

Creative practice: the time of grace

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Abstract

This article addresses the time of creative practice, drawing attention to the significance of grace, which is at once an experience of good timing and of the gift. Creative difference, in the poststructuralist account, emerges from disruption of the self-sameness of linear time, from a giving that does not await return, from unceasing forward movement. By contrast, our relational understanding is that creativity emerges from the non-linear present or now, which is both still and still-moving. To develop our analysis of the grace of good timing, we will draw parallels between monastic and musical practice.

Keywords

Creativity, practice, grace, gift, eternity

Creative practice: the time of grace

This article addresses the time of creative practice, drawing attention to the significance of grace, which is at once an experience of good timing and of the gift.ⁱ We will develop our analysis by comparing poststructuralist and relational understandings of creativity.

Poststructuralists rarely use the term creativity because it is associated with the humanist subject. They talk, instead, of the difference generated by the deconstruction of the order of the same. Central to this analysis is the figure of the subject whose desires always exceed centred subjectivity, linear time and Euclidean space. According to this tradition, creativity and difference are associated with excess. Thus, the temporal quality of creativity is a ceaseless movement that ensures that the subject and the text never remain the same. Barthes, for example, says ‘I write myself as a subject at present out of place, arriving too soon or too late’ (1975: 62-3), and ‘The bliss of the text is ... *precocious*; it does not come in its own good time, it does not depend on any ripening.’ (1975: 52). In this view, it is bad timing that protects creative difference from sameness and fixity.

Excess is also central to Irigaray's account of wonder, which, she says, inaugurates love and art and thought (1993: 82). Like desire, wonder 'motivates' an endless movement *toward* (1993: 73-6). Although the experience of wonder is characterised by a momentary pause, this pause is itself constitutive of a future-oriented movement: the *in-stance* is a gap between past and future, between the subject and object of wonder (1993: 74-6), and it is this gap in linear-Euclidean time-space that ensures difference. This difference is (not) located in an elsewhere, in an unmeetable other. Irigaray says:

To wonder again and again without ever stopping.... The 'object' of wonder or attraction remaining impossible to delimit... that which he designates as woman-eternity, an other who is sufficiently open, cosmic, so that he can keep on moving toward her ... without ever getting there (1993: 81).

Difference, here, derives from a never arriving, from the forward moving trajectory of desirous time and subjectivity. Irigaray regards repetition as sameness, an appropriation of the other, contending that wonder is 'Outside of repetition. It is the passion of the first encounter' (1993: 82).

It is clear from these accounts that poststructuralism shares the assumptions about stillness that are characteristic of linear models of time. Within these models, stillness is characterised as sameness ('undifferentiated unity', the narcissism of the oceanic (Hartocollis, 1983: 171-2)) and stasis ('the unchangeable or the eternal' (Hartocollis, 1983: 171)). Because they share these assumptions about stillness, poststructuralists would have trouble understanding pianist Glenn Gould's claim that 'The purpose of art is not the release of a momentary ejection of adrenalin but rather the gradual, lifelong construction of a state of wonder and serenity' (quoted in Ostwald, 1998: 154). In contrast to the restlessness of Irigaray's wonder, Gould associates wonder with serenity, thereby insisting that stillness is the temporal state of creative difference. We have, then, two different understandings of the time and ontology associated with creativity. In this article we will consider the assumptions underlying these approaches.

Our argument is that the poststructuralist account of creativity relies on (the deconstruction of) a subject-based ontology and linear time. By contrast, Gould's account accords with a relational ontology and an appreciation of the significance of the non-linear present or the now. Whereas, for poststructuralists, it is endless deferral that ensures difference, a relational

perspective suggests that creative difference is experienced in the stillness, the stillness-and-movement, of the non-linear present.

