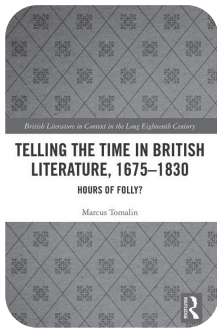


Marcus Tomalin, *Telling the Time in British Literature, 1675-1830. Hours of Folly?*, New York and London, Routledge, 2020



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FOLDING TIME: ON THE LONG EIGHTEENTH CENTURY'S MATERIAL TEMPORALITIES

Committed to the materialist-temporal turn in scholarship,¹ Marcus Tomalin's *Telling the Time in British Literature, 1675-1830. Hours of Folly* (2020) imaginatively reappraises the polymorphic understandings of time conveyed by different horological tropes in the literature of the long eighteenth century. It aligns itself with other recent endeavours to reconfigure the timescapes of modern literature² and engages a massive corpus of time-related writings, seeking to show “how various essayists, poets, playwrights, and novelists meditated deeply upon the physical form, social functions, and philosophical implications of particular objects used to measure time.”³ In this review, I read Tomalin's vast survey of literary renditions of prototypical time-measuring devices in the light of Michel Serres's thoughts on time topologies. I take into account the two thinkers' shared distrust of hegemonic accounts of time, their belief in the importance of balancing out, rather than sieving through, the multivalent temporal dimensions articulated by the (im)materiality of objects, as well as their endorsement of an ecological milieu within which different philosophies of time may be folded together or interlinked to generate, in the words of Tomalin, an accommodating view of the “pervasive pluralism” of time-determining methods, ranging from the most sophisticated mechanistic devices to the non-artificial bio- and astro-rhythms of the natural and cosmological spheres.⁴

In his influential reflections on the “polychronic” and “multitemporal” nature of objects, Michel Serres notes that rather than conforming to the trajectory of an

“irreversible line [...] of acquisitions and inventions,” time’s flow patterns are complicated, particularly when looked at from the vantage point of things, by various “stopping points, ruptures, deep wells, chimneys of thunderous acceleration, rendings, gaps – all sown at random.”⁵ This structural polyvalence of time is also evident in Tomalin’s perspective on the mingling modes of temporal quantification that have found expression in different works of literature since the age of classical chronometry. Not just in Tomalin’s study, but also in Serresian thought objects index and are indexed as chronological aggregates of past, present, and future; in fact, these conventional segments of time need not be sequentially distributed alongside a teleological arc, since things may concomitantly convey an understanding of time as “the obsolete, the contemporary, and the futuristic.”⁶

Underpinning this idea of multiple material temporalities whose linearities are not straightforward, but pleated within other, similarly layered or disjunctive timelines is the need to think beside the classical or Cartesian notion of time’s rectilinear, equispaced motion from a point of origin (past) to one of destination (future).⁷ In Serres’s “pluritemporal system,”⁸ this model of chronometrically ascertainable flux is not succeeded by, but co-extensive with nonsequential, unexpected, or on the one hand, entropic turbulences and irreversible “drifts from order to disorder” and, on the other hand, with negentropic stabilisations of flux.⁹ Moreover, the philosopher of science says, time’s “paradoxical” topology is captured in the image of pliable objects, such as a handkerchief which preserves its flat geometry of immovable coordinates when its fabric is stretched out, but may “fold or twist” moments deemed to be distant into

proximity or cause rifts to emerge between nearby instants when its textile surface is creased.¹⁰

Writing against the grain of simplifying historical accounts of timekeeping practices, Tomalin himself provides an account of the creasing, crumpling, fluctuating, sometimes erratic and unpredictable senses of time and time-showing objects in the poems or prose of certain decades in the period he canvasses. His study undercuts the grand narrative of industrial modernity’s regularised, synchronised, and standardised temporal frameworks, whose scaffoldings were erected, as historians like Michel Foucault or E. P. Thompson have shown, on the compulsory uniformity of timetables and the interiorisation of clockwork routines roughly around the time of the Enlightenment.¹¹ Drawing his arguments from the intersected fields of narratology, prosody, ecocriticism, sensory and material history, as well as, I would say, thing theory, the Cambridge-based scholar disrupts by-now conservative views according to which the chronometric innovations of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ensured the gradual disparagement and displacement of more “natural” ways of telling time.

