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Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2006. xiv + 230 pp. Bibliography and index. \$52.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-4421-0; \$18.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8014-7300-5.

Review by Julian Bourg, Bucknell University.

Suzanne Guerlac has written an introduction to Bergson that does its job. It is not the kind of hasty, rudimentary, and sometimes even cartoonish book one easily finds today on any and all subjects: Introducing..., An Introduction to..., A Very Short Introduction to..., X for Beginners, and so forth--books publishers obviously like but that have disturbing consequences for scholarship. Guerlac's work is too sophisticated and in some sense too full to be counted as a primer meant to be read on a cross-country flight. Instead, the book does its job by offering a persuasive argument for Bergson's contemporary relevance that culminates in a call for rediscovery; a fair attempt to think the thinker and his times; and (the heart of the book) a meticulously guided tour of two of his early writings: *Time and Free Will* (1889) and *Matter and Memory* (1896). By calling her introduction *Thinking in Time*, Guerlac means to celebrate Bergson's accomplishment of basing philosophy, especially a philosophy of science, in temporal metaphors rather than spatial ones; and furthermore to invite readers to consider the parallels between Bergson's era and our own.

A first critical point. It is in some sense a shame that Guerlac spends so much time--130 out of 214 pages--reading those two early works: *Time and Free Will* (the poorly translated title, as she rightly notes, of *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*) and *Matter and Memory*. To be sure, she unpacks them well. Anyone who has slogged through them (I confess to having read only the second of the two) is sure to appreciate the painstaking and intricate walk-through of these truly difficult texts. For these works are arcane, and their strangeness comes from the fact that the problems Bergson confronted and some of the resources he used to overcome them were to some extent distinctive to the late nineteenth century. It helps to have a guide, and Guerlac's presentation convinces the reader of the books' richness and complexity. To read her essays alongside Bergson himself would certainly be rewarding. And yet, it is not so clear that these two early works are the most worthwhile of Bergson's to read by way of introduction. Guerlac claims that they are but does not explain fully why, by and large noting their rigor and declaring them to be wellsprings. She herself observes that the later *Creative Evolution* (1907) and *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932) reflect the mature Bergson. The laborious positions formulated during his late twenties and early thirties were eventually shaped and developed into works that are simply less overwrought and more accessible. Bergson was the cultural force he was precisely because his lectures and short works in particular were not as tensely baroque as *Time and Free Will* and *Matter and Memory*.

Beyond the matter of what texts are best suited for an entrée to Bergson, there is also the issue of execution. One sometimes has the impression of reading Guerlac's reader's notes: the results of the undeniably earnest process of untwining the densely wrapped balls of Bergsonian thread. Her summary itself, however, is somewhat knotted. Frequent long block quotes are followed by involved explication whereby the overall shape of Bergson's argument seems more reproduced than explained. This reader would have found it more satisfying if Guerlac had given a little more synopsis and a little less minute exegesis. I'm not sure we needed such a detailed tour of the labyrinth of these two books to be convinced of Guerlac's central point--that Bergson's *idée fixe* of *time* makes him a thinker relevant for our own day. But perhaps I'm voicing a readerly expectation that comes from the same entry-level culture that has

generated those airfare introductions mentioned above. As it is, the book finds itself caught--not unproductively--between Bergson 101 and the kind of almost philological close reading one might expect from a literary-minded scholar and that, to be sure, one ought to respect.

Guerlac's main argument is compelling. Bergson did place time at the center of his thinking. The unique power of Bergsonism comes from pointing out the sheer difficulty of expressing this view. Take the second phrase of this paragraph: "placing" thinking at a "center" demonstrates exactly the kind of spatialization in which thought tends to get caught. It is indeed remarkable how often analytical and representational thought relies on spatial points, coordinates, horizons, openings, moves, etc. Such tendencies are, for Bergson, ultimately erroneous or at best resemble what Friedrich Nietzsche called "useful fictions." One famous example illustrates the essence of Bergson's project; namely, the difference between time as it is measured by a clock and time as it is experienced by someone. That time *seems* to pass more quickly or slowly for an individual in his or her "inner" experience is metaphysically *more real*, and not only to that person, than the supposedly *objective* calculation of a timepiece. The example is especially compelling with students, who instinctively understand the difference between the dependable ticks of the classroom clock and the fact that their teacher's lecture drones on and on interminably. Bergson called *intuition* this non-analytic, non-quantifying method of grasping the fundamental metaphysical substratum of temporality; and he called *duration* the qualitative, experiential, "pure" kind of time that we know immediately from within our own consciousnesses. It is from our own experience that we can move, not into a private subjectivity divided from the world, but toward an apprehension of the fundamentally unified flow of reality as a whole.