While, we will see, the poststructuralist account of creativity is based on the subject's excessive giving, the relational account sees creativity as gratuitous, emerging from relations themselves. To be open to difference, the artist must set aside desires and motivations, and receive what is given. As Hyde puts it:

[W]here there is no gift there is no art.... [A gift] is bestowed upon us.
... [T]he artist does not find himself engaged or exhilarated by the work, nor does it seem authentic, until this gratuitous element has appeared, so that along with any true creation comes the uncanny sense that 'I', the artist, did not make the work. (1979: xi-xii)

If art is a gift, what then is the work of the artist? We will argue that it is creative practice that allows for the suspension of subjectivity (centred or de-centred) and for the emergence of difference. Gould alludes to creative practice when he speaks of the artistic state being a gradual lifelong construction. Every day, without choice or purpose, the pianist is called to hours of practice at the piano. It is the very repetition in this discipline that allows the pianist to be present, in the now, in the experience of wonder. In creative practice, repetition

is not serial, as it is in linear time, but, rather, is the eternal return of creation (Eliade, 1954/1971). Creative practice allows for grace, both as good timing and artistic gift.

Excess

The poststructuralist understanding of creative difference is based on a logic of excess. This concept derives from Bataille's drawing together of Mauss' account of the gift and Hegel's account of desire (Bataille, 1985). For Mauss (1990), the gift exists as measured exchange involving a sequence of giving, receiving and reciprocating. This sequence, of exchanges of objects, commodities, women, and signs, produces the elementary structures of social life (see Lévi-Strauss, 1987; Irigaray, 1985). Mauss' account is paired, within poststructuralism, with Hegel's account of desire as the self's going out to the other in order to return with self-certainty (Hegel, 1807/1977). As Cixous says,

unfortunately, Hegel isn't inventing things. What I mean is that the dialectic, its syllogistic system, the subject's going out into the other *in order to come back* to itself... is, in fact, what is commonly at work in our everyday banality. (1986: 78)

Both desire and exchange are based on the subject's journey out to the other and back, and social reproduction relies on the linear-Euclidean time-space of this journey. Excess, for poststructuralists, refers to the way in which both logics undo themselves.

In *The Gift*, Mauss himself draws attention to the unstable tendencies of the gift exchange when he describes the potlatch as an excessive giving that attempts to refuse a return (1990: 6). Bataille makes this theme of excessive giving the centre of a romantic and violent critique of rational capitalism. He refers to a 'principle of loss', of 'unconditional expenditure' 'contrary to the principle of balanced accounts', and cites, as examples of unproductive expenditure, luxury, mourning, war, spectacles and arts (1985: 118; see eg also Derrida, 1992; Diprose, 2002; Hird, 2007). Difference, in this view, is that which exceeds the self-sameness of a balanced exchange. Despite Bataille's claim that a gift principle of expenditure and loss is contrary to market principles of balanced accounts, excess is based on an accountancy model that identifies who gives, who receives and what is given, and it presumes the linear logic of 'more than'. Since a giving with no return destabilises the sequence of giving, receiving and returning, excess derives its meaning from (the truncation of) sequence, from the (deconstruction of) linearity.

Cixous draws on these ideas in her account of feminine creativity. When the feminine speaks, it gives in a way that cannot be returned within the terms of the masculine economy. She says that the feminine ‘jams sociality’ (1986: 96-7), meaning, by ‘sociality’, the Hegelian scenario: *écriture féminine* transgresses the order by returning the difference repressed by the self-same:

A feminine text cannot be more [*sic*: less?] than subversive: if it writes itself it is in volcanic heaving of the old ‘real’ property crust. In ceaseless displacement. Write yourself: your body must make itself heard. Then the huge resources of the unconscious will burst out. (1986: 97)

Cixous describes *écriture féminine* as a gift: oriented towards future transformation, feminine writing is generous and creative because it overflows the masculine economy of measurement, calculation and return (1986: 91-2). ‘She is able not to return to herself, never settling down, pouring out going everywhere to other.’ (1986: 87). She says: ‘We need that waste. To write is always to make allowances for superabundance and uselessness while slashing the exchange value that keeps the spoken word on its track’ (1986: 93). For Cixous, writing is a gift because it is just giving, because it is pure desire, exceeding any end or return.

