

Beyond Story and Discourse: Narrative Time in Postmodern and Nonmimetic Fiction

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Narrative temporality is perhaps the area in which there is still the greatest degree of general agreement among major theorists. The standard conceptual framework here is Genette's, with its basic concepts of order, duration, and frequency. These concepts build on and are consonant with the Russian Formalists' earlier distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet* and theoretical dyad of *Erzählzeit* and *erzählthe Zeit*, long present in several strands of the German critical tradition; Genette's model also shares the same general mimetic assumptions of virtually every other current theory of narrative time, a common ground that allows the theory to attempt to cover both fictional and nonfictional works.¹

In most cases, this is all that is required. There is no question that Genette's account is generally adequate to describe the temporality of most nonfictional narratives, of the great majority of works of realist fiction, and of much modernist fiction. Indeed, it was quite possibly the strikingly antilinear yet naturalistically recuperable texts of the modernists that may have originally inspired these investigations in the first place. However, these categories do not work if applied to many late modernist and postmodern texts, since they are predicated on distinctions that experimental writers are determined to preclude, deny, or confound—and this is also true of some postmodern forays into nonfictional genres.² As Diane Elam has written, "postmodernism is the recognition of the specifically *temporal* irony within narrative" (217). Surveying the considerable body of avant-garde and postmodern narratives that have recently proliferated, we are now in a position to identify several significant varieties of temporal construction that have become fairly well established that nevertheless cannot be contained within a Genettean framework.³

3. See Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg's *The Nature of Narrative* (New York, 1966).

4. See Claude Bremond's "La Logique des possibles narratifs," *Communications* 8 (1966): 60–76.

5. See Louis O. Mink's "Interpretation and Narrative Understanding," *Journal of Philosophy* 69, no. 9 (1972): 735–37.

6. See also the work of William H. Dray on judgment.

7. In my "Narrative Function" (*Semiotica* 13 [1978]: 177–202), I contend that "if history may have been grafted, as inquiry, onto narrative activity, it is because the 'configurational' dimension of story-telling and story-following already paved the way for an activity that Mandelbaum rightly characterizes as subsuming wholes. This activity is not a radical break with narrative activity to the extent that the latter already combines chronological and configurational order" (184).

8. It may be noted in passing that this correlation between "theme" and "plot" is also the basis of Northrop Frye's "archetypal" criticism.

Among the numerous violations of realistic temporality present in recent texts, there are six kinds of temporal reconstruction that stand out as sufficiently distinctive to warrant particular notice. These strategies, as we will see, are often present in earlier narratives as well; furthermore, insofar as they engage in logical contradictions, they are usually only possible in works of fiction. Though nonmimetic, they nevertheless bear a dialectical relationship to the concept of mimesis, since it is only through that concept that we can understand its violation. The strategies include the following:

1. CIRCULAR

Perhaps the best known type, this kind of fiction instead of ending returns to its own beginning, and thus continues infinitely. Its circular temporality partially mimes but ultimately transforms the linear chronology of everyday existence; it always returns to and departs from its point of origin—which is also its (temporary) conclusion. The *locus classicus* of this type is *Finnegans Wake*; other earlier examples include Queneau's *Le Chiendent* (1933) and Nabokov's *The Gift* (1937–38).⁴ Brian McHale further points out that “[o]ther variants on the ouroboros-structure include Julio Cortazar's *Hopscotch* (1963/77), Gabriel Jospovic's ‘Möbius the Stripper’ (1974), and John Barth's minimalist Möbius-strip narrative, ‘Frame-Tale’ (from *Lost in the Funhouse*)” (1987, 111). Such texts also problematize Genette's notion of frequency as well, since they are infinitely repeated instances of otherwise singulative events.

