To everything there is a season
and a time for every purpose under heaven

— Ecclesiastes/Pete Seeger/The Byrds

In *Untangling My Chopsticks*, Victoria Riccardi’s book about *kaiseki*, the foods accompanying the Japanese tea ceremony, she describes a traditional way of reckoning time: “The special opening of the sealed tea jar, for example, which marked the beginning of the new tea year, used to be determined by the yellowing of yuzu citrus fruit in late October, not by a set date, which is currently November.” Such temporal measuring, following nature’s flexible lead, was abandoned in 1873, when Japan switched to the Gregorian calendar. The new schema severed old connective tissues linking ritualistic response to specific natural occurrences. “Suddenly,” as Riccardi puts it, “all the food, flowers, weather, colors, and numerous other seasonal aesthetics involved in the tea ceremony and tea kaiseki fell slightly off track.”

Although such associations may have been lost, surely a great deal of efficiency was gained. After all, under the original schema, what kind of directions would one give a caterer? What date could be printed on invitations? When would one prepare the hors d’oeuvres? The older way of reckoning time was characterized by contingency rather than control, dependence rather than autonomy. We, who are children of the Enlightenment, tend to dismiss the “yuzu fruit” approach as both quaint and, given our desire for control, inefficient.

The linguist Benjamin Whorf, commenting on his experience of having lived among the Hopi, offered a less wistful judgment than that pronounced by Riccardi. Whorf suggested that the Hopi never had what we would consider a proper sense of time, and thus they could not lose what they never had. They certainly did not grasp time “as a smooth flowing continuum in which everything in the universe proceeds at an equal rate….”

Einstein’s challenge to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century paradigms in physics was matched in philosophy by thinkers like John Dewey and Martin Heidegger, who began to question assumptions that had guided “modern,” that is, postmedieval, thought. We might call them incipient “postmodern” thinkers except that this label has become a lightning rod for various specific doctrines, and the sorting out of epochs in terms of linear progression—for example, ancient, medieval, modern, postmodern—represents a prototypically “modern” mode of thinking, one that is now widely questioned. Whatever name it comes to possess, the philosophical shift at the turn of the last century was real, as were parallel ones not only in the sciences but in literature, painting, music, and architecture. Such a shift sent ripple effects throughout the modern worldview, including its notion of time.

Had Whorf done his linguistic research in China, original home of tea ceremonies, he would have found no term directly corresponding to our “time.” This point becomes the centerpiece for a careful and helpful analysis by the philosopher and sinologist François Jullien. The word *riyue*, Jullien points out, means literally “days and months.”
as a language without conjugated verbs, Chinese does not encourage neat separations of past, present, and future. Using such linguistic clues, Jullien takes a different approach from that of Whorf. Selecting a particular take on time as the correct one unduly limits the complexity of human experience. As a way of fostering a richer grasp of that experience, Jullien welcomes the difference between post-Enlightenment European and traditional Chinese understandings. The two modes of thinking, the latter more concretely experiential, the former a product of abstract compartmentalization, sort of need each other, or at least that is what I, following Jullien, hope to indicate in these reflections.

How Can Philosophy Help?

Reconstructing and rehabilitating the “yuzu fruit” conception of time requires an ear for unfamiliar voices. Some of these will come from alternative philosophical traditions; others will come from our own. One surprising voice will be found in the ordinary rumblings of an organ too often dismissed by thinkers, the stomach. Borborygmi, often marking intervals signaling hunger, offer one way to mark out temporal passage. Stomach temporality, more directly related to ordinary experience than even “yuzu fruit” chronology, is neither, pace Newton, disconnected from “reference to anything external” nor, pace Whorf, a “smooth flowing continuum in which everything in the universe proceeds at an equal rate.”