The time of creativity in Cixous' account is the rush of desire towards a future. Difference, as it is for Irigaray, is located in an elsewhere that never arrives, and writing is this never arriving at a continually desired end (1993: 65). Speed allows creativity to elude capture by the Hegelian syllogism: 'We follow it, things go at top speed, and we are constantly – what a giddy and delicious sensation! – surprised. ...we go from one amazement to another' (1993: 98). Forward movement thwarts the self-sameness of stasis and the nostalgia of masculine return. Cixous says: 'Not the origin: she doesn't go back there. A boy's journey is the return to the native land ... A girl's journey is farther – to the unknown, to invent.' (1986: 93). 'Farther' clearly indicates Cixous' reliance on linear-Euclidean time-space: feminine creativity exceeds the masculine pattern of repetition which manifests the desire for self-sameness. In this sense of time, creation is the invention of the absolutely new.

Clément's understanding of creative excess shares these temporal and ontological assumptions. Calling her book on creativity *Syncope*, Clément argues that creative experiences involve the disruption of the repetitions of routine and habit. Inspiration, for example, is the violent rupture of serenity, the cough or the hiccup that disturbs the rhythm of respiration (1994: 8). In creative states, the syncope in time is matched by 'the syncope of the subject':

‘tranquillity gives way’ and ‘disintegration begins’. Clément describes these states as ‘manic-oceanic’, ‘hyperactivity’, ‘obsession’, ‘mental collapse’, ‘psychosis’, ‘agitation’, ‘devastation’ (1994: 236-240). The source of creativity, in her account, is the syncopal rupture, an interval that inaugurates a new departure. ‘On the one side, time’, she says, ‘on the other, rupture’ (1994: 173). In this deconstructive strategy, the logic of linear time is retained – syncope *exceeds* the order of linear time and the centred subject - and Clément is left with oppositions, either time or rupture, either old or new. As in Irigaray’s account of wonder and Cixous’ account of writing, the new is absolutely new.

Now

Our argument begins with the claim that there are non-linear forms of time and that these forms allow for a deeper understanding of creativity and its association with the gift. While many gift experiences *do* take the form of exchange, the temporal and ontological assumptions of exchange logic make it impossible to understand the experience that Hyde describes as the gift of creativity. We are arguing that the gift is not always gift *exchange*, and that there are not always distinct parties who give, receive and reciprocate. We propose instead that creative experiences are those in which there is a giving-and-

receiving that is neither sequential nor locatable, experiences where a gift occurs, but not through the desires of any subject, however decentred, and not in a way that allows giving to be distinguished from receiving. In other words, we are making a conceptual space for a gift *relation*, an experience of grace and gratuity where there are no distinct givers or receivers.

To make sense of this ontology, it is necessary to recognise that the space of relation is non-finite. Space, in this logic, is ecological or wholistic rather than Euclidean: the gift happens in a here that suspends insides and outsides, locations and boundaries. While, for poststructuralists, difference is maintained through deferral and displacement, in relational logic difference is *experienced*, in the infinitude of the here. Difference emerges in the here without a source: there is difference but it is impossible to identify where or what it is.

If it is clear that ontology has a spatial quality (that subjects are finite because they are locatable and that relations are non-finite because they cannot be located), the temporal nature of ontology may be less obvious. While finite (and de-centred) subjects live in linear time, the time of relationship is now: the temporal counterpart to the infinite here is the eternal now. This is the time of the gift without sequence, the time, we will argue, of creative difference. To provide an account of this time, we will draw together T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*

and Loy's work on time. Both connect desirous subjectivity with linear time; both insist that desire and linearity involve fantasy, and that the eternal, far from being transcendent or the otherworldly, is the shock of the real. Both draw on the religious traditions and experiences often described as 'perennial philosophy' (see Huxley, 1946/1958).