2. CONTRADICTIONARY

A prominent type of many of the more extreme postmodern narratives is the self-contradictory story, in which incompatible and irreconcilable versions of the story are set forth. In real life, such contradictions are not possible: a man may have died in 1956 or he may have died in 1967, but he cannot have died in 1956 *and* in 1967. But this law of noncontradiction does not have to be followed in nonmimetic works like J. B. Priestley's *Dangerous Corner*; Robert Coover's “The Babysitter,” Caryl Churchill's *Traps*, Jeanette Winterson's “The Poetics of Sex,” the mutually incompatible dual endings of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and most famously (and egregiously) in Robbe-Grillet's later fiction.⁵ Discussing *La Maison de rendez-vous*, Ruth Ronen has observed that “fictional worlds can contain time paradoxes where time is presented as reversible or bilateral” (202).⁶ In these texts, there is no single, unambiguous story to be extrapolated from the discourse, but rather two or more contradictory versions that seriously vitiate the very notion of story (*histoire*) insofar as it is conceived as a single, self-consistent series of events that can be

inferred from the discourse. For that matter, Genette's notion of frequency as well as his concept of story presupposes the existence of a fixed, retrievable, noncontradictory sequence of events, a sequence many postmodern writers refuse to provide. Ursula Heiss, who deftly analyzes such contradictory temporalities in Pynchon and Robbe-Grillet (113–46, 179–219), explains this practice in terms derived from Borges: “Postmodernist novels thereby project into the narrative present and past an experience of time which normally is only available for the future: time dividing and subdividing, bifurcating and branching off continuously into multiple possibilities and alternatives” (55).⁷

3. ANTINOMIC

There are several narratives that move backward in time (Elizabeth Howard's *The Long View*, C. H. Sisson's *Christopher Homm*, Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*); most can be easily situated within the standard temporal concepts that inform almost all contemporary narrative theory—that is, the order of the *synzhet* is simply the opposite of the order of the *fabula*. Other, more complexly retroverted narratives however present more recalcitrant conundrums. Ilse Aichinger's “Spiegelgeschichte” (1952) is a doubly linear story that simultaneously moves backward and forward in time, as do later texts like Alejo Carpentier's “Journey Back to the Source” (1963), the final pages of Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* (1984).⁸ Aichinger's protagonist, that is, goes from her burial backward in time to her birth, all the while acting as if she is instead moving forward in time, looking ahead to that which has already occurred, as it were.

Thus, we get statements like: “Drei Tage später wagt er nicht mehr, den Arm um deine Schultern zu legen. Wieder drei Tage später fragt er dich, wie du heisst, und du fragst ihn. Nun wisst ihr voneinander nicht einmal mehr die Namen. . . . Ein Tag wird kommen, da siehst du ihn zum erstenmal. Und er sieht dich. Zum erstenmal, das heisst: Nie wieder” (71). (“Three days later he no longer dares to put his arm round your shoulder. And three days after that he asks you what your name is, and you ask him his. And now neither of you knows the other's name. . . . A day will come when you will see him for the first time. And he you. For the first time means: never again” [74–75]). The first meeting, from one temporal perspective, is also the last one from the other perspective.

With this kind of story, one can certainly have anachronies, though it's not clear whether—and why—they should be called prolepses or analepses. In a mimetic text, the narrator tells the story retrospectively (i.e., in the past tense), as the audience's reception of the story is prospective; the interested reader wants to learn what has already happened. In antinomic narration, both narrator and reader are moving prospectively (present tense, even future tense), though time's arrow is reversed.

Aichinger's story also includes jocular, tongue-in-cheek comments about this unusual temporal situation that emblemize its opposed chronological trajectories: "Vom Hafen heulen die Schiffe. Zur Abfahrt oder zur Ankunft? Wer soll das wissen?" (66) ("Over in the harbour the ships are hooting. Does it mean arrival or departure? Who can know that?" [68-69]).⁹ This joke is one that conventional narratology is incapable of explaining, since it does not imagine that the time of the story, in a work of fiction, might move in two directions simultaneously.¹⁰

