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## La Durée in The Bridge on the Drina

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### Abstract

The French philosopher Henri Bergson claims that time has two qualities: The objective time; measured by clocks, and *la durée* that cannot be divided into units—but reflects our inner individual experience. The latter is the main concern of this paper which addresses the subjective concept of time in relation to a stone bridge—the main character in the historical novel *The Bridge on the Drina*, by the Yugoslavian writer Ivo Andrić. The bridge was constructed across the Drina by the Ottomans in the 16th century. In the novel, the bridge stands as a witness for the lives and fates of the residents of Višegrad for four centuries, till the time of its destruction during the First World War. The paper aims to examine Bergson's *la durée* through the inner consciousness of the people who live around the stone bridge, or participate in its construction. The novelist describes people experiencing the swift or slow passage of time according to their circumstances. In both cases, time is linked to consciousness, and it is indivisible.

**Keywords:** Bridge, consciousness, Drina, *la durée*, time, witness

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## إدراك الزمن في رواية جسر على نهر درينا

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### المستخلص

يزعم الفيلسوف الفرنسي هنري بيرجسون أن الزمن له صفتان: "الزمن الموضوعي"؛ يقاس بالساعات، وشعورنا الذاتي بالزمن و هذا لا يمكن تقسيمه إلى وحدات، ولكنه يعكس تجربتنا الفردية. الشعور الذاتي بالزمن هو موضوع هذه الورقة البحثية التي تتناول المفهوم الذاتي للزمن فيما يتعلق بالجسر الحجري—الشخصية الرئيسية في الرواية التاريخية "الجسر على نهر الدرينا" للكاتب اليوغوسلافي إيفو أندريتش. تم بناء الجسر عبر نهرالدرينا من قبل العثمانيين في القرن السادس عشر. وفي الرواية يقف الجسر شاهداً على حياة ومصائر سكان فيشغراد لمدة أربعة قرون، حتى وقت تدميره خلال الحرب العالمية الأولى. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى دراسة الشعور الذاتي بالزمن من خلال وعي الأشخاص الذين يعيشون حول الجسر الحجري أو الذين يشاركون في بناءه. حيث يصف الروائي شعور الناس بمرور الوقت سريعاً أو بطيئاً، حسب ظروفهم. في كلا الحالتين يرتبط الزمن بالوعي، وهو غير قابل للتجزئة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** جسر، الوعي، نهر الدرينا، الشعور الذاتي بالزمن، الوقت، شاهد

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the year 1961, the Yugoslav writer Ivo Andrić's won the Nobel Prize in literature for his powerful novel, *The Bridge on the Drina*. The main image of the novel is a bridge, which symbolizes connection and unity. However, this historical novel is set in Yugoslavia, which would later be divided into six countries, and suffer from ethnic conflicts and civil wars.

The study focuses on being conscious of time in relation to the moment of inner duration of the people who live around the bridge on the Drina in Ivo Andrić's novel, *The Bridge on the Drina*. It aims to explore time perception in the novel, and through incidents related to building the bridge. Everyday common experiences surrounding the bridge are described fleetingly in few paragraphs; while intense incidents and circumstances are described in more details—throughout long chapters with reference to consciousness of time. The study is limited to the time span of constructing the bridge.

The study aims to examine Ivo Andrić's depiction of consciousness of time through language. The study aims to examine the novelist's depiction of time through language, and the novelist's artistic presentation of the concept of intense time in difficult, sad, and happy situations.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Few studies are available on *The Bridge on the Drina*. Teodora Popović has written an article titled "The impact of Ivo Andrić's novel *The bridge on the Drina* on the formation of tourist image on the historical Višegrad bridge and its surrounding waterscape". The study addresses the symbolic meaning of the literary waterscape in the novel.

The other significant study is Henry R. Cooper's "The Structure of the Bridge on the Drina". The article examines the building of the structure of the novel through many separate tales.

Sezen Canatan presents a comprehensive analysis of the novel in her article "An Analytical Essay on the Novel Titled 'The Bridge on the Drina'". The study approaches the novel through the a broad examination of themes and characters.

Thus the current study presents an original interpretation of this historical novel through Henri Bergson's notion of *la durée*, or consciousness of time.

## **3. THE ADOPTED THEORY**

Consciousness is about our inner feelings that are hugely influenced by the outside material world. Unlike the material world, however, consciousness cannot be defined or measured. The French philosopher Henri Bergson coined the term *la durée* to describe "the dynamic, everchanging nature of consciousness, a consciousness expressed and manifested in-and-through-and-as time" (1). Bergson links *la durée* to the continuing, strong, transitory, flow of awareness. *la durée* denotes, in unison, "both the knower and what is known" (1). It is also time by its very nature, not the clock time though. *La durée* is our inner condition of consciousness. "In this way, it is meaningless to claim that time always moves forward at the same rate; instead, as we all know, experienced time is very fluid; [...] 'an hour of joy is infinitely shorter than an hour of expectation'" (1). *La durée* cannot be charted in the form of a linear and forward flowing time; it is not an abstract link between past and future. *La durée* is how we experience our lives, as past experiences and future expectations influence our present consciousness. According to Bergson, "time is not a separate something that we experience; rather, time is our experience, or more accurately still, time (at least in certain respects) is us" (1). Most significant is Bergson's differentiation between time and space:

All through the history of philosophy time and space have been placed on the same level and treated as things of a kind; the procedure has been to study space, to determine its nature and function, and then to apply to time the conclusions thus reached. ... To pass from one to the other one had only to change a single word: 'juxtaposition' was replaced by 'succession.' (2)

Therefore, Bergson concludes, the line mistakenly becomes the symbol of the progression of time. Bergson asserts that the mental state cannot be represented in the

form of progression, nor time—our inner consciousness—can be divided into progressive parts: “we project time into space, we express duration [la durée] in terms of extensity, and succession thus takes the form of a continuous line or a chain, the parts of which touch without penetrating one another” (3). Bergson argues that our consciousness perceives past and present at the same moment; the inner time is not divided into before and after. This is precisely what he refers to as *la duree*: a “qualitative multiplicity, with no likeness to number; an organic evolution ... ; a pure heterogeneity within which there are no distinct qualities. In a word, the moments of inner duration are not external to one another” (3). Thus time cannot be grasped by science.

#### 4. ANALYSIS

The bridge in *The Bridge on the Drina* symbolizes the Ottoman civilization that came to the Balkans in the fourteenth century, establishing a Muslim community that lived alongside Christian and Jewish communities in the region. “The myths are woven around the bridge’s construction, and the psychology of the town is explained by the supra-human presence of the bridge” (4). Mehmed Paša Sokolović—the son of a Bosnian peasant, who was recruited into the sultan’s service in his boyhood, and later converted to Islam and became the grand Vezir—ordered to build the bridge in the town of Višegrad, across the river Drina, at the end of the 16th century. The bridge stands as a witness to the lives of the Bosnian society, in all its diversity.

The bridge is approximately two hundred and fifty steps long and ten steps wide. It widens out in the middle, forming two terraces that are five steps long and five steps wide. This part of the bridge is referred to as the *kapia*. The terrace on the right, if one comes from town, is referred to as the *sofa*. It has benches made of shining stone which are supported by a parapet of the same kind of stone. On the opposite side of the *sofa*, and which has no benches, a stone rises high from the center of the parapet, and a white marble is inserted in it. Turkish inscriptions are carved on the marble that register in verse the name of Mehmed Paša Sokolović, and the date of building the bridge. On this part of the *kapia*, Turkish coffee is served from copper vessels by a coffee maker. An apprentice serves the coffee in Turkish cups to guests sitting on the benches of the *sofa*.

The bridge witnesses the live stories of individuals of mixed backgrounds living in communities on the area around it. “On the bridge and its *kapia*, about it or in connection with it, flowed and developed [...] the life of the townsmen. In all tales about personal, family or public events the words ‘on the bridge’ could always be heard. Indeed on the bridge over the Drina were the first steps of childhood and the first games of boyhood” (4). As if an eternal bond existed between the lives of Višegrad people and the bridge; their stories hence become one and inseparable. The construction and the final destruction of the bridge reflect the history of the people in the place surrounding it. Happy incidents occurring across or around the bridge are described fleetingly, reflecting the quick passage of time experienced by Višegrad people: newly born Christian children taken across the bridge to be christened, or Muslim children spending a significant part of their lives around the bridge—fishing and hunting doves.

The building of the bridge takes five difficult years. It is significant that the time, five years, is mentioned in relation to difficulty. The trials and tribulations associated with the construction of the bridge are described in long passages of the novel, representing the slow passage of time experienced by the builders. The construction

group is headed by Abidaga, who is commissioned by the Vezir Mehmed Pasha for building the bridge. Abidaga “was a man who stopped at nothing, harsh and pitiless beyond measure” (5). As he decides to spend the winter in a warmer place, he threatens the people of Višegrad that they would be responsible for any missing piece of the building material or any damage to the bridge. Consequently, “all the winter the townsmen guarded the material and watched the construction works like the eyes in their head” (5). Significantly, long time, “all the winter”, is associated with difficulty. When Abidaga is later accused of embezzlement, he is replaced by Arif Beg. The latter “brought with him a feeling of strict attention to everything that was the Vezir’s will or order, but like a calm, normal and honest man who had nothing to be afraid of and nothing to conceal, so that he had no need to frighten or persecute anyone” (5). Although work continues in the same rhythm, yet the workers feel time passing easily and quickly.

At the beginning, it was thought that Abidaga is building a wooden bridge. Yet later began the dragging of stones from hills that take an hour walk from the town. The entire place is covered by yellow dust from the stones and the boats work all day to carry workers and building material from one bank of the Drina to the other. After three years, the Turks of the town have privately begun expressing their indignation at the Vezir, his men, and the bridge. They have missed the old peaceful days and the traditional way of crossing the Drina by ferries. The Christian *rayah* have even suffered more after the passage of three years. They have been forced to work in constructing the Bridge, along with their oxen and horses. “Through all Bosnia, traveller told traveller not to go to the Drina, for whoever went there was seized, without question of who or what he was or where he was going, and was forced to work for at least a few days” (5). The description of all the difficulties that the town people suffer while building the bridge is associated with mentioning the time span. Conscious experience of time is linked with slowness and hardship.