We will start with Eliot's claim that the linear time of busy life, with its nostalgia and its projects, is based upon a flight from the reality of the present:

Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.
Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present (1944/2000: 4).

What flees the 'always present' present is the self: the desire of subjectivity *is* the flight into 'time past and time future'. In other words, desire is distraction.

Eliot writes of:

... the strained time-ridden faces
Distracted from distraction by distraction

Filled with fancies and empty of meaning (1944/2000: 6)

In this view, alienation is not a problem for the self to overcome, but is the very condition of the self of subjective ontology: the temporal alienation from the present parallels the spatial logic of separation and opposition that constitutes the finite subject.

Loy's conception of ontology and time complements that of Eliot. His argument (1992, 2001) is that desirous subjectivity is defined in terms of an opposition between fullness and lack. The desirous subject is fleeing to the past or future out of fear of the emptiness of the present, an emptiness that is experienced as lack to be made good at another time. This opposition between fullness and lack, however, only arises within the finite logic of subjective ontology. Perennial philosophy, Loy says (1992: 248), recognises ontological states that do not experience emptiness as lack but as simultaneous emptiness-and-fullness. The suspension of the boundaries that alienate the finite subject allows for a form of being that is part of the infinite whole. In this state, there is no lack to be made good since everything is here now, as potential, as nothing or *emptiffulness*.

Loy helps us understand the logic underpinning poststructuralist deconstructions of linear time and the centred subject. These focus on lack for its deconstructive possibilities: since desire can never be satisfied, mastery and self-sameness are impossible. Poststructuralists argue that this lack, the gap or the interval, need not be experienced as fearful; instead of a backward-looking attempt at recuperation of self-sameness, there is the prospect of surprise and difference in the very unmeatability of the future (e.g. Irigaray, 1993: 75). Loy points out, however, that future orientation, as much as nostalgia, is based on linear temporality and desirous subjectivity; like nostalgia, it is driven by fear of ‘an always gnawing sense of *lack* now: living (in) the present is uncomfortable because it discloses our nothingness’ (1992: 248-9). It is the self, constituted through the desirous opposition fullness/lack, that fears the present. Loy claims that this fear dissolves in an ontological state that accepts and lives nothingness.

The future-orientation of poststructuralism can be understood, then, as a blasé denial of difference that is always-already given, in the nothingness and infinitude of now. When Irigaray exhorts the reader ‘to wonder again and again without ever stopping’, she is characterising stillness as self-certainty and fixity. From the perspective of relational logic, however, this betrays a fear of being with difference that has no orientation, a fear of no-thingness here, now.

To understand stillness, we need to distinguish the relational logic of the now from the oppositional logic of linear time. In linear time, stillness is presumed to be fixity or not-movement, as sameness or not-difference. Fixity, in this logic, is a characteristic of the present, which is understood oppositionally, as not the future and not the past, not the beginning and not the end. To appreciate the quality of the relational now, here is another passage from Eliot:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor
towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.
I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where.
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.

Or say that the end precedes the beginning,
And the end and beginning were always there
Before the beginning and after the end.

And all is always now (1944/2000: 4-5, 7)

When Eliot uses the formulation ‘neither... nor ...’, he is not using it in an exclusive or oppositional way; he could just as well be saying ‘both ... and ...’, as indeed he does when he say ‘the end and the beginning were always there’. In other words, the eternal now is based on an inclusive logic. In these terms, stillness is not understood as fixity, but as stillness *and* movement, as ‘still and still moving’ (Eliot, 1944/2000: 17; see also Steindl-Rast, 1984: 133-7). Stillness is the quality of the non-linear present, ‘where past and future are gathered’ (see also Buber, 1958: 12). It is because there are no exclusions that Eliot says ‘all time is eternally present’ (1944/2000: 3), ‘all is always now’. Thus, he insists that the timeless includes the temporal.