Stomach time could not be taken seriously, and cannot be taken seriously, as long as the default starting point for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy remains dominant: humans defined as “minds,” with the mind understood as an organ for the detached observation of a separate reality, the world. Fortunately, the twentieth century witnessed several philosophical revisions of that central assumption. American Pragmatism, for example, moved from modernity’s emphasis on autonomy and separation toward an orientation
consistent with our post-Darwinian status as biosocial beings. John Dewey, the prototypical pragmatist thinker, stands as an especially good guide. He may be the philosophical tradition’s only stomach-friendly thinker. (David Hume, who loved to eat and cook, was stomach-friendly, but in an “I love to gorge myself on good food” sort of way, an attitude signaled by his wide girth.)

Dewey, announcing a shift from received assumptions, actually made theoretical hay of our food-dependent condition. It was he, after all, who established an experimental school in which the stomach took a central place. “One of Dewey’s curricular obsessions,” Louis Menand has pointed out, “was cooking.”7 The justification for such an emphasis goes to the heart of whether we think of humans as essentially minds or as fully embodied beings. In the latter case, the practices associated with the stomach, far from being problematic, become emblematic of the human condition.

What has any of this to do with time? The rehabilitation of interdependence allows for a renewed appreciation of the “yuzu fruit” connection with things external. Such a shift brings with it two important corollaries. First, Instead of moments escaping, temporality comes to be understood as opportunities surging forward. Time no longer need be considered one-dimensionally as an ever-escaping sequence of standard units. It comes to be considered, on the “yuzu fruit” model, as a cluster of possibilities tending toward us. Second, Time relaxation rather than time anxiety. A particularly prominent contemporary anxiety, “chronomania,” the frantic concern with not wasting “time,” is directly linked to the time-as-disconnected-from-anything-external attitude. Rethinking temporality allows for a more relaxed, welcoming posture toward emerging eventualities.

Can the pre-Meiji Humpty Dumpty be reconstructed? Yes, if we are willing to piece together components from diverse sources. Philosophically, China and America offer important clues. Both Jullien’s explanations of Chinese time sensibility and American Pragmatism’s emphasis on human practices help overcome the sedimented prejudice toward separation, autonomy, and disconnectedness. Iconographically, help will come from two well-known paintings. Together, these considerations will culminate in a new root metaphor for understanding temporality: seasonality, replacing the alternative model of time as a line.

This metaphoric move comes from François Jullien. He points out that in traditional China, seasons, not clocks, provided the primary analogue for thinking about temporality. The central modern assumption of humans (subjects) and the world (objects) set in opposition to one another would have struck traditional Chinese thinkers as odd. It does not seem odd to us. But that is because we have inherited the particularly post-Cartesian construal of ourselves as outside spectators, “subjects,” accumulating neutral observations about matter, or “objects.”

Such a spectator self had not always been dominant. Greek mythology, in its wisdom, had understood the importance of the mind’s not considering itself a detached spectator. Mind (Psyche) needed to be blended with a force linking it to things, and what better force than love (Eros)?8 Eros, urging Psyche toward connections and relations, would discourage detachment. Rationality worked best, not as a disembodied or disinterested stance, but when it had a real affection for things. “Philosophy,” after all, means love of wisdom or, maybe even better, the wisdom of love.9

Psyche, however, suffering from a sort of seven-year itch, longed to be free. It sought liberation from both Eros, the drive that implicated it in things other than itself, and Soma, its longtime partner, the body. In the early seventeenth century, Psyche sued for divorce. Modern philosophy really gets its start in the divorce court presided over by René Descartes. The famous dualisms and binary oppositions against which late-twentieth-century philosophy railed began with what could be compared to a judicial decree. Descartes pronounced Psyche (Mind) and Soma (Body) as riven by irreconcilable differences. Not only that, but the settlement he imposed favored Mind entirely. It got its main demand: freedom as autonomy. Having jettisoned Eros and Soma, Psyche assumed the status of self-sufficiency, dismissing neediness, dependence, and attachment as impediments associated with its former life.

