

## World Enough and Time

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**Morse, Donald E. *It's Time: A Mosaic Reflecting What Living in Time is Like*. Debrecen: Debrecen UP, 2022. 326 pages. ISBN 978-963-615-004-4. Open Access E-book and Pbk. HUF 4,000.**

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The metaphoric title of Donald E. Morse's scholarly foray into the obliquely envisioned nature of time establishes his approach to his subject, for how else can one approach the conundrum of time, that fourth dimension, but through story, symbol, metaphor, simile, analogy, allusion, and, of course, oxymoron? Organized into seven chapters, Morse's extensively researched and footnoted study examines how many authors have depicted possible experiences of lived time through fictional characters and narratives against a broad canvas of works by philosophers, historians, theologians, mathematicians, scientists, and great minds across the ages: to name but a few, from physicist Saul Perlmutter, David Michel, Joyce Carol Oates, Heraclitus, Ewan Macoll, Jill Lapore, Lewis Carroll, Richard Muller, Julian Barbour, David Park, Kurt Vonnegut, George R. R. Martin, Marina Carr, Frank McGuinness, Jorge Luis Borges, to theologian St. Augustine, from earth to heaven and back, in a sense.

Each chapter confronts and offers potential insights or answers to a host of questions and uncertainties. Of what does time consist? What do we know of it? How do peoples and cultures of different historical periods and geographic locations perceive of, express, measure, or experience time? How much time do we, as individuals, families, even as a species, have? How does memory or lack thereof, affect our experience of time? How does history invoke time? How can we, to paraphrase Robert Herrick, use our time and not tarry? Should one rage

against the dying of the light or go gently into that good night? Why? From a cosmological perspective, how does time function? How does the past relate to the present and both to the future? Is there, possibly, a multiverse where times run differently, diverge, or coil back? Did time have a beginning? Does, will, time have an end?

Organized, primarily thematically, into an Introduction, six body chapters, and a lengthy Works Cited, *It's Time* offers a broad exploration and array of analyses of living in and grappling with them greediest paws of time.<sup>1</sup> The Introduction, entitled “The Uniqueness of Temporality,” is followed by chapters on “Measuring and Marking Time”; “Remembering the Future, Anticipating the Past”; “Two Common Fallacies about Time”: “Apocalypse Now and Progress”; “The Fullness of Time and the Cancer of Time”; “Time, Memory, and Dementia”; “Time, the Life Cycle, Immortality, and Mortality”; and the Works Cited.

Several extended examples will give notice of Morse’s range and breadth of study and material. For instance, he holds up varying conceptions of time’s nature. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus viewed time as a flowing river, inexorably headed into one, linear direction so that one could never step into the same place twice. However, the nineteenth-century writer and philosopher William James envisioned it metaphorically as a saddleback on which we perch and which linked past to present to future in a cause and effect relationship; for him, there is no (equally metaphorical) knife’s edge of time in which one event is as possible as another. Both stand in absolute contrast to the findings of twentieth-century physicist David Park, who muses that “the strange thing about quantum mechanics . . . is that it does not contain the concept of time” (qtd. in Morse 18). No metaphor there.

In Chapter 1, Morse explores the shrinking of the present through representations of war. The American Civil War was the first to be documented by photograph, but events were often far away in time and place from those viewing the photograph, resulting in a distancing of effect. The newsreels of World War II hastened the connection to their audience but remained

still at a substantial temporal remove. Thirty years later, in the American conflict in Vietnam audiences viewed images and film within forty-eight hours, bringing the reality of the war literally and closely into living rooms. Then, because of the advances in technology, in 1990 events such as the Gulf War were broadcast simultaneously with their occurrence while people watched and had immediate reactions. “Thus in less than one hundred and sixty years the distance from events taking place on a battlefield to someone on the home front viewing them became reduced from weeks to days, then to hours, and finally to only fractions of seconds” (37). Here, graphically, is an example of how different people of different times perceive time and how their expectations and understanding are affected by it. How would we in our contemporary world react so radically differently to finding out about something weeks after it occurred?

H. G. Wells’s aptly titled *The Time Machine* (1895) draws on a pseudo-science that allows the Time Traveler to experience the linearity of time from the present to the end of Earth as we know it, in contrast to the Christian belief which Morse examines in relation to nineteenth-century American Millerism and the eschaton or End of Time. In *The Time Machine*, a seminal work in the popular sub-genre of time travel, Wells is responding to the emerging discoveries of the nature of geologic time without a finite end, so his traveler voyages over 800,000 years into the future to discover the Darwinian adaption/bifurcation of humanity into the sheeplike Eloi from the privileged class and inactive upper class to the nocturnal, subterranean, predatory Morlocks, the underclass of workers. After his appalling discovery of what the unremitting detachment of time has caused to Homo Sapiens, he speeds 30 million years into the future to witness the last gasp of life, the “abominable desolation” (86) of the Earth itself before narrowly escaping death at the hands of a crablike creature, ostensibly the last beings on the planet, to return to his clubby house and Victorian comfort. What he has discovered is that, similarly to many species, time has erased any sign of humankind or its work, hence any meaning or

significance. However, Morse quotes Wells scholar John Huntington, who argues that “The Time Traveler and the reader try to understand the nature of temporal contrast presented and then to discover connections” (qtd. in Morse 85-86). Wells’s singular and pessimistic vision flies in the face of “Victorian notions of progress” and the Christian Final Judgment and end of time.