For instance, in Stuart Sherman’s magisterial demonstration from *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries, and English Diurnal Form. 1660-1785*, the post-Huygensian refinement of time-tracking devices – not just public clocks but also, and increasingly over the course of the eighteenth century, private watches – fostered the rise of a consciousness of quotidian temporality: this was seen to shape interiorised habits of journalistic or memoirist notation, which more or less aimed to replicate the accuracy of outwardly recorded “small durations – minutes, seconds

– in regular, perceptible, continuous succession,” in other words, to achieve an inward registration of “time as a steady series.”¹² However compelling such an explanation may be, it is undeniable that anarchetypal texts¹³ like Margaret Cavendish’s *The Blazing World* or Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* would be riddled with traces of temporalities different from that measured by the – ineffectual and, at best, mildly reliable – clock figured in the latter narrative.¹⁴ Besides this, while Tomalin agrees that the journals, periodical publications, travelogues and novels discussed by Sherman illustrate how the “horological revolution” spun off a vogue for narrative encodings of time, the overriding concern of his demonstration is nonetheless that of showing the inherent limitations of such monotonal, monoperspectival accounts, which address a relatively scant body of literary works in positing the “emergence of the so-called clock time” as the onset of a teleological “progression from approximation and plurality to precision and uniformity.”¹⁵

By contrast, Tomalin inspects, from sundry angles (some traditional, others ingeniously new), an astonishingly rich gamut of literary genres and forms, and it is this comprehensive – albeit not exhaustive – approach that permits him to modulate his thesis about the malleability of objects’ temporal significance. Taking time-telling objects to work not just as recorders of the pace of individual and collective life, but also as prosthetic aids to pondering time beyond positivistic constraints, Tomalin calls for a rethinking of both animate and inanimate matter’s capacity to objectivise multiple rather than singular temporalities and proposes a complicated horological narrative in which mechanical and organic temporal regimes overlap and coexist well

into the highly technologised nineteenth century.

In the timeframe explored here – from 1675, when the Royal Greenwich Observatory was constructed and, also, when living organism *v.* clockwork mechanism analogies of Hobbesian or Cartesian inspiration permeated more consistently the poetry of even minor writers like Richard Leigh, to the 1830s, when, on the brink of the Victorian Age and half a century before Greenwich became the standard national time zone, the authority of timekeeping technologies superseded that of nature’s organic pulses and rhythms, as exemplified in Henry Lee’s *Memoirs of a Manager* – Tomalin identifies the workings of what he calls an “ecological horology.”¹⁶ The working premise behind this vision of time ecology is that the period saw frequently overlapping and, sometimes, antinomic values associated with different time-measuring objects, which serve as the focal points of the book’s chapters. Tomalin’s is, however, far from an inventory or a taxonomy of timing instruments because if one looks at the “watches,” “pendulums,” “sandglasses,” “sundials,” “flowers,” and “bells” that he shapes his inquiry around, they convey such a multitude of diurnal and nocturnal, reliable and unreliable, stable and unstable, technological and biological, inanimate and animate reflections on time that the long eighteenth century ultimately appears to be defined by “horological plurality” rather than chronometric homogeneity.¹⁷

Among the temporal sensibilities invoked to prove the coexistence of idiosyncratic and emblematic engagements with time is that elicited by pocket watches. These, Tomalin shows with reference to the texts of writers like Samuel Johnson and William Hazlitt, remained associated with