Bergson's position on the classic being versus becoming debate is thus pretty clear. Guerlac is right that the re-temporalization of thought, or better, reacquainting thought with the constitutive temporality on which it depends, is one of Bergson's main contributions. Time is a "force" and a "form of energy," she quotes him as saying. From this basic element spring a number of positions; for example, memory does not regress from present to past but rather progresses from past to present, the real is heterogeneous and indeterminate, and the self is a free center of action precisely because it is indeterminate. All of that is perfectly appealing and acceptable. It is indeed difficult to think in time, to think time, and to make thought adequate to time. Bergson, however, employs one category--life itself--that Guerlac does not make much of. I was somewhat surprised that she did not discuss his vitalism, for to my understanding Bergson ultimately roots time in the energy of life itself (*élan vital*) in the sense that time is a quality of life and not the other way around. He was criticized in his own day and since for his vitalism, which can be taken in a number of directions, not all of which are anodyne.

Guerlac presents herself as a recovering, even reformed poststructuralist. As such, she might be read as a case of a larger phenomenon whereby, methodologically speaking, the modish textualism that reigned in another moment (and in some corners continues to hold sway) appears tempered by a healthy respect for contextual factors, traditional philosophical dilemmas, science as scientists understand it, and intellectual history. While her skills as a close reader come through in the attentive walk-throughs of the Bergsonian texts, those readings are framed by chapters that reach outward into Bergson's trajectory as a whole, the controversies in the philosophy of science that marked his generation, his influence on recent continental thought, and information-age dilemmas for which he might be a helpful resource. Guerlac's succinct treatments of these broader themes--that is, themes that move beyond Bergson's own books--function as compelling counterweights to *Thinking in Time's* textual-expositional middle.

It might be pointed out that appreciating contextual factors and intellectual history is nothing new. More specifically, a model has long existed that situates and explains Bergson's project alongside other European thinkers in the *fin de siècle* and early twentieth century: namely, the "crisis in positivism" treated by H. Stuart Hughes some fifty years ago. Without discussing the considerable scholarship that has accrued in the wake of this formula, Guerlac does a competent job in the first chapter of

reconstituting Bergson's own development and the reasons why he was attractive to his contemporaries. More impressive is her explanation in the second chapter of the shift to post-Newtonian physics, the resulting crisis in existing neo-Kantian philosophies of science, and the search for new philo-scientific foundations (which, again, Bergson help lay by replacing the notion of space with time). As someone unfamiliar with the technical worries of early-twentieth-century physicists, I found myself both wowed and entirely unqualified to evaluate her foray. The final chapters--first on Bergson's importance to media theorist Mark Hansen, "virtualist" Brian Massumi, and above all Gilles Deleuze; and then on Bergson's pertinence for contemporary debates in chaos theory and cybernetics--are suggestive and necessarily brief. They propose without imposing and invite the reader to imagine why Bergson should matter to us and how his thought might have applications and implications for a variety of humanistic and scientific fields. And yet, when Guerlac draws a parallel between the positivism of the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* and the neo-positivism of the recent *fin de siècle* and suggests that Bergson's relevance then makes him relevant now, she overlooks the fact that anti-positivism and temporal thinking are ever-available traditions in modern thought. They merge, for instance, in the familiar notion of historicity.

Guerlac largely avoids the temptation of using Bergson's thought itself to explain the differences between his era and our own, how he has been forgotten, and why we should reconsider him. The pitfall here would have been, for example, to self-consciously use Bergson's theories to show how remembering him does not involve regressing from our day to an abandoned past but rather progressing from his moment to ours. Her post-poststructuralist move breaks out of the kind of self-reflexive hermeneutic circle in which many have spun their wheels. As an object lesson, Guerlac shows how that kind of thinking has had its time and why many of us no longer give it ours.

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