Left aside in all of this was a formidable character, Gaster (Stomach), who would prove more difficult to divorce. Philosophers did not immediately recognize the difficulty because, mind-intoxicated, they dismissed the stomach as insignificant. How strange this would have seemed to a Chinese thinker. Humans may, in great numbers, have circumvented a bodily activity like sex, said Lin Yutang, but “no saint has yet circumvented food and drink.” The stomach, along with its needs, its dependencies, its attachments, should not be considered a burden. We are “stomach-gifted,” says Lin. The practices associated with eating open us to possibilities for connection and celebration. This observation is so true that “the best arrangement we can think of when we gather to render public homage to a grandfather is to give him a birthday feast.”10

Psyche, mind in its haughty imperiousness, had tried to rise above such feasts, linked as they were to Eros, interconnection, and Soma, body. Doing so meant attempting also to rise above Gaster. Here, Mind met its match. Several
hours of hunger would drive Mind away from the self-enclosed realm of pure theory and toward the very practical search for food. Needless of such biological commonplaces, the Cartesian tribunal, declaring Psyche self-sufficient, imposed at the same time a particular value hierarchy. Autonomy was no longer to be decried as unreal fantasy. Self-sufficiency now earned exemplary status. No wonder this tradition ignored Gaster. The stomach cannot consider self-sufficiency as any sort of ideal. It is immediately, irrevocably connected to and dependent on its surroundings.

Millet’s Interconnected Temporality

This tension between connection (Gaster) and separation (Psyche) provides the source out of which our two conceptions of temporality emerge. Their differences can be highlighted by using iconographic representations in which the stomach plays a prominent role. Jean-François Millet’s Angelus, for example, assumes a stomach-centered world. As such, it situates the participants in a nexus of intersections. The place is clearly defined, a field just outside town, still within sight of the local church’s steeple. One temporal span, afternoon, is transitioning into another, evening. Time flows via intervals that may be stretched and shrunk in various ways, depending on the activities with which they are associated. Some are relatively short, as in the bowing of a head. Others are lengthier, as they are accompanied either by the sun’s diurnal trajectory or by the periods of planting, cultivation, growth, and harvesting.

Such an expanding series of spans, multiple and variously measured, emerges in a matter-of-fact way when time is inseparable from external events. What about reversing the order and looking for the shortest fundamental constituents? What are the ultimate building blocks out of which these spans are constructed? Stomach time’s surprising answer: there are none. Time is not here thought of as a line made up of distinct points. Spans, defined by the flux and flow of ongoing activities, cannot be separated from those activities. Zeno’s famous paradoxes (ca. 488 BCE) had problematized the notions of time and space as made up of infinitely divisible units. If the distance between A and B is composed of an infinite amount of indivisible units, then anyone wanting to travel from A to B would have to traverse half the distance, then half of what is left of the distance, then half again, and so on. But this would mean that one could never reach B, since reaching B would involve traversing an infinite number of points in a finite amount of time. In an analogous way, stomach temporality, rooted in practices rather than in conceptual abstractions, questions the notion of time as composed of indivisible, independent units. Such a construal, admittedly, is particularly well suited to certain purposes, those of efficiency and control. But it is neither the only possible conceptualization nor the one closest to the actual flow of experience.

Zeno had highlighted a real problem. While the mind can divide things in various ways, the results of such mental abstractions should not uncritically be read back into reality as if they were its primordial and thus ultimately real constituents. Dewey identified this procedure as the “commonest of all philosophical fallacies.” The things of ordinary experience are “objects to be treated, used, acted upon and with, enjoyed and endured, even more than things to be known.” Applied to temporality, this axiom means that our experiences, dependent as they are on use, enjoyment, and interaction, can best be considered in light of such practices. Within this sort of “fluid” rather than “atomic” world, the ultimate instant, that abstract construct so crucial for efficiency, power, and control, no longer retains its primacy. It can be grasped for what it is, a specific mode of interpreting time for particular purposes. Temporal durations, when considered in relation to practices, are spans composed of spans. Multiplicity and codependence are primordial. Borrowing the Chinese metaphor, time is a season composed of seasons.