Under the wan November sun the peasants dragged wood and stone, waded with bare feet or in sandals of freshly slaughtered hide along the muddy roads, sweating with strain or chilled by the wind, folding around themselves cloaks full of new holes and old patches, and knotting up the ragged ends of their single shirts of coarse linen, blackened by rain, mud and smoke, which they dared not wash lest they fall to pieces in the water. (5)

The peasants could not see an end to their extreme suffering. Bergson writes in *Creative Mind*, “it is a succession of states each one of which announces what follows and contains what precedes. Strictly speaking they do not constitute multiple states until I have got beyond them and turned around to observe their trail” (2). The peasants can only feel endless despair motivated by long suffering.

Time is perceived differently on another occasion, despite its difficulty. Višegrad people start noticing that the building of the bridge is never ending. The workers find a new damage in the bridge every morning. A rumour spreads in the town that vilas, a malicious spirit of nature, is working against the completion of the bridge over the Drina. Abidaga, who is not a superstitious person, becomes furious at the thought that someone is intentionally damaging his work. “He posted guards on both banks of the

river. The damage to the earthworks then ceased, but damage to the construction work in the river itself continued. Only on moonlit nights was no damage” (5). Abidaga orders the chief of guards, a man from Plevlje, to find the person doing the damage to the bridge. He threatens to punish the chief severely if he does not find the culprit within three days:

Know that I will put you under the earth so that you will not throw as much shadow as even the tiniest blade of grass. If all damage to the works does not cease within three days, if you do not catch whoever is doing this and do not put an end to all these silly stories about *vilas* and about stopping the work, then I will put you living on a stake on the highest part of the staging, that all may see you and take fright and get some sense into their heads. I swear this by my life and my faith, which I do not swear by lightly. Today is Thursday. You have till Sunday. Now go to the devil who sent you to me. Go! March! (5)

The chief of guards shudders at the threat and immediately sets to work. He spends two nights sailing up and down the Drina with his men, but to no avail. He feels time flies while he is “tormented by the dark thoughts whirling in his head; would Abidaga really carry out his threat and take his life [...]. Thus it dawned and the man from Plevlje felt in all his stiffened body that his life was darkening and shortening” (5). His fear of losing his life makes him conscious of the rapid flow of time. On the third and last night, however, the chief of guards and his men discover and arrest the culprits, a Christian peasant, in ambush.

Višegrad people remain dissatisfied for five years, complaining of the endless flow of workers and masons, the wooden scaffoldings conquering the Drina, and the apparent formless shape of the bridge. Yet—when finally emerged a perfectly designed, convenient, and beautiful bridge—the people quickly begin expressing a sense of relieve and merriment. They become embarrassed by their previous lack of trust in the Vezir’s grand project. “The bridge acts as the reconciler of all the oppositions” (6). The bridge opening celebration continues for nine days. The town people start praising the Vezir, his men, Abidaga, Aref Beg, and the strong bridge. Arif Beg orders great feasts, where gifts of money and clothes are distributed to the workers and overseers.

The Vezir’s health was celebrated in meat and drink, in music, dancing and song; horse and foot races were arranged, and meat sweetstuffs divided amongst the poor. On the square which linked the bridge with the market-place, *halva* was cooked in cauldrons and served piping hot to the people. That *halva* even got as far as the villages around the town and whoever ate it wished good health to the Vezir and long life to his buildings. (5)

At the end of the nine days, the town people gradually have had enough of food, dancing across the bridge, and celebration. Crossing the bridge becomes part of their everyday lives, and it is no longer associated with intense feelings and their consciousness of time. “They crossed the bridge hurriedly, indifferently, anxiously, absent-mindedly as the tumultuous waters that flowed beneath it, as if it were only one of the countless roads that they and their beasts trod beneath their feet” (5). As Višegrad people become less conscious of the material world, they become less conscious of time as well.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Thus, and in accordance with the Bergsonian notion of time, the novel does not present time as static, but linked with the intensity of a given experience, in what is referred to as duration. The people of Višegrad suffer through the process of building the bridge, whether they are workers constructing it, or onlookers. They are conscious of the slow progress of time through five years, till the completion of the bridge. The people's fear of Abidaga makes them conscious of his presence and absence, both associated with the heavy passage of time. When Abidaga is replaced by the gentle Arif Beg, the people of the town and the workers become less conscious of time which passes swiftly. Yet consciousness of the fast flow of time is not always associated with easiness, the chief of guards' fear of losing his life in case he does not find the person responsible for the damage in the bridge within three days makes him conscious of his life getting shorter. Finally, Višegrad people's intense happiness after the completion of a strong and beautiful bridge makes them conscious of happy times that last for nine days; till this consciousness gradually declines into the familiarity of daily routine.

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