The formulation ‘all is always now’ tells us about the ontology of the now. If the finite subject is produced in alienation, through the boundaries and exclusions that define it and separate it from the world, it follows that the all and the now are not available to this subject. The subject *only* exists in the alienation of linear time. For this reason, Loy talks of the now as a *being-time*, or a *time-being*, where there is no alienation or separation of time and being:

[T]ime never arrives or passes away, yet it does flow. This apparent inconsistency is the heart of the matter, but to resolve it we must first notice that *time flies away when we experience it dualistically*, with the sense of a self that is separate from it and looking *at* it. Then time becomes objectified into something that I have (or don't have), quantified into a succession of fleeting 'now-moments' that cannot be retained but incessantly fall away. In contrast, the *being-times* ... cannot be said to occur in time, for they are time. (1992: 249-250)

Within the now, flow is a quality of potential: the now 'is pregnant with the not-yet-now' (Loy, 1992: 247). Loy insists that this is not anticipation, but an unfolding in which nothing happens that wasn't always there. When Eliot says that the dance is stillness, he is pointing out that flow is *only* possible in the now; flow is a form of grace that is lost when there is any inertia or anticipation.

The eternal now is the time of the gift and creativity. The now makes possible a gift without sequence, without beginnings and ends, without source or destination, a gift where there is movement-and-stillness, sameness-and-difference. Rather than a gift based on the excess of subjectivity and time, this gift is based on the emptiness of *being-time*. The gift, as its etymology confirms,

is an experience of grace because there is no *one* who gives. It is gratuitous because, without linearity, there is no cause, purpose or anticipation. The relevance of this to the understanding of creative experience is apparent when we remember Hyde's claim that 'where there is no gift there is no art'.

Creativity only comes through the emptiness of the artist, the suspension of desire and subjectivity. It is not an experience of rush but of the wonder and serenity described by Gould. The creative difference of art does not lie in the (deconstructed) linearity of the absolutely new (see also Bergson, 1913: 11), but, in the new-and-old of the now.

This discussion of time and the gift has indicated the connection between two senses of grace: grace is given and not produced by anyone; it is also the *emptiffulness* of good timing. This raises the question that we will now consider: if the artist doesn't produce the art work, what do they do?

Monastic Practice

The poststructuralist account of artistic work emphasises the importance of releasing the madness of the unconscious from the repressions of the symbolic order. For this tradition, Hegel's order of the self-same is deconstructed by

artistic frenzy, which Clément describes as ‘manic oceanic’ and Cixous describes as ‘extravagant’ giving. The frenzy in artistic work disrupts the linear time it depends on, by producing the interval of non-arrival.

Although Barthes’ account of reading and writing relies on the familiar poststructuralist themes of bad timing, excess and transgression, he reveals, in an interview, that his own daily writing and reading practice relies on a very different temporality. He describes ‘the set of those “rules” (in the monastic sense of the word) which predetermine the work’:

To be able to function, I need to be able structurally to reproduce my usual work space. In Paris, the place where I work (everyday from 9.30am to 1pm; this regular workaday schedule for writing suits me better than an aleatory schedule, which supposes a state of continual excitement) is in my bedroom. This space is completed by a music area (I play the piano everyday, at about the same time: 2.30 in the afternoon). (1991: 178-180)

This account points to a discrepancy between Barthes’ life of monastic rules and his conceptual emphasis on hedonistic ‘liberty and desire’ (1991: 179).

Instead of bad timing and excess, Barthes' workday is governed by an ascetic practice which involves ontological, spatial and temporal discipline. While, from the perspective of subjective ontology, asceticism is understood as restriction, within the perennial philosophy of the monastic tradition, and in relational thought, certain forms of discipline are understood as preconditions of freedom and creativity. The difference hinges on understandings of the role of the subject.

