

Truth in time travel: subversions of time in *An Adventure*

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Abstract: This article explores how Frances Lamont and Elizabeth Morison's *An Adventure* (1913) disrupts temporal and spatial dichotomies through its supposed representations of time travel. *An Adventure* presents time as a shifting force that aligns with Bergsonian notions of temporality – specifically the concepts of objective and subjective time as defined in Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (1911) and "Time and Free Will" (1913). This article also considers how Freudian notions of "condensation" further outline the subjective rendering of time in *An Adventure*'s surreal journeys back in time to the French Revolution and how the narrative's subjective presentation of time aligns with Ford Madox Ford's later theories of literary impressionism, particularly his idea that modernist narratives are composed of "various unordered pictures". This article ultimately argues that Lamont and Morison's book benefited from the temporally minded scientific and social climate of the time and used the theoretical groundwork of thinkers like Henri Bergson, Ford Madox Ford and Sigmund Freud as starting points from which they could tell their tale as truth. Specifically, their formal construction of the text as scientific research seeks to consciously obscure the differentiation between fact and fable, effectively positing their nonlinear time slip as truth. If that truth is humored, Lamont and Morison are proposing a more radical conception of time than Bergson – a nonlinear conception of time – a proposition that sits in tension with their use of scientific diction and discourse.

Keywords: *time travel; subjective time; Henri Bergson; Frances Lamont and Elizabeth Morison; An Adventure.*



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Introduction

The book *An Adventure* (1913) by Frances Lamont and Elizabeth Morison¹ recounts what they claim to be a true journey back in time to the French Revolution in which they strolled through the gardens of Versailles. This mysterious event was triggered upon the two English women's first sightseeing visit to the Palace of Versailles in 1901, where they were supposedly transported back to the time of Marie Antoinette. The authors went to great lengths to prove the unmistakable validity of their time travel and even seemed to believe it themselves. The two would return to Versailles two more times – first in 1905, then in 1908 – to collect further evidence of their journey through time. Their years of research were carefully collated in *An Adventure* and offered as proof to a skeptical readership in the form of interviews, personal accounts of their three visits to Versailles, and detailed maps of the garden grounds.

An Adventure was written in a time and for a culture steeped in imaginative ideas about the nature of time itself. Its 1913 publication at the turn of the century coincided with Bergsonian thought finding frequent publication in modernist journals like *Rhythm* (1911-1913), Modernist theories like literary impressionism growing in popularity, and Freudian notions of subjectivity and condensation being translated for English speaking audiences (Snyder). Despite the incident having occurred nearly a decade earlier, Lamont and Morison's publication of a tale of time travel in an era where audiences were more welcoming to abstract considerations of time is no coincidence. Lamont and Morison present their surreal journey to the French Revolution in *An Adventure* not simply as a modernist tale that plays with subjective time for the entertainment of an audience but as scientific fact that extends the reach of contemporary understandings of time.

In constructing the text of *An Adventure* itself as scientific research, Lamont and Morison are positioning their fantastical experiences with nonlinear time as irrefutable fact. The positioning of their accounts on the side of truth begins with a preface establishing a narrative frame in which Lamont and Morison should be considered experts who "have collected so much evidence on the subject, that it is possible now to consider it as a whole" and who "have tried to record exactly what happened as simply and fully as possible" (Jourdain v). Lamont and Morison are explicitly framing their work under the disclaimer that although their story must be regarded with an open mind, that story is, nevertheless, scientifically certain. The Publisher's Note also offers a promise of good faith that they "guarantee that the Authors have put down what happened to them as faithfully and accurately as was in their power" (Jourdain vi).

An Adventure is meticulously constructed as formal scientific research with distinct chapters for their "Three Visits to the Petit Trianon", the "Results of Research", the "Answers to Questions", "A Reverie", an "Appendix", and a selection of maps (Jourdain vii). In their efforts to align their writing with scientific discourse, Lamont and Morison

¹ Frances Lamont and Elizabeth Morison are the pseudonyms of Eleanor Frances Jourdain and Charlotte Anne Elizabeth Moberly, respectively. To remain consistent with the language of the text itself, the pseudonyms of Frances Lamont and Elizabeth Morison will be used over the course of this article, but the legal names of Eleanor Jourdain and Charlotte Moberly will be used in both the parenthetical citations and the Works Cited for *An Adventure*.

