Passing time, clocking off

(Harold Lloyd in Safety Last!)

On 11 November 1918, US pilot Sergeant Charles Veil, still with a French squadron although he had technically become a lieutenant in the United States Army, was greeted on landing with the news that the Armistice had been signed and that the war was over. ‘No more patrols, no more fights in the air. Nothing to do, nothing to live for... I found my watch, brought it forth, threw it as far as ever I could. Time would never mean the same thing again...’[1]

It means, of course, different things to different people at different... times. It might seem stable enough if you stand still—until you move east or west—a lot more stable than it used to be, for sure. Standard time came in towards the close of the nineteenth century. In the United States, it was the railroad companies rather than governments that were first to institute it: ‘Around 1870, if a traveler from Washington to San Francisco set his watch in every town he passed through, he would set it over two hundred times.’ You’d barely have had time to set the time. And, in fact, it was on this day, 18 November, in 1883, that the railroads imposed uniform time. It was called ‘the day of two noons’ because at midday clocks in the eastern part of each zone had to be set back: ‘one last necessary disruption’.[2]

Clock time as a major issue can certainly be demanding. On Robert Scott’s Antarctic expedition of 1910--
1913, the young Apsley Cherry-Gerrard (‘Cherry’) ‘kept three clocks and two wristwatches above his bunk to make absolutely sure that he did not miss his shift on deck.’[3] Hugh Kenner wrote of Buckminster Fuller that: ‘He zoomed around the globe in person, bearing his news to audiences in town after town. He wore three watches to tell him (1) the time back home, (2) the time where he was now, and (3) the time at his next stop.’[4]

Buckminster Fuller (https://pacificdomesnews.wordpress.com/happy-birthday-buckminster-fuller/)

But time is not only clock time, of course: it’s time as experience, time in our heads, the moment that stretches into hours, the days collapsed into a heartbeat. Does time speed up as we age? Is it one of the inescapable problems of ageing, the days ‘flashing by like subway stations passed by the express train’, as Saul Bellow’s narrator remarks? ‘If only we could bring back the full days we knew as kids.’ But ‘[o]ur need for rapid disposal eliminates the details that bewitch, hold, or delay the children.’ Still, ‘Art is one rescue from this chaotic acceleration. Meter in poetry, tempo in music, form and color in painting. But we do feel that we are speeding earthward, crashing into our graves.’[5]

Time; space—or time as space. At a small party to celebrate the completion of her book about the area around the Italian village where she lives, Julia Blackburn writes of saying that: ‘being here in the valley has made me think that time past and time present and time future is like a vast landscape and we are walking through it on a tracery of thin paths.’[6]

Then space as time, in a sense. William Herschel’s 1802 paper considered the idea that deep space must also imply deep time. His telescope had ‘also, as it may be called, a power of penetrating into time past’ — the rays of light conveying the image of a remote nebula to the eye must have been ‘almost two million years on their way’. Therefore the universe was ‘almost unimaginably older than people had previously thought.’[7]
Writers, certainly most of the major modernist writers, have a complex relationship with time: James Joyce, Ford Madox Ford, David Jones, Marcel Proust, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, Dorothy Richardson, William Faulkner, Samuel Beckett, Gertrude Stein. How could they not, given the rupture of the First World War, that ‘crack across the table of History’?[8] Wyndham Lewis devoted a massive volume to opposing and analysing the ‘Time–doctrine’, the stress on the subjective and the interior which he traced to the French philosopher Henri Bergson, ‘the perfect philosophic ruffian, of the darkest and most forbidding description: and he pulls every emotional lever on which he can lay his hands.’[9] Characteristically, Lewis—‘Dogmatically, then, I am for the Great Without, for the method of external approach’[10]—had a pop at a huge range of targets, among them Joyce, Pound, Stein, Proust and a flock of philosophers.

Later writers’ view of time has tended more towards Bergson’s—and less towards Lewis’s—view of the matter. Eudora Welty remarked that ‘The time as we know it subjectively is often the chronology that stories and novels follow: it is the continuous thread of revelation.’[11] Jeanette Winterson wrote that Sigmund Freud, ‘one of the grand masters of narrative, knew that the past is not fixed in the way that linear time suggests. We can return. We can pick up what we dropped. We can mend what others broke. We can talk with the dead.’[12]

Indeed. We don’t need time machines. We are time machines. Possessing memory and imagination, we are masters—or mistresses—of both past and future. It’s just the present that’s so damned tricky.

References


THE VERY DEFINITION OF CHAOS

‘Complication without order or principle is the very definition of chaos.’—Herbert Read, *Contrary Experiences*