Although this manner of speaking seems foreign to us, the philosophical riches of our own language reveal how people were once comfortable with such a way of thinking. In Tom Jones, Henry Fielding describes crude behavior immediately following the death of a character’s mother as “very indecent at this season.” The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that “season” comes from a term eminently related to the stomach, serere, the Latin verb meaning “to sow.” In common contemporary usage, “season” identifies, paradigmatically, one of the four recurring periods of the year. Examined historically, “season” turns out to be fundamentally heteronomous; in other words, it is dependent on some external activity. We speak of the planting, the harvesting, the hunting, or the fishing seasons. The dictionary’s four pages devoted to the term include meanings indicating a university term or a court session, movement toward ripeness or maturity, and the fit or proper time. One phrase, harsh to our ears, goes to the heart of the term’s extension. Autumn, the expression goes, is drifting away “through all its seasons.”

Etymology is also helpful. The Mind-centered and the Stomach-centered conceptions of time reveal complementary developmental trajectories. Our English word “time,” consistent with its divorce-friendly connotation, derives from the Indo-European root “di, “to cut or divide.” Romance
languages, growing from a different root, tend to emphasize, well, romance: linkage, connection, reaching out. Their words for time go back to the Latin tempus, rooted in the action of stretching, as with the cognates “extend,” “portend,” “attend.” English emphasizes ultimate divisions, the constant disappearance of homogeneous instants. Latin suggests time stretching toward us.

These differences take on special significance when we examine their ramifications. First, Time, divided into a series of instants, suggests linearity, an ongoing, unending succession of moments, a timeline. Tempus, seasonality, suggests periods, repeating patterns, a set of cycles. Second, the way “season” invites a modifier, such as “rainy” season, “tourist” season, “hunting” season, links temporality to ongoing events while pluralizing it. Third, Time, as the autonomous ticking away of instants, privileges not only ultimate isolated units but an ultimate neutrality. Time considered apart from external conditions is nothing but a neutral datum. “Valuing” becomes a subjective imposition onto an initially neutral backdrop. Seasonal time knows no such neutrality. Linked as it is to practices, it remains irredeemably immersed in a world of preference and avoidance. Finally, the Psyche/Soma split in modern thought got a bit contagious. Everyone, it seems, was heading for divorce court. One prominent pair, time and space, had been inseparable from Aristotle to Leibniz. Their divorce was announced most famously by Newton. Thinking of tempus as composed of seasons discourages the isolation of time from space. The growing season, the rutting season, the dry season, the planting season, these all involve the intersection of localities and temporalities. Millet’s painting takes on relevance in light of these reflections. It represents the lived experience of tempus. Though painted in the mid-nineteenth century, Millet’s characters inhabit a premodern world, a world in which breaking up is hard to do. His depiction is suffused with significance because it jumbles together, in a hard-to-separate mixture, solar movement, harvest, memory, religious heritage, community, fatigue, hunger, and hope. Time is not a fixed measure of disappearing, uniformly constituted units, ticking away autonomously. In Millet’s world the present is constituted by what is present.

In spite of its overtly religious theme, Millet’s scene is driven by something more fundamental than the church bell calling for a reverential pause. It is the couple’s location rather than the religious commemoration that takes on special significance. They have toiled in the field because of the stomach’s incessant demands. Various temporal spans intersect in that place: the sun’s trajectory, autumn coming to a close, memories of spring and summer. The couple commemorates the day’s end, first by pausing reverentially for the spirit and then by heading home to pause nutritionally for the body. Mechanical clocks are not present, nor need they be. Time is real. But this is stomach time, a heteronomous parceling out of spans according to conditions presented by the couple’s setting.

**Hopper and Chronomania**

Millet’s world is by no means our own. A more familiar scene, one centered on Time rather than tempus, was painted eighty
years later. With Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks*, we find a community whose main points of reference have little to do with Millet’s world. Instead of fields surrounding a village, there is the omnipresent city. We are immersed in a concrete, steel, and glass environment. Gone are the signs of planting, cultivation, harvesting. Gone are the traces of the sun’s natural trajectory. Gone, too, are the supple hues of dusk that distend boundaries and blur the separations between humans, earth, and sky. Light is now artificial and contrived. Harsh verticality and disconnection rule. In the distance (across the street, actually) a cash register, the modern world’s replacement for a steeple, stands out in sheer isolation. Along with the agricultural setting, the sense of rooted interrelatedness has also disappeared. Division and self-enclosure now dominate.

