

The Irreducible Self: Liberation in the Aesthetic and the Art of Lingering

I. Conscious States in Space and Time

A violent love or a deep melancholy takes possession of our soul: here we feel a thousand different elements which...permeate one another without any precise outlines... We distort them as soon as we...set them out...in...time or space... A moment ago each of them was borrowing an indefinable color from its surroundings: now we have it colorless, and ready to accept a name. The feeling itself is a being which lives and develops... it lives because the duration in which it develops is a duration whose moments permeate one another. By separating these moments...we believe that we have analyzed our feeling, while we have really replaced it by a juxtaposition of lifeless states...translated into words.¹

I find the discrepancy between emotion as experienced and emotion as named in my own interiority, where ideas and impressions color my consciousness—all rapid-fire, muddling into and magnifying each other. This raw experiencing-of-life exists in itself and seeks no externalization—no relative definition or quantification, no measurement—I impose the external when I pin down the emotion in language. Though feeling may grow or diminish, it admits only of intensive quantity—a more or less—and not extensive quantity, which is requisite for measurement. Yet, once we know a feeling may increase or decrease, we want to know: *by how much?* We reach for the quantitative measure because we've rendered the purely qualitative emotion as concrete. To speak of an emotion or an idea is to represent the idea symbolically in space. To speak of an idea, I must first consider the idea as something discontinuous and discrete, then I begin to establish the sort of sharp distinctions within the idea that lend themselves to corresponding words. These sharp distinctions we naturally perceive between material objects, but conscious states are no such physical things. Therefore, I spatialize the *process* of feeling as I designate the feeling's word. In naming, I can retain only a static facsimile of true living. This move, a shift from conscious state as *process* to conscious state as *thing*, treats life as if it were a tidy succession of independent conscious states rather than the vibrant, prodigal madness that is the experience of being.

Along with the implications naming has on the vivacity, the veracity, and the quantification of emotion, Bergson introduces a temporal element. His account of duration as moments that *permeate one another* explicitly echoes his account of emotions—which, he writes, *permeate one another without any*

¹ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 58.

precise outlines. Just as conscious states are averse to the fixed and dispassionate nature of language, real duration—the duration lived by consciousness—is antithetical to the sequentiality of standardized time. Just as we err to regard conscious states as externalized rather than as pure quality, so too are we in error when we divide duration into distinct moments. We wrest pure duration, which is heterogeneous, into the uniform linearity of homogeneous duration, or clock time. As Bergson writes, “by spreading out time in space, we have caused the feeling to lose its life and its colour. Hence we *axe* now”.² The verb *axe* underscores violence because, for him, *the feeling itself is a being*, alive and ever-developing in duration; to spatialize and temporalize is to kill it.

I’d like to ground in a particular emotional experience, the death of a loved one, to better contend with Bergson’s account of the living feeling. When a person dies, we call the mourner’s reaction to the death *loss* or *bereavement* or *grief*. This naming blankets what is particular with some lowest-common-denominator term meant to encapsulate the wide, wild reaches of mourning. *Grief* becomes communicable to all, but potent to none. The act of naming suggests we believe ourselves to know, believe ourselves to have traversed the whole of the feeling and emerged with something representative, the feeling’s name. This name leaches the vivid hue of oblitative pain, yes, but we are also deceiving ourselves about the very nature of the experience. We isolate the bereaved in the particularity of *his* loss, first from himself, then from others. Though he anticipates that, at some point, he will lose someone he loves, he finds himself unmoored in his own life, utterly unprepared for the intensity of loss, all the more so for having believed himself to know what *loss* would entail. A second order isolation is found in the reaction of those around the bereaved who struggle to locate empathy, struggle to sit with and make space for a potent multiplicity of his loss. And how fitting that in talking of emotional healing, we often spatialize—*it gets better with time*—along a linear trajectory. This platitude reveals an expectation that the number of days (or months, or years) that

² *Ibid.*, 58

separates the bereaved from the death will correspond with an increasing alleviation of grief's psychic weight. But grief is no such homogenous or universal thing. It is more an ebb and flow and thrash of feeling and memory than it is steady progression. In making the psychic state of grief static and spatial, we've done violence to the immediacy and the intensity of it.