4. DIFFERENTIAL

A curious temporality can be found in Woolf's *Orlando*, in which the eponymous character ages at a different rate than the people that surround him (her), as one chronology is superimposed on another, larger one. Thus, twenty years pass for Orlando at the same time that three and a half centuries pass for those around her (him). This situation drives the narrator to some playful descriptions in which metaphorical statements about time take on a literal meaning when applied to *Orlando*: "It would be no exaggeration to say that he would go out after breakfast a man of thirty and come home to dinner a man of fifty-five at least. Some weeks added a century to his age, others no more than three seconds at most" (70). This strategy is repeated (perhaps in homage to Woolf) by Caryl Churchill in her play *Cloud Nine*, which has the characters age twenty years as the society they inhabit gains a century. Borges's "The Secret Miracle" also employs a similar construction, as time slows down for a man awaiting execution so that he is able to finish composing a play even as the bullets from the firing squad move imperceptibly toward him; he experiences a year while his killers perceive an instant. The opposite happens to the protagonist of Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, as the protagonist ages faster than the people around him. A still more elaborate deployment of such disparate yet synchronized embedded chronologies can be found in Calderón's classic, *The Great Theater of the World*, where both the history of creation and the time span of a human life are collapsed into the actual duration of the play's performance. It should be noted that Bakhtin's account of the chronotope of the medieval dream vision, which "synchronize[s] diachrony" to produce a time in which all events coalesce into "pure simultaneous existence" (157), is entirely consonant with the differential temporalities of Calderón and intriguingly anticipates more recent postmodern practices.¹¹

5. CONFLATED

A distinctively contemporary construction is that in which apparently different temporal zones fail to remain distinct, and slide or spill into one another.

As the story segments run into each other, so do their respective temporalities. We find this in Pinget's *Passacaille*, in some of later novels of Claude Simon, and in Juan Goytisolo's *Landscape After the Battle*. Accounts of one set of events fold into a different set of events, presumably occurring at another time, without any framing device to clarify the relations between the disparate groups of events. In Simon's *Les Corps conducteurs*, we find a retarded, minimal, and resolutely antiteleological temporality; the narrative moves from setting to setting, and invariably the "separate" times and spaces begin to melt or bleed into each other, as the distinctions between each cluster of events begin to collapse, and "now" and "then" no longer signify clearly disparate times. A Genettean analysis of story or frequency will rapidly lead to a series of contradictions and impasses, since there is no principle of identity at work that would establish what is and what is not the "same" event.

There are also interesting variants of this practice, such as the contamination of the basic eighteenth-century setting of Carpentier's *Concierto Barroco* by a brief and unexplained interlude in the twentieth century. Ishmael Reed's superimposition of modern technology and time consciousness onto the 1860s narrative in *Flight to Canada*, or the impossibly scrambled historical references in Guy Davenport's "The Haile Selassie Funeral Train." Another blatant use of this technique appears in Milan Kundera's *Slowness*, as the protagonist of the main, contemporary narrative is brought face to face with the hero of the eighteenth-century novel that has partially inspired the later fiction—and both characters are then encountered by narrator/fabricator himself.

6. DUAL OR MULTIPLE

We are now perhaps in a position to finally situate that problem child of Shakespeare criticism: the notorious "double time" of many of his mature plays, in which different plotlines, though beginning and ending at the same moment, nevertheless take different numbers of days to unfold. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (a play replete with sly allusions to skewed chronology), four days and three nights pass for the duke and his entourage in the city while—at the same time—only two days and a single night pass for the lovers in the enchanted forest.¹² As the character Time himself explains between the acts of *The Winter's Tale*, "it is in my pow'r/ to o'erthrow law, and in one self-born hour/ To plant and o'erwhelm custom" (IV.i.7-9). *The Fairie Queen*, as Rawdon Wilson has shown, also embodies similar temporal contradictions.¹³ Such a situation is present as well (and explicitly remarked on) in Byron's *Cain*: after Lucifer returns Cain to Eden, Adah expresses her thanks that he has come back so soon, after only "two long hours" (III.i.54) according to the movement of the sun. Cain, understandably confused, responds:

And yet I have approached that sun, and seen
 Worlds which he once shone on, and never more
 Shall light; and worlds he never lit: methought
 Years had rolled o'er my absence. (III. i. 56-59)

The temporally enchanted forests of Shakespeare and Spenser almost certainly inspired "the time-shifting sorcery" of the jungle in the Sundarbans chapter of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