Thus, Morse discusses the belief in a coming apocalypse and attendant writing, which have co-existed for ages, in its justification. William Miller of New York predicted just before the Civil War that the world would end around 1843. His rationale behind it was based on his reading of prophetic books in the Bible, from which he induced that a day mentioned in one of them was the equivalent of a year of current time. An earlier voice of the apocalypse, Irish Archbishop James Ussher in 1611 used similar biblical evidence to proclaim the (experienceable) end of the world in October 1997. These theological pronouncements of the nature of time and their widespread acceptance stand in direct opposition to emerging discoveries in science by such figures as Charles Lyell and his *Principles of Geology* (1830), Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Newton’s discovery of “the immensity of space” (150), and the earlier theories of James Hutton that Earth landscapes formed over long periods of time. For many, “religious commitment,” as Morse phrases it (138), establishes the fixed notion of the nature of time which no science can dispute.

Just before the Millennium with all of its dire prophecies, William Gibson’s *All Tomorrow’s Parties* (1999) raises the question of the nature of time in cyberspace, for those within and outside of it. How does one characterize the nature of computer time? Morse cites the scene in which Boomzilla, a street urchin, witnesses a naked girl who appears out of the nanofax machine at The Lucky Dragon store, a future 7/11, whose security camera, and those of all Lucky Dragon screens across the world, instantly and simultaneously show the image that Boomzilla observes but quickly dismisses, for historical context has no meaning or even

existence; the extraordinary—to the reader—event also has no connection to the future because it is part of a ubiquitous present. Morse comments that the experience of time and space has “moved away from James’s saddle-back of duration, but . . . also has turned its back on Heraclitus’s river of time” (42). The girl, Idoru from the earlier novel of that name, now a nanotech being, appears from seeming nowhere to everywhere at once and is related to all the ROM constructs, like the Dixie Flatline, of other works, who live in “an apparently timeless world of pure data” (46). One may escape the limitations of the “meat,” so despised by Gibson’s cowboys, for the timeless and placeless freedom of the consensual hallucination of cyberspace where, for instance, a lengthy conversation, as measured by Case’s consciousness, between Case and Wintermute takes virtually no external time. Existence within such a world holds out the possibility of immortality, the ultimate defeat and denial of time. In his future world, Gibson extrapolates from the lightning advances in technology that allow virtual reality, augmented reality, and portability. Although Morse does not allude to it, many of his comments on Gibson’s work also apply to Ray Kurzweil’s prediction of the Singularity.

An example from drama comes from Chapter 5, “Time, Memory, and Dementia in Frank McGuinness’ play *The Hanging Gardens*,” which takes place in the twentieth century but harks back to the legendary gardens of some twenty-five centuries earlier. Morse points out that this timely play addresses the contemporary problem of an aging population in which dementia and its effects become more prevalent and pressing. Sam Grant, the protagonist, descends into dementia and names his surroundings after one of the wonders of the world, but all is illusory; he will “participate in this larger pattern of lost irretrievable memories coupled with the tragic ‘inability to recall the past’ that will rob him of his life’s story” (221). Sam (like Billy Pilgrim in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which Morse deals with earlier in the book) has become “unmoored in time” so that past, present, and future no longer exist for him. Sam, without a consistent memory of who he is or was, must endure “a prospect of years to be

lived out in silence without identity, personality, memory, or history—without words, without time” (232). Caring for him results, causally, in a change of time for his family, whose lives are irretrievably transformed; for them time will become slow, endless, and hellish as Sam’s time nears.

“To say that humans live in Time is to affirm that we live in the present moment but a present moment that includes remnants and memories of our past that we carry with us into the present as memory” (96-97). Moreover, present and past combine to create anticipations for a future, all three linked in a pattern. A mosaic, similarly, as [lexico.com](http://lexico.com) has it, is “a picture or pattern produced by arranging together small colored pieces of hard material, such as stone, tile, or glass.” As such, it builds a meaningful image from many sources, all different yet contributing to a totality open to various impressions and interpretations. Donald E. Morse’s wordsmithed mosaic of time, whose assembled pieces include fictions of different genres and periods, scientific investigation and theories, theological and philosophical commentary, and the evidence of historical events, proffers an enticing academic study for serious consideration of a subject central to the human condition. Read this book; you will be glad that you spent the time.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The phrase is borrowed from e. e. cummings’s poem “(Ponder, Darling, These Busted Statues),” where it reads as “. . . Them Greediest Paws of careful / time . . .” (Cummings, *Poems*, 1923-1954. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World. 1954, p. 186).