To illustrate how we might conceive of a qualitative *confused multiplicity* rather than the quantitate *discrete multiplicity* to which language inclines us, Bergson presents the intensity of a conscious state conceived not as a musical note that grows louder in decibel, but as a symphony of increasing instruments. In the layering of woodwinds and brass, of percussion and strings, the orchestra produces something pervasive and burgeoning, something greater than the sum of its comprising instruments. So too is consciousness irreducible. We talk of instruments as constitutive elements of the orchestra, likewise, we may identify idiosyncrasies or formative experiences of the individual, but there remains a texture to the whole that simply refuses quantification. Each moment, each sensation is something radically new, something more than and formed through the preceding elements.

II. A Self Divided

We should... distinguish two forms of multiplicity... Below homogeneous duration, a duration whose heterogeneous moments permeate one another; below the numerical multiplicity of conscious states, a qualitative multiplicity; below the self with well-defined states, a self [of states] *melting into one another* and forming an organic whole. But we are generally content with... the shadow of the self projected into homogenous space... As the self... broken into pieces, is much better adapted to the requirements of social life in general and language in particular, consciousness prefers it, and gradually loses sight of the fundamental self.³

From the disparity of these multiplicities, the discrete surface and the confused below, a divide of selfhood follows. Of course, when we define the self within the discrete, we bind it by space and time and ensure we only engage it on the surface. This creates a chasm between one's own selves akin to that between emotion felt and emotion named or that between heterogeneous duration and homogeneous time. Much like a name offers only an impersonal residue of lived experience, the

³ Ibid., 56

surface self offers but an external projection, the spatial representation, of the fundamental self. But we operate in a society that rewards clarity and accessibility, an active inducement to live on the surface, until we hardly recognize our own depths.

There is something greater at stake for selfhood here than a lack of introspection and contemplation. When Bergson paints a roiling self beneath that can, at times, *burst forth*, through the crust of the surface self, there is terrible possibility in such volcanic imagery. Our world of clock-time and language has formed a physical impediment—the crust, as it were—to contain and suppress a volatile self. We've lost more than our self-knowledge here; we've lost our agency and our control. In Bergson's characterization, "we live for the external world rather than for ourselves; we speak rather than think; we 'are acted' rather than act".⁴

However, we are capable of recovering possession of the deep self, and this repossession of self is the necessary condition for an individual to live and act freely. Bergson frames this recovery as *a vigorous effort of analysis* in which we *isolate* the real from the surface. Though conceptually this act of separating the wheat—unbound, inexpressible, and constantly becoming—from our proverbial chaff—precise but impersonal—seems right, I don't know how it would be practiced. It seems we can hardly help but acquiesce to the common and concrete. Were we capable of letting consciousness exist amorphously in an ether of aspatiality and pure duration, this mode of existence sounds more dangerous to the human condition than the original threat of spatialization and temporality. If we tried to protect our psychic states by keeping them profound—fluid and submerged in the sea of consciousness—we would inhabit a place many would surely drown, isolated and overwhelmed. But Bergson does acknowledge the impossibility of extrication from our linguistic and temporal framework, so it seems to me we must engage in this world, must attempt to bring the depths to the surface and affix some bit of them, even if it's only a bit, in language.

⁴ Ibid., 96

Perhaps the act of analysis itself is secondary to the shift in conceptual approach to understanding being in the world, being in time. I don't think Bergson intended to provide a universal rubric for discerning the dualities, and the very desire for such a rubric or system seem a desire borne of the surface self, conditioned to reach for the categorical. Instead, the primary work is the perpetual striving to countenance one's own true self, work we can only undertake while maintaining an appreciation of the limits of our framework. I find here a vindication of a rich inner life and the call for vigorous contemplation and rigorous self-reflection.