The subject is produced through the logic of oppositions, through the alienation that makes the world external. Within this logic, authority and discipline are necessarily external impositions that thwart the subject's freedom. In relational thought and perennial philosophy, a relational state is distinguished from a subjective state by its openness. It is non-finite and non-alienated. Thus, while authority is understood as subjugation of one subject by another in the subjective tradition, within the monastic tradition, authority emerges organically through the relation. In the latter tradition, then, obedience is not understood as subjection, but as acceptance of what is. Etymologically, obedience means listening attentively, but rather than being a listening to an external subject, this listening is to a relation of which you are a part, a listening to self-and-other. Hence, as Jamison says 'the monastic tradition believes that obedience is potentially the greatest expression of human freedom' (2006: 75).ⁱⁱ

He insists that Benedict's monastic *Rule* 'is clear that obedience is not just about doing what the boss says; it is about mutual love' (2006: 77). Barthes is probably making the same point about mutual implication when he says that he needs a set of rules 'to be able to function'.

In monastic terms, freedom is not a condition that can be brought about by a subject. Experienced as a gift, as grace, freedom is unalienated openness to the relations in which we live. Ascetic discipline's role is to still desire, thereby transforming the practitioner so that they are open and available to the world. Asceticism, then, is an affirmation of life, rather than a negation. It accepts and allows a life that is more and other than one's own (see Williams, 2005b: 46; Williams, 2005a: 147). It allows differences to emerge that could not have been anticipated or brought about by the desirous subject. Ascetic ritual, then, is not a means to an end. It is the practice that is most important and not the content of the practice, the praying, for example, and not the content of the prayer (Aitken and Steindl-Rast, 1996: 67-9; Herrigel, 1953: 60). When the prayer finds fulfillment it is as a contentless communion that could not have been comprehended in the words of the prayer. This principle of difference, according to Jamison, is the very heart of monastic practice (2006: 84-5).

Different ontological states involve different forms of space. The distracted state of desire or artistic frenzy, for example, presumes that difference is elsewhere, and that sameness is here. While poststructuralists privilege the endless displacement of this difference, the monastic tradition insists on the importance of a spatial discipline that holds the practitioner in the non-Euclidean here. Instead of here being the lack of an elsewhere, here becomes the opening of the infinite. Barthes' room in Paris becomes like a hermit's cell, like the infinitude of Bachelard's intimate space (1969), like the sacred centre of Eliade's hierophany (1957/1987: 20ff). As one of the most famous sayings of the desert fathers puts it: 'Sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything' (quoted in Williams, 2005b: 95). Everything and everywhere (and no-thing and nowhere) are here. The spatial discipline of the monastic rule holds the practitioner when they fantasise that their creativity lies in another place, and time (Williams, 2005b: 98).

The temporal discipline of ascetic practice complements its spatial discipline. Barthes' day, for example, is ordered like the monks' day, as a daily round (Norris, 1999: 377): every day he writes from 9.30am to 1pm in his bedroom, then he plays the piano from 2.30 in the 'music area'. While the reference to clock time might seem to imply that his day is governed by the sameness of linear time, the monastic clock opens to the eternal now or present (see Loy

2001; see Le Goff, 1982: 48; Corbin, 1999: 128ff). Whereas the clock in linear time alienates the subject from the lived present, by directing them to the future, the bells ring in the monastery to bring the practitioner back from anticipation to the present (Thich, 1995: 23). The monastic bell is an ascetic discipline that frustrates personal desire and allows the practitioner to relinquish heroic projects and to wait with humility, in the knowledge that it is the practice that does the work and not the subject. As Steindl-Rast puts it, 'We learn in the monastery to savor our work as we are doing it – doing it for its own sake, not just doing it to have it done, or to get over with. We need to resist our tendency to rush into things and to hurry through our activities' (Steindl-Rast with Lebell, 1998: 50). Steindl-Rast is talking about *being-time*, when activities are not in time but are time. It might be presumed that a day ordered by hours is a fragmented experience, as it would be in linear time. However, monastic practice is experienced as flow: the bell is the present that holds all time. The stillness of the monastic experience is its flow.