adopt a scientific register in their language. They carefully date their personal accounts, just as one might do for formal research entries, and they use linguistic signals like “summary of results of research” (41). The book is strategically littered with markers of credibility that aim to chip away at a skeptic’s reservations and instill a reputable sense to their work. For example, there are an array of detailed maps that fill the last few pages, providing a tangible and, thus, more credible view of their fantastical world. *The Prefatory Note* written by Professor Sir W. F. Barrett, F.R.S. functions in much the same way in its vote of confidence:

The authors of this book have given me an opportunity of reading the narratives which they independently wrote shortly after their strange experience; and also have submitted to me a large collection of letters from various friends, to whom they related the occurrence the same year. From the perusal of these documents no doubt whatever is left in my mind that the story was written substantially as it appears in this volume, and told to many persons, very soon after the authors had experienced this remarkable collective hallucination. (Jourdain 163)

Professor Barrett’s note is full of such markers of respectable nomenclature that one might expect to see in a far more scientifically rigorous setting. The inclusion of factors such as these within *An Adventure* work preemptively to build up the credibility of the book as it is sent out into the discerning public eye.

An Adventure is a self-conscious and self-aware text that is seeking to work within the social benefits of a modernist audience, but with a conscious mind to move outside of narrative restrictions that threaten to disprove Lamont and Morison. As a way of understanding some of that context, I will be looking at three contemporary thinkers: Henri Bergson, Ford Madox Ford, and Sigmund Freud. *An Adventure* presents time as a shifting force that aligns with Bergsonian notions of temporality – specifically his concepts of subjective and objective time – Freudian notions of “condensation”, and theories of literary impressionism and modernist thought as popularized by Ford. Regardless of the truth of the English women’s travels, the formal construction of the text as scientific research conscientiously seeks to obscure the difference between fact and fable, effectively positing their nonlinear time slip as truth. If that truth is humored, Lamont and Morison are proposing an even more radical conception of time than Bergson – a nonlinear conception of time. This radical component sticks out from their work like a splinter in an otherwise smooth piece of wood; despite their best efforts, their story sits in tension with the scientific dictation they have employed.

Fluid time and subjective time in *An Adventure*

Time is fluid in the tales of *An Adventure*. Specifically, Lamont and Morison’s accounts of their French time travel present a duality of time that builds upon Henri Bergson’s theories of objective and subjective time. In his 1889 essay, “Time and Free Will: an Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness”, Henri Bergson proposed a conception of pure duration as “the form which the succession of our conscious states

assumes when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states”, and from this conception of a “lived time” grew the notion of a subjective experience of time (100). While a scientific, “objective” understanding of time “considers, one after the other, undivided periods of duration, nothing but phases succeeding phases, forms replacing forms”, this uniform, impersonal succession of time does not fully encompass the lived experience of time as Bergson understood it nor as how Lamont and Morison lived it, for “when we seek to know what happens within one of these periods, at any moment of time, we are aiming at something entirely different” (Bergson, *Creative Evolution* 332-33).

Subjective time emerges within Bergsonian thought from the “confusion between concrete duration and abstract time, two very different things”, and that subjectivity offers an understanding of time that can vary and fluctuate both from person to person and within the span of a single person’s existence (Bergson, “Time and Free Will” 155). While objective time is understood as a force that continues onward at a fixed pace, subjective time accounts for “what the reflective consciousness feels about time and even about succession” (91). Lamont and Morison’s *An Adventure* is penned with a clear eye towards strict Bergsonian temporality, the ebb and flow of subjective and objective time which always marches forward despite how any one person might experience it. While they attempted to align with modern sensibilities, there was simply no existing paradigm available to understand time travel within such a strict system. For these women, time is in a state of flux and disruption that challenges even the flexibility of subjective time.

Lamont and Morison draw heavily upon Bergson’s notions of subjective time to carve out space for their own radical reconceptions of time within contemporary scientific discourse. While their broad claims of nonlinear time travel extend beyond the reaches of Bergsonian thought, in isolated sections, some of their writing is very much in alignment with his more accepted conceptions of subjective time. Their personal accounts of travels to Versailles in the first chapter, “Three Visits to the Petit Trianon”, are an excellent example of this. In Morison’s account of her first visit to the Petit Trianon, she described her temporal slip into the past with the all-consuming, harrowing recognition that “it was all intensely still” (Jourdain 5). Objective time that marches onward without any regard for individual feelings and experiences could not accommodate Morison’s experience of stillness, as objective time does not stray from its forward motion. This surreal suspension of time that Morison recounts is inherently shaped by a personal experience of time, a subjective experience of time, as “the flux of time is the reality itself, and the things which we study are the things which flow” (Bergson, *Creative Evolution* 344). Morison and Lamont’s efforts to study and understand their time travel experiences at the Petit Trianon align with Bergson’s theoretical understandings of temporality in *Creative Evolution*, as they all claim “that real time, regarded as a flux, or, in other words, as the ‘very mobility of being’, escapes the hold of scientific knowledge” (337).