III. The Speed of Time

A feeling which lasted only half the number of days, for example, would no longer be the same feeling for it would lack thousands of impressions which gradually thickened its substance and altered its colour. True, when we give this feeling a certain name, when we treat it as a thing, we believe that we can diminish its duration by half, for example, and also halve the duration of all the rest of our history: it seems it would still be the same life... But we forget that states of consciousness are processes, and not things; that... in consequence, it is impossible to cut off a moment from them without making them poorer by the loss of some impression, and thus altering their quality.⁵

I recognize this temporal tension carried through and contemporized in Byung-Chul Han's *The Scent of Time*, published in 2009. Bergson's groundwork—the objectification of *process* as *thing*, the externalization that inclines toward *quantification*, and the spatialization of *permeating duration* into *homogeneous time*—serves as foundation for, if not cause of, Han's *atomization* of time and identity. The term *atomization* conveys a perpetual breaking down, splitting off and into distinct units. An atom doesn't develop organically, doesn't admit of change in itself or, to borrow from Bergson's language, isn't *becoming*. I take *atomized* in the tradition of Bergsonian static, surface representations; the fact that an atom is comprised mostly of empty space only serves the contrast against the dense dynamism of duration and selfhood.

Atomized time collapses into a series of point-like moments without end or direction. In a constant *now*, time no longer *lasts*. So we careen from one present to the next, never finding rest, never achieving completion. The paradox is: we've mistaken plentitude for meaning, as though the

⁵ Ibid., 82

qualitative fulfillment we seek can be secured by sheer quantity, so we accelerate in order to maximize experience within the confines of our lifetime, but acceleration erodes the very possibility of meaningful conclusion. This rapid and reductive mode of being, this *hyperkinesia of everyday life*, reinforces what Han terms *inauthentic existence*, but what could easily be called the Bergsonian surface self.

In identifying the inclination to halve the duration of an impression, Bergson both anticipates and cautions against the acceleration of time. He arrests our greedy impulse for plenitude with the declaration that a feeling is qualitatively changed, made *poorer*, when we carve away at its duration. Bergson directs us below the shadow life: below lifeless symbols and homogenous duration, below quantified multiplicity and the self of well-defined states. When we revive the depths, we can dwell and reflect. In so doing, we subvert the social self and bulwark against acceleration.

Han continues in this tradition; he rejects our fixation on immediate enjoyment and locates a redemptive possibility in duration. We see this in his treatment of beauty: beauty is not fleeting brilliance, but temporally thick, can only be appreciated in duration and with contemplation. If devoid of duration, it becomes mere momentary allure. To flit along the surface denies the self the time and space required to appreciate the beautiful and the profound.

Thus the experiencing self must reconstitute a time that resists acceleration. The capacity to direct time requires a *constancy of the self*, built upon a sense of *authentic historicity*, according to Han, wherein that which has passed does not disappear, but constitutes the self's understanding of its own present. Here, we rediscover and re-inhabit duration. When we dwell in duration, which is continuous, our experience also finds continuity. It coheres rather than fragmenting with atomization. Duration becomes the place for forming *holds* within the slipstream of time, *holds* that enable the self to *linger*, to contemplate, to connect. According to Han, "only through intense

relationships do things become real in the first place”.⁶ These relationships—whether between two individuals, or between the interior self and the exterior event, between being and space—form the connective tissue to vivify a life. Rather than seek to flood our lives with a succession of present points, we ought to orient ourselves toward fully inhabiting the path between.

This *path between*, which Han also calls the *meantime*, creates in the atomized individual a feeling of restlessness and anxiety. Humans are no longer comfortable in the transition; we seek the instantaneous and the simultaneous. This simultaneity destroys the distance between *here* and *there*. We no longer progress *toward a there*, we have only an ever-optimized and total *here*. Bergson, too, related simultaneity to the external present, but Han introduces modern technology into the temporal crisis. His account seems in keeping with Bergson, though, as he sets out the internet as a place for *surfing* and *browsing*, forms of undirected movement that have no path. The internet, instantaneous and simultaneous, collapses time and space. It lacks continuity, transition, or history and therefore lacks development. The user leaps from one page to the next, clicking link after link, whizzing from one present Now to another.