In this section we have been concentrating on monastic practice but, as many writers have observed, there are strong parallels between the practices of artists and sports people and those of monks. Any field that emphasises practice is emphasising the importance of grace. In all cases, practice is an ascetic discipline that allows grace, or freedom, by bringing about ontological change.

Creative Practice

We will consider the time of grace through an example offered by cellist Pablo Casals. He shows that creative practice allows the gift without which there is no art.

For the past eighty years I have started each day in the same manner. It is not a mechanistic routine but something essential to my daily life. I go to the piano, and I play two preludes and fugues by Bach. I cannot think of doing otherwise. It is a sort of benediction on the house. But that is not its only meaning for me. It is a rediscovery of the world of which I have the joy of being a part. It fills me with awareness of the wonder of life, with a feeling of the incredible marvel of being a human being. The music is never the same for me, never. Each day is something new, fantastic, and unbelievable. That is Bach ... a miracle! (Casals, 1974: 17; cf Merton, 1974: 435, 1998: 251)

Like Gould, Casals links wonder and serenity, insisting that wonder and newness emerge *from* repetition rather than being ‘outside of repetition’

(Irigaray, 1993: 82). For Casals, routine is not mechanical and not a repetition of the past, because, through his practice, past, present and future co-exist in the unfolding now. The difference of creation is not simply the syncopation or deconstruction of linear time, but is the unfolding-but-still quality of the eternal. While a writer like Clément talks readily of moments that rupture linear time (the cough, the stumble), Casals is talking about a timelessness that holds all time, so that everything is of a piece, and every piece is of everything.

In the eternal, originality is not the absolutely new, but is, as Casals suggests in his use of the present tense and the term ‘rediscovery’, a bringing to life of origins. Bach is miraculously alive, a real presence (Steiner, 1989; Shotter, 2003). This is not simply to say that the Bach of the past has been brought to life in a modern representation; this is not the Bach of the biographer or historian. Instead, Casals is saying that Bach *is*. The ‘miracle’ is knowing Bach in his essence or beingness, a non-finite emptiness that allows Casals to participate without exclusion or reserve: Casals and Bach meet as emptiness in the eternal now. This, we think, is the experience that Eliade is referring to when he talks of originating origins and ‘the eternal return’ (1954/1971).

Casals’ experience of this eternal *is*-ness reminds us of Eliot’s analysis of the time of grace.

[Tradition] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer ...composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity. ...There is accordingly something outside of the artist to which he owes allegiance, a devotion to which he must surrender... in order to obtain his unique position. (1951: 14-15, 24; see Poulet, 1956: 354-9)

While, in a linear sense, the traditional is seen as conservative or a desire for the self-same, Eliot is using this term to indicate a living whole that *allows* the difference of uniqueness. Accordingly, what Eliot understands by ‘unique position’ is a particular unfolding of the whole or universal. In other words, ‘unique position’ is the emptiness that allows Casals, for example, to experience the miracle of Bach’s presence. Eliot’s point is that art is only alive when the artist surrenders subjectivity in their devotion to tradition; the distinction

between great and mediocre art is the latter's distraction by subjective fantasies, which are only set aside by devotion to a practice (see also Weil, 2002; Murdoch, 1970; Williams, 2005a, 2005b; Merton, 1974; Maritain 1960/2006).

Casals is speaking of the surrender in devotion when he says 'I cannot think of doing otherwise'. His devotion has the same form as monastic obedience, arising, as gratitude, from his relation to 'the world of which [he has] the joy of being a part' (see Gaita, 1999: 219ff, 2002: 137ff). When he adds 'each day is something new, fantastic and unbelievable', Casals is making a connection between the necessity in the surrender and the gratuity in the wonder. As Williams says in his book *Grace and Necessity*, the artistic gift involves the ascetic acceptance of the gratuity of art, the experience of something being at once 'totally right' and 'totally unexpected' (2005a: 104). This is an experience of the now, in which the work emerges both fatefully and fortuitously, feeling both meant to be and without cause.