In the works of Henri Bergson and the accounts of Lamont and Morison, “the idea of a homogeneous and measurable time is shown to be an artificial concept, formed by the intrusion of the idea of space into the realm of pure duration”, and a notion of lived time, or subjective time, more aptly accounts for the human experience (Bergson, “Time and Free Will” viii). Lamont’s corroborating account of passing through the Petit Trianon feeling “as if [she] were walking in [her] sleep; the heavy dreaminess was oppressive”

speaks directly to an irregular experience of time that cannot simply be understood under the restrictions of objective time (Jourdain 18). Just as Lamont notes a myriad of irregularities in the slow suspension of time in the dreaminess of her walk through the Petit Trianon and the juxtaposing experience of quickly breezing through the walk to the gardens themselves, Morison's confusing encounter of "turning [her] head to join Miss Lamont in thanking [their mysterious guide], [and finding], to [her] surprise, that he was not there" bends the rules of time and reality themselves (Jourdain 7).

To a similar end, the passing note included by Morison in her first account that "the man said a great deal more which we could not catch" speaks to a non-uniformity of time and memory (Jourdain 6), though memory will be considered at a later point. Under contemporary notions of objective time, all time should be uniformly experienced and, therefore, equally remembered. However, Morison's aside marks that time had been irregularly experienced in such a way that the exact details of the distinct "handsome" gentleman's appearance with "his face glowing red as through great exertion, as though he had come a long way" could be easily recalled while his words could not (Jourdain 6). Just as Bergson notes that "for us, conscious beings, it is the units that matter, for we do not count extremities of intervals, we feel and live the intervals themselves" (*Creative Evolution* 339), Morison is not experiencing and recollecting her life as absolute intervals but personally feeling and living within the intervals themselves.

The subjective time portrayed in Lamont and Morison's accounts also positions itself seamlessly within early modernist notions of literary impressionism. Although literary impressionism was a blossoming literary field at the turn of the century, Ford Madox Ford clearly distills its essence in his work, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (1924). Literary impressionism builds from a notion of Bergsonian subjective time to posit that life follows the impressions and timelines of memories rather than regimented, level understandings of life in its entirety. Just as Ford noted the idea that modernist narratives are composed of "various unordered pictures" (182), Lamont and Morison's *An Adventure*, despite its purposeful construction, frequently presents such a modernist narrative feature in their unordered experiences at the Petit Trianon. Morison recounted that following the incident, "for a whole week [they] never alluded to that afternoon, nor did [she] think about it until [she] began writing a descriptive letter of [their] expeditions of the week before" (Jourdain 11). Considering this gap, her experience of time was neither level nor immediately and equally understood. More specifically, in her recollection of these memories, Morison noted that "as the scenes came back one by one, the same sensation of dreamy unnatural oppression came over me so strongly that I stopped writing" (11).

Modernist narratives as described by Ford consider the human experience with subjective time in such a way that "life did not narrate, but made impressions on our brains" (Ford 183). The shared, unsettling, confusing experiences of Morison and Lamont in the Petit Trianon are impressionistic experiences rather than a clinical narration of every aspect of their journey. Each step of their garden stroll was not given equal literary footing to their mirrored "feeling[s] of depression and anxiety" felt in the grass, nor their shared "dislik[e] [of] the thought of passing the man in the kiosk" (Jourdain 12). These editorialized representations of time fit neatly into the modernist trend of literary impressionism that was fashionable at the time.