“diametrically opposed meanings” and were often the interface against which the significances of “public and private spaces, ostentatious display and meditative isolation, mechanical reliability and inexactness” were played out.¹⁸ While pendulums occasion an intricately articulated chapter on Augustan and post-Augustan prosody, time-telling sound rhythms are also deciphered in a chapter on curfew bells, where the emphasis is on “literary descriptions of horological campanology,” with intriguing references to the perceptual shift that led to the investment of these chiming devices with “solemnity and, eventually, sublimity” in the literature of the Romantic decades.¹⁹ As the author asserts, despite the period’s “fascination with mechanical periodicity” and isochronic regularity, despite an appetite for ever more ingenious horological methods, timekeeping practices were never fully homogenised and progress was consistently shadowed by outmodedness, as evinced, for example, by the iconography of sandglasses: this, Tomalin argues, was progressively related, in a secularised world, with either antiquated nostalgia or the anxiety that was to eventually encapsulate the thresholds of granular

modernity.²⁰ Moreover, the claim goes, “clock time remained a heterogeneous and relativistic notion well into the nineteenth century,” far from suppressing the somewhat less well-regulated rhythms of nature.²¹ Multi-temporality, as Serres puts it, is not just characteristic of organisms, which he defines as “sheafs of times.”²² It is also inherent in objects, which, for the humans observing them, pivot the idea that what might pass for time’s smooth, one-directional stream ought to be revised in keeping with the following dictum: “flux is a multiplicity of fluctuations.”²³ This intuition, amply demonstrated in the chapters on flowers and sundials, as objectual proxies for naturally disciplined timestreams, unsettles the “teleological character of the technological horological advances”²⁴ upheld by previous studies and reveals Tomalin’s Serresian openness to the manifold material temporalities of the long eighteenth century.

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NOTES

1. See Nick Yablon's take on the concurrent materialist and temporal (re)turns in the humanities, in "Untimely Objects. Temporal Studies and the New Materialism," in Thomas M. Allen (ed.), *Time and Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 120.
2. See, for instance, Jesse Matz's own project of restoring the complexities of aesthetic modernism's "temporal environment," in *Modernist Time Ecology*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019, p. 16.
3. Marcus Tomalin, *Telling the Time in British Literature, 1675-1830. Hours of Folly?*, New York and London, Routledge, 2020, p. 4.
4. *Ibidem*, pp. 202, 188.
5. Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, translated by Roxanne Lapidus, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1995, pp. 48, 57, 60.
6. Serres with Latour, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
7. *Ibidem*, p. 61.
8. Michel Serres, *Genesis*, translated by Genevieve James and James Nielson, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1995, p. 97.
9. Michel Serres, *Hermes. Literature, Science, Philosophy*, edited by Josué V. Harari & David F. Bell, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982, pp. 72, 75.
10. Serres with Latour, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
11. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, translated from the French by Alan Sheridan, New York, Vintage, 1995, pp. 124, 128; E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past & Present*, No. 38 (December 1967), p. 57.
12. Stuart Sherman, *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries, and English Diurnal Form, 1660-1785*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 3.
13. See Corin Braga's definition of the term in "Anarchetype: Reading Aesthetic Form after 'Structure'," in Alexandru Matei, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian (eds.), *Theory in the "Post" Era: A Vocabulary for the 21st-Century Conceptual Commons*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, pp. 121-140.
14. This is a point Tomalin makes to illustrate his contention that the horologically centred opening scene of Sterne's novel "brings inner psychological temporalities and natural reproductive biorhythms into direct conflict with the recently established rituals of (quasi-)isochronic timekeeping," *op. cit.*, p. 13.
15. *Ibidem*, p. 17.
16. *Ibidem*, pp. 9, vii.
17. *Ibidem*, p. 11.
18. *Ibidem*, p. 21.
19. *Ibidem*, pp. 22, 178.
20. *Ibidem*, pp. 9, 84.
21. *Ibidem*, pp. 20, 23.
22. Serres, *Hermes*, p. 75.
23. Serres, *Genesis*, p. 65.
24. Tomalin, *op. cit.*, p. 203.