We should pause to note that fate, in this sense, is not about a predetermined future. Likewise, fortuity is not understood in the sense of absurdity, arbitrariness or 'unbearable lightness'. The notions of both a predetermined future and meaninglessness rely on a form of being that is alienated from time. Casals, on the other hand, is talking about *being-time*,

which explains the prevalence of organic metaphors in descriptions of this temporal experience. Whereas Barthes says that the text ‘does not come in its own good time, it does not depend on any ripening’ (1975: 52), Herrigel, for example, says that good timing, in any field, is like the bursting open of the skin of a ripe fruit (1953: 46). Because the piece of fruit is what it is and not anything else, its ripening comes in its own good time, in the fullness of time, which is not to a predictable schedule. The temporal logic of Ecclesiastes is not that of repetition of the same, but rather of unique unfolding (see Eliot, 1944/2000: 12). Grace or good timing accepts the time it is given, the future coming both as a fulfilment and as a surprise.

This experience of good timing requires the emptiness of being. It is the respectful ritual of going to the piano every morning that changes Casals’ ontological form, humbling and opening him (Williams, 2005a: 142-7; Murdoch, 1970: 65-67). Because he cannot think of doing otherwise, Casals is allowed to hear otherwise, to hear difference: his practice allows him to respond to the day and the music as they really are, rather than to hear through the filter of comparison. The logic, then, is not simply that 80 years of practice gives him a greater repertoire of performances against which to distinguish today’s; it is that practice, without making him deny his full experience, also allows him to hear as a beginner. Casals serves music by

attending to *this* music, to the instruments and the world at hand (see Maritain, 1960/2006 ; Murdoch, 1970: 59). When Casals can hear *this* note, it reveals a unique aspect of the inexhaustible whole, and it this form of hearing that guides his playing (Quinteros, 2004). Each note unfolds, finding itself through the previous note, without anticipation, will or desire. This is how flow arises from the stillness of being present.

While Eliot's 'tradition' points to a temporal depth, creative practice also allows a spatial depth. There is a unique and infinite here that corresponds with the unique and eternal now. When Casals speaks of a 'benediction on the house', he is not talking about a finite space, but an experience of belonging that suspends the borders of Euclidean space. His joy is ecological; he finds his home through his instruments, cello and piano, as he gives them a home (Bachelard, 1969). The body that vibrates, the note that sings is a flesh that intermingles string, wood and blood and bone (Bateson, 1972; Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 130ff). Although writers often talk of this deepening as an inner journey, this is to retain Euclidean terms. Through his practice, Casals finds his depths *in* the world. These depths, as a being-in-the-world, give him the guiding sense of wonder and significance that makes his practice 'essential' to his life. As the musician WA Mathieu comments, music teaches you 'the reciprocity between trust and

discernment ... you learn how what is most deeply your own belongs to everyone' (1994: 122).

It is the ontological emptiness of the here and now that makes possible the gift of creativity. When poststructuralists associate creativity with excess and bad timing, it is because they have not understood the relational – the non-finite and non-linear -- qualities of the here and now. Without these concepts, a gift is reduced to exchange. Casals' experience provides an example of a gift relation in the here and now: he receives life from the music as he gives life to it; his acceptance of what the music offers is a giving. There is no causation, no sequence and no location in this experience of grace. While the concept of excess presumes that the gift is initiated by the giver, in a gift relation the gift emerges from the simultaneous giving-and-acceptance of openness or emptiness.

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ⁱ In this article we develop themes of practice, good timing and grace introduced in ‘Becoming Who You Are: the time of education’. *Time & Society* 2007 Vol. 16 No. 1

ⁱⁱ Many of the references in this section are from the writings of monks: Jamison, Steindl-Rast, Merton, Thich Nhat Hanh. Along with these monks, Williams and Norris write about the relevance of monastic practice to everyday apparently secular life. It should be noted that, for the purposes of this article, we are not drawing attention to the distinctions in content amongst different monastic orders (see Rutledge, 1966: 63ff).