Human memory and representations of time travel

Memory is at the center of both modernist representations of time and literary impressionism, and memory is the crux upon which all of *An Adventure* turns. The throughline of subjective time across Henri Bergson's theories on temporality, Ford Madox Ford's theories on literary impressionism, and Lamont and Morison's accounts is shaped by the human experience, and that human experience is fundamentally linked to human memory. In his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud presents an idea of condensation as a tool of compression wherein "we might conclude that the condensation is accomplished by means of omission, in as much as the dream is not a faithful translation or projection, point by point, of the dream-thoughts, but a very incomplete and defective reproduction of them" (94). While Lamont and Morison's accounts of their journey in time are not presented as a literal dream, applying Freud's interpretation of dreams to their memories of time travel is appropriate on two counts: one, that they were contemporarily influenced by Freud's explosive impact on their societies, so any reader and arguably the writers themselves would almost certainly bring Freudian ideas to mind when engaging with this text; and two, because their experiences are penned in such a way as to evoke dreamlike states, thus making them compatible with such an analytical framework. Morison even explicitly notes in her primary account that she "was beginning to feel as though [they] were walking in a dream" in the midst of their adventure (Jourdain 9).

Freud's use of condensation as the incomplete and defective reproduction of dream-thoughts is directly applicable to both Morison and Lamont's accounts of their first visit to the Petit Trianon, as neither woman recounted the same tale as the other. The narrative differences between Frances Lamont and Elizabeth Morison's accounts of their supposed temporal slip back to the French Revolution during their visit to the Petit Trianon make a great case study for the selection process of condensation. Freud's own study of the condensation of dreams focused itself on the central inquiry, "if only a few of the elements of the dream-thoughts make their way into the dream-content, what are the conditions that determine their selection?" (94). A similar line of questioning can be applied to the included and missing details of either primary account in Lamont and Morison's *An Adventure*, specifically in the main point of divergence between their recollections – the sighting of the supposed figure of Marie Antoinette. This is arguably the pivotal piece of evidence in support of their travel back to the French Revolution, so it must be questioned as to why "it was not till three months later, when [Lamont] was staying with [Morison], that Miss Morison casually mentioned the lady, and almost refused to believe that [she] had not seen her" (Jourdain 21). Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* suggests that "a displacement occurs until ideas of feeble potential, by taking over the charge from ideas which have a stronger initial potential, reach a degree of intensity which enables them to force their way into consciousness" (61), and Morison's offhanded comment of the sighting of Marie Antoinette may have been the idea to give charge to her memories of her "impression at the moment of there being more people than [she] could see" (Jourdain 21). The recollection of Lamont and Morison's experiences is almost a process of condensation itself wherein their subjective experiences of time can

be scrutinized for not having the same vision that day in Versailles.

If the claims to truthfulness of *An Adventure* are humored, then Lamont and Morison's nonlinear retelling is a radical step beyond even the already flexible ideas around time which their contemporaries would have appreciated. While Bergson offers a dualistic understanding of time that accounts for fixed, objective time and lived, subjective time, his theories on time are anchored by the fact that "succession exists; [he is] conscious of it; it is a fact" (*Creative Evolution* 338). It is at this point that *An Adventure* diverges from Bergsonian notions of temporality, as Bergson's strict stance that time is a linear matter cannot fully encompass the indulged realities of time travel in Lamont and Morison's accounts. Even being so strict in their conformity to scientific diction and discourse, there is nonetheless tension that estranges Lamont and Morison from the credible scientific community with which they so wholeheartedly sought to align themselves.

This accidentally radical approach must have registered to them, hence their use of their pseudonyms with a publisher's note prefacing the book itself with a note that "the ladies whose Adventure is described in these pages have for various reasons preferred not to disclose their real names, but the signatures appended to the Preface are the only fictitious words in the book (Jourdain vi). A later edition of *An Adventure* includes an editor's note to this effect that remarks that Lamont and Morison's work "did not go unchallenged" (Jourdain 21). Rather the two authors published their work under a false guise of anonymity where the truth of their publication and the repercussions that followed was marked "at all events in academic circles: secret de Polichinelle" (20).

Conclusion

Frances Lamont and Elizabeth Morison's *An Adventure* (1913) disrupts temporal and spatial dichotomies through its supposed representations of time travel. Time within *An Adventure* is a point in a larger constellation made up of contemporary psychological and philosophical ideas, modernist notions of literary impressionism, and an ever-evolving human narrative of attempting to understand our lived experiences. As Henri Bergson emphatically noted in *Creative Evolution*, "time is invention or it is nothing at all" (341). While the surreal journey of Frances Lamont and Elizabeth Morison in *An Adventure* aligns with modernists ideals of subjective time, the formal construction of the text as scientific research poses these time travel tales as truth. That truth stands in conflict with contemporary understandings of reality in a radical way, and thus these two women made quiet literary history in proposing a radical new understanding of time that diverges from both its Bergsonian roots and its linguistic scientific register to envision *nonlinear* time – truth in time travel.

Disclosure statement

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