissertation in terms of presenting the most possibilities about time and understandings of the way time operates, in the smallest space. This dissertation has been concerned with developing an investigation of contemporary fiction with roots in the philosophy of Bergson and the scientific theories of Einstein. There is certainly a wealth of additional fiction published in recent years by authors like Jeannette Winterson, Nicholson Baker, Kazuo Ishiguro, Thomas Wharton and many others that would fit in well with the themes considered here. By no means is this analysis a comprehensive one, but the expectation of this author is that the foundation exists for the continuing questioning of the manifestation of time in human experience and understanding, both within fiction and outside of that realm, within the present moment, within memory, and looking ahead to the future.

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