In addition to the types of currently untheorized temporal construction identified above, there are adjacent areas that need to be explored in greater depth. The most prominent, and the one that is now beginning to receive critical attention, is a contestation of the opposition between story time and discourse time. Such a distinction presupposes that it is possible to retrieve or deduce a consistent story (*fabula*) from a text (*syuzhet*); in many recent works, this simply is not the case.¹⁴ Beckett's *Molloy*, to take a familiar example, can be said to have no recoverable story, and therefore no story time. Near the end of his narrative, Molloy wonders about an event he has just recounted: "Yes, it seems to me some such incident occurred about this time. . . . But perhaps I am merging two times in one, and two women, one coming towards me, shyly, urged on by the cries and laughter of her companions, and the other going away from me, unhesitatingly" (75). This question can never be definitively answered, either by Molloy or by a narrator, since in this self-negating novel every putative event is suspect or called into question, and may never have occurred at all.¹⁵

In other works Beckett offers more strident and uncompromising challenges to the notion of a preexistent, recoverable story that is independent of the discourse, as his narrators "denarrate" or deny and cancel the events they had earlier affirmed to be the case (*The Unnamable*, "Cascando," *Fizzles, Ill Seen, Ill Said*).¹⁶ This pattern continues until we come to *Worstward Ho*, where descriptions are negated right after they are uttered: "First the body. No. First the place. No. First both. Now either. Now the other. Sick of the either try the other. Sick of it back sick of the either. So on. Somehow on. Till sick of both. Throw up and go. Where neither. Till sick of there. Throw up and back. The body again. Where none. . . . Say it stands. Had to up in the end and stand. Say bones. No bones but say bones" (7-8). In these contexts, it doesn't make sense to talk about a story (and, by implication, an originary chronological sequence) that can be deduced or extracted from the discourse. In such texts, the discourse serves to erase the story.¹⁷ The representational model of a writer transcribing a preexistent story is here dissolved and supplanted by one that stresses the act of invention and the free play of an author who invents what

he claims to recount; or to put it another way, mimesis is here replaced by poesis.

Salman Rushdie offers a potentially more radical erasure. *Midnight's Children*, in which Shandean narrative arabesques are fused with the history of modern India, contains a temporal contradiction which the narrator himself points out: "Rereading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time" (198). This work's *histoire* negates the historical timetable that otherwise structures much of the text; it becomes inseparable from the discourse that expresses it. This strategy is a typically postmodern reconstitution of history that simultaneously underwrites a distinct postcolonial political allegory—Gandhi's death will always be untimely for those on the subcontinent, as recent events continue to demonstrate.

Up to this point I have been discussing texts that construct impossible stories and thereby challenge the mimetically grounded distinctions of *fabula* and *syuzhet* and Genette's category of order. Contemporary literature also provides us with a number of texts the narration or presentation of which is either unusual or impossible. One deliberately contradictory postmodern practice is that of first person "simultaneous" or present tense narration, recently analyzed by Dorrit Cohn (96-108), in which events are narrated by the protagonist at the time they are occurring, thus producing impossible sentences such as "Face down . . . I try to compose myself for a day of hiding. I doze and I wake, drifting from one formless dream to another" from J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (101). The events themselves may be reported in a simple chronological order, but they are completely "de-naturalized" or removed from possible real world, natural discourse, by being narrated in what Cohn has felicitously termed "the fictional present" (106). As Cohn points out, this "form remains narratologically in limbo: neglected (if not denied) in theory, mis- or unidentified in practice, its anomaly falls between the cracks of established discursive norms" (101).

Genette's notion of duration—that is, the relation between the amount of time it takes for an event to occur and the time it takes for that event to be recounted—has not been developed as fully as it might be. Genette himself is a little apologetic about the necessary imprecision of its measurement (since reading speed varies greatly between individuals), and resorts instead to the expedient of the number of pages devoted to an incident, though of course different editions vary considerably in the number of pages they allot the same text. Greater exactitude need not be despaired of, however: a word count will

Interestingly, this kind of temporal contraction was theorized about by Pierre Corneille (who himself, through the device of the magic mirror in his *L'Illusion comique*, found a way to dramatize many years and still preserve the neoclassical "unity of time"). Breaking from appeals to verisimilitude that informed his positions in his essay on the unities, he states: "the fifth act, by special privilege, has the right to accelerate time so that the part of the action which it presents may use up more time than is necessary for performance" (224). The reason given for this rupture is the convenience of the audience, impatient to see the end of the play. Corneille explains he deliberately made use of this "privilege" at the admittedly cluttered ending of *Le Cid*, and also pointed to a classical precedent for this temporal telescoping in the final act of Terence's *Andria*.

Comparable instances in fiction can also be found, such as des Grieux's oral recounting of the central events of Prevost's *Manon Lescaut*. Shklovsky has pointed out that such a narration would have lasted at least sixteen hours—far longer than the text explicitly indicates (37). The precise time that many of the dialogues actually take to unfold in Andrey Bely's temporally skewed novel, *St. Petersburg*, is often blurred and largely indeterminable, while in Woolf's novel, Mrs. Dalloway's return to her house after shopping is improbably, perhaps impossibly rapid.¹⁹ Still more obviously transgressive is the preternaturally fast death of Lolita's mother, who is said to have been killed by a car in the street while Humbert was mixing her a drink in their house (chap. 22). The "Circe" chapter of *Ulysses* abruptly collapses, expands, and distorts temporal duration; at one point, a fantasy sequence extending over eighteen pages is situated between two seemingly consecutive lines of dialogue (390–407). Finally, we may note an avowedly contradictory duration quite similar to that in *Dr. Faustus* appears in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, as the delivery of an eight-page speech takes up an entire day—much to the surprise of the confused auditor of the monologue. Together, these examples should demonstrate the usefulness of the concept of duration, as well as suggest that it can be measured more accurately, manipulated more playfully, and controverted more brahly than is generally recognized by theorists of narrative temporality.

The text types identified above, though covering the most prominent varieties of nonmimetic temporality in narrative, nevertheless do not exhaust the entire range of experimental fiction. Some particularly interesting pieces deserve to be set forth; we may begin with those that, though undeniably innovative, can probably be contained within the Genettean model. These include narratives in which time is virtually immobilized, such as Calvino's "t zero," which freezes temporal progression to speculate discursively on the nature of time—though its duration is arguably infinite, since all of its pages are devoted to a

be much more accurate for fiction, while the duration of the production of a play can be quite precisely determined, and the time of a film or video measured to a fraction of a second.

Fictional play with duration has been around at least since Henry Fielding vowed he would not merely be the anameunsis of time: "if whole years should pass without producing anything worthy his notice, we shall not be afraid to add a chasm in our history, but shall hasten on to matters of consequence" (*Tom Jones*, bk. 2, chap. 1). The concept of duration is quite useful in describing certain postmodern practices, such as the equivalence Rushdie sets up between of an hour of the time represented and a second for its presentation, as he recreates the hours leading up to India's independence (and the birth of Saleem Sinai) in a manner generally associated with the launching of a rocket on the onset of New Year's Day: "But now the countdown will not be denied . . . eighteen hours; seventeen; sixteen . . . and already, at Dr. Naalika's Nursing Home, it is possible to hear the shrieks of a woman in labour" (Rushdie's ellipses); after a vertiginous pause of a full paragraph, the countdown resumes ("fourteen hours to go, thirteen, twelve") before it's paused once more (129). Foregrounding duration in this manner points to the artificiality of the book's temporal construction even as it paradoxically enhances its dramatic effect.

Such extreme play with duration has numerous antecedents, including Heinrich Mann's "Three Minute Novel," in which an entire life is recounted in some 500 words, as well as in passages such as the following from Que-neau's *Le Chienfant*, which shows the arbitrary nature of conventional novelistic observations once the time frame is expanded beyond its ordinary parameters: "At about 3 o'clock, the [man in] silhouette blew its nose; at about 4, it spat; at about 5, it bowed; at about 5:50 it was already hearing the squeak of the little gate of its headless house. At 6, the other man was there, on the dot, at his cafe table" (10).

In drama, one may find many works in which the represented time of the story is contradicted by the method of its presentation. To take one of the best known instances, the final hour of Faustus's life is presented on stage in a continuous soliloquy of fifty-eight lines, unpunctuated by any indication of temporal ellipsis, as the time of the story is radically shrunken. Shakespeare plays with this kind of construction as well, collapsing three hours of story time into a continuous twenty minutes of performance in the last scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or compressing the unnatural night during which Duncan is slain in *Macbeth*.¹⁸ Similarly, in *Hamlet*, the appearance of the ghost "that usurp'd this time of night" (1.1.46) twice impels the clock to hurtle from midnight to dawn in temporally uninterrupted periods lasting only a few minutes each (1.1; 1.4–5). Hamlet is more prescient than he imagines when he complains that "The time is out of joint" (1.5.188).

single moment in time that does not move forward! Beckett's almost literally time-less "Ping," which has (perhaps) no real events, potentially challenges the concept of narrative itself, inviting us to speculate on whether a minimal narrative can exist without temporality. Similarly, we should note the achievement of Christine Brooke-Rose's *Amalgamannon*, which largely consists of statements made about the future—a future that is not clearly sequenced, nor always certain to occur as predicted—though this text too can probably be contained within Genette's model.

Still other works however ask potentially harder questions. What are we to do with Gertrude Stein's cubist narratives that fragment and displace time, or Jean Ricardou's *La Prise de Constantinople*, which was designed to be read either front to back or back to front, or with unbound manuscripts like Marc Saportia's *Composition No. 1*, the chapters of which readers must physically place into a sequence?²⁰ And in "La Chambre secrète," Robbe-Grillet may have created a story that has no temporality: there are instead a series of slightly different descriptions of what may be the same melodramatic scene to which a reader may or may not supply temporal connections. The scenes also resemble possible descriptions of a series of paintings, all variations of a single original. These images challenge or defy the reader to make them into a narrative by supplying the absent temporality, thereby connecting the images into a single story—an alternative that few readers are able to resist.

Both interpretations however remain problematic, since some of the "pictures" contain minimal movement, while any story we fabricate around them will contain an impossible chronology. One solution to this interpretive puzzle is to start with a resolutely antimimetic approach and admit that the text is internally contradictory, while noting at the same time that many of the descriptions (the stairs, the cape, the smoke, etc.) portray a spiral shape—including the temporal "spiral" the reader may be expected to project onto the sequence of vignettes. Robbe-Grillet would thus be using a geometrical shape to pattern events that are impossible in the real world; this is perhaps an apt analogue for his aesthetic practice as well as for many of the more committed antimimetic authors.

Genette of course is aware of many of the texts that seem to elude his system. He admits that there are some narratives that will not allow a consistent story and its attendant temporality to be inferred: "Obviously, this reconstruction is not always possible, and it becomes useless for certain extreme cases like the novels of Robbe-Grillet, where temporal reference is deliberately sabotaged" (35). But such extreme cases continue to proliferate, and from certain vantage points may even suggest a new norm. As Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth has stated, "[w]hile all narrative is temporal by definition because its medium is temporal, postmodern sequences make accessible new temporal capacities that

subvert the privilege of historical time and bind temporality in language" (11). It must be acknowledged that this new practice can only be understood by reference to the mimetic aesthetic it flouts; nevertheless, its rejection of conventional mimesis is occasionally depicted as an effective method to represent the contemporary world in all its contradictions. At this juncture in both the development of narrative theory and the history of literature, there is no justification for ignoring the non- and antimimetic fiction that surrounds us.

Alternative theoretical formulations that insist on temporal features unique to fiction have been advanced from time to time (especially in the last few years) and deserve to be better known. In the first decades of the twentieth century Viktor Shklovsky asserted that "Literary time' is clearly arbitrary: its laws do not coincide with the laws of ordinary time" (36). Bakhtin, in his analyses of the chronotopes of the history of fiction, sets forth a number of concepts that still have not been fully incorporated into the theory of narrative temporality. This is particularly true of his discussion of the Rabelaisian chronotope, the distinctive method of which consists "in the general destruction of all ordinary ties, of all the *habitual matrices* of things and ideas, and the creation of unexpected matrices, unexpected connections" (