The internet offers seemingly boundless information, but information is not knowledge. When Han distinguishes information, *empty of time*, from knowledge, I hear an echo of Bergson. Information is but the surface facsimile of knowledge, commoditized into the commonplace of public domain. We conceive of information on the internet as that which is stored, that which can be accessed, so, we’ve spatialized it. It has become *thing*, not *process*. Knowledge, however, recalls the orchestra’s symphony: it is greater than mere data. Knowledge, like beauty, resists reduction to constitutive elements.

I conceive of Han’s acceleration as a metaphoric skimming upon water’s surface, where technology provides an evolving selection of boats capable of reaching increasing speeds. We

⁶ Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time*, 47

mistake information for knowledge, ephemeral allure for beauty, immediate enjoyment for joy, quantity of experience for quality, so we skim ever-faster to try to find fulfillment. We hardly appreciate the surface of the water, to say nothing of our perception of all that lies below.

IV. Art as Redemption

But the greater number of emotions are instinct with a thousand sensations, feelings or ideas which pervade them: each one is then a state unique of its kind and indefinable, and it seems that we should have to re-live the life of the subject who experiences it if we wished to grasp it in its original complexity. Yet the artist aims at giving us a share in this emotion, so rich, so personal, so novel, and at enabling us to experience what he cannot make us understand.⁷

If it seems we are to be abandoned, left to our own little egos, awash in a fraught but necessary relationship with time, fighting to heed Han's call for *lingering*, Bergson throws us a life-preserver that provides a more concrete and immediate means of authentic being: Art. While he explores multiple art forms, from music to theater, I'm most drawn to his account of poetry and fiction. I find a delightful paradox in the salvific possibility of an art form that is expressed in language as a means of transcending the very spatialized limitations placed upon us, in part, by language. As I consider the way certain books and certain writers cut through language to inhabit me—how they can thrill me, can devastate me, can change me—Bergson's treatment of the aesthetic experience as that which *completely monopolizes our soul*⁸ seems right.

Through art, there seems some proximity to another's conscious states, to the artist's fundamental self, that doesn't seem possible in our social world. Of course language is inadequate to convey the whole of selfhood, but it also holds the power to rip me from my own linear, limited, self-imposed narrative. There's a reason Whitman's "I contain multitudes" or Langston Hughes's "my soul has grown deep like the rivers" still resonate today. The poet elevates the common, invites the reader to *experience* what cannot merely be said. The poet restores depth through the layering of detail and texture until we feel near the living narrative. But the poem requires an artist to

⁷ Bergson, 15

⁸ Ibid., 15

countenance the terror of self-discovery then disclose fundamental self in all its vulnerability. It is this radical departure from surface selfhood to which we've so acclimated that displaces the audience, that seizes us, effects us. Here, Bergson writes, our soul might be *lulled into self-forgetfulness*⁹ as though an artist might break the barrier of distinct selves. In art, *being* is stared down, grappled with. We resist time itself. Art provides an expansive heterogeneous alternative to the successive point-like present.

In the Bergsonian notion of selfhood, I find a radical sense of responsibility to the self. Here lies the potential for liberation and empowerment, knowing ourselves and reclaiming our agency. To not only acknowledge but embrace the multiplicity of self, to resist externalization and objectification, to engage in perpetual contemplation. To more fully embody *becoming*. When we dig below the surface to reach the real self, we find that symphonic crescendo that is ours alone.

Though this is a fundamentally individual focus, perhaps understanding one's own complexity provides the basis for appreciating just how changing and colorful others are. I believe the aesthetic experience can provide relief from the surface performance of our social selves and enable us to recognize a deeper affinity with others. Our best hope for meaningful connection seems not through the reduction of every person into the common, but by leaving the door open for each person's distinct irreducibility.

⁹ Ibid., 14.