The lonely figures even seem to be imprisoned, there being no obvious mode of egress. We may well be looking at a diner, but where, we might ask, is Gaster? Strangely, the stomach is present by its absence. Hunger-induced activities, dominant in Millet, hardly appear. No longer does seasonal time, the bouquet of possibilities surging toward us, dominate. Artificial light, abetted by a cash-register society, reflects and reinforces the dominance of autonomous Time. No surprise here, since Time is itself part and parcel of a world dominated by isolation, division, and forlornness. “Killing time” could serve as an alternative title for the painting. The victim might be an evening, but as M.F.K. Fisher noted, “an evening killed is murder of a kind, criminal like any disease, and like disease a thorough-going crime.”

Hopper’s characters exhibit a condition fully in line with the Indo-European root *di*: isolated individuals, severed from the earth, from their communities, from transcendence, and from each other. Division and divorce rule. Such characters, insular in their solitariness, favor sullenness over solemnity. The world of Hopper is a desolate one in which Time hovers as an invisible presence. Just as Millet’s painting gave us an anachronism, a post-Enlightenment painter depicting a pre-Enlightenment scene, so Hopper’s painting also involves an interesting reversal. We are now situated in a post-Deweyan world, but the scene immerses us in a call-and-response sort of world. Autonomous Time, privileging freedom as disconnection, treats all external demands as inherently burdensome. Time is experienced as a disappearing deposit of instants (1,440 minutes or 86,400 seconds per day). Each string of instants, optimally, would be set aside for self-originating and self-directed activities. Pesky externally generated demands, however, keep interfering. Strings of ever-perishing instants then become a battleground. They can be set free by autonomy, or they can be “lost” in servitude to heteronomy and obligation.

Certain externally imposed obligations we cannot avoid. Employment, for most of us, falls into this category. Conceding such a loss, the battle moves elsewhere. To liberate the remaining temporal units, other instant-surpassing activities must be eliminated. Actions thought of as natural and inherently worthwhile in a call-and-response kind of setting now come to be viewed as impositions. Take bedtime stories. Who has time? One solution: a 1983 volume entitled *One-Minute Bedtime Stories*. But why stop there? That volume’s success led to *One-Minute Birthday Stories*, *One-Minute Teddy Bear Stories*, and even *One-Minute Christmas Stories*. Not surprisingly, stomach-related activities become special targets for eradication. Nutrition remains an ironclad necessity. Time-obsessed individuals wish to dispense as much as possible with necessity, replacing it with autonomy, that is, as many free instants as possible. Eating presents a special challenge. Heteronomy wins this battle. Autonomy, however, regroups and strikes, guerilla-like, in skirmishes it can win: those involving the preparation and ingestion of food. James Gleick, in his book *Faster: The Acceleration of Just about Everything*, recounts an extreme case. A Japanese restaurant owner has devised a pay-by-the-time-you-spend-eating scheme. His restaurant features a punch clock. For patrons, it’s all you can eat, pay by the minute. Customers rush in, load up on food, speed-eat, and rush back to punch out. So popular is the concept, Gleick points out with delicious irony, that “when the restaurant prepares to open at lunchtime, Tokyo residents wait in line.”

Autonomous Time brings with it what I call “chronomania,” constant fretfulness about wasted moments. Chronomania as a way of life requires palliatives. Distraction and amusement tend to dominate in this regard. Barring either, Time can be occupied by simply sitting, mostly isolated, in a late-night eatery. Hopper may have situated his characters in a diner, but no stomach-induced rhythms of temporality emerge. There is neither plate nor piece of food in sight. Just mugs and two large, forlorn coffee urns, isolated in vertical rigidity. Evening brings social solitariness to prominence. Humans are forced to admit (as did existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre) the repercussions of being a Spectator self: isolated individuals confronting a neutral, meaningless world.
The word “boredom,” it is well worth recalling, emerged only in the mid-nineteenth century. How, we might ask, did humans ever manage without this now ubiquitous term? Well, seasonal time, in its call-and-response dimension, kept us plenty occupied. By contrast, autonomous Time, by disengaging temporal flow from ongoing events, encourages an attitude of detached indifference. Hopper depicted disconnected characters getting through yet another lengthy series of lonely instants. Time is autonomous and oppressive, space is meaningless, amusement and distraction have their limits. Boredom rules.

Autonomous Time will not and need not go away. Our world of airline schedules, conference calls, and Global Positioning Systems is too dependent on it. It has proven a marvelous boon to organizing and coordinating lives. In its move to prominence, however, it has overly marginalized another sense of time, that which Jullien discovered in traditional Chinese society, Millet depicted in a preurbanized Europe, and Riccardi celebrated in pre-Meiji Japan. Our world has seen the triumph of the spectator subject and the trumping of Millet’s Angelus by Hopper’s Nighthawks. This is where we have been led by the divorce-court model of philosophizing. Our new young couple, Psyche and Gaster, offer us matrimonial hope. With their union we can go a long way toward a more balanced perspective.

**Notes**

5. José Ortega y Gasset summed up the situation at the turn of the twentieth century this way: “The great turnabout of 1600 was the result of a grave historical crisis which lasted for two centuries, and which was the most serious that contemporary peoples have ever experienced. I believe this to be a matter of enormous interest because we are now living in an era of intense crisis in which man, whether he likes it or not, must execute another great about-face. Why? Is it not obvious to suspect that the present crisis proceeds from the fact that the new posture adopted in 1600—the modern posture—has exhausted all its possibilities, has reached its farthest limits, and thereby has discovered its own limitations, its contradictions, its insufficiency?” *Man and Crisis*, Mildred Adams, trans. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1938), 69. See also my essay “Philosophy: Postmodern or Polytemporal,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 40 (2000): 313–326.
8. The full story, not just the symbolic elements of blending love and mind, can be found in *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius.
9. This alternative reading of how philosophy’s etymology should be treated was suggested in Michel Serres, *En amour-nous-mêmes des bêtes?* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2002), 8.
10. Yutang Lin, *The Importance of Living* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1937), 44. Birthdays present typical markers of time. Time can be represented by any marker of change or alteration. In this sense the stomach stands as one of biology’s most familiar timepieces. This link is preserved etymologically in the word “meal,” whose oldest significations include “measure” and “time.” Anchored in the Indo-European root “me,” to measure, the word “meal” indicated, initially, a measure in general and, more specifically, a measure of time. Our term “piece-meal” still echoes this older sense.
12. Ibid.
14. Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (London: Elsevier Publishing Company, 1967), s.v. “temporal,” “time.” The actual etymological situation, as reported in various sources, is actually more complicated. The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, takes “time” back only to its Teutonic root, which means not to divide, but “to stretch.” For his part, Eric Partridge in *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1958), s.v. “tempor,” “tide,” traces temps back to a root indicating not stretching but cutting and dividing. Philosophically, the importance remains the same: time lives at the intersection of two tendencies, dividing and stretching, both of which have to be preserved in some sort of tension.
15. We have here the concrete, ordinary-experience version of Hermann Minkowski’s powerful 1908 claim announcing the triumph of Einsteinian relativity: “Henceforth space by itself and time by itself, are doomed to fade away into mere shadows…” Cited in Peter Galison, *Einstein’s Clocks, Poincaré’s Maps: Empires of Time* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 244.
18. Fast-food establishments are naturally the past masters at avoiding “wasted” time. A 1997 *New York Times* article pointed out how the Boston Market chain more than halved time of service (15 minutes to 5) “by requiring customers to select their meals from a menu board and pay at the front of the line instead of ordering cafeteria-style and paying at the end.” The article goes on to tout how “value meals” ordered by a single number rather than by an enumeration of various items cuts time of service as well. Barnaby J. Feder, “Defining Fast Food: Between 35 Seconds and 50 Minutes,” *New York Times*, 22 June 1997, sec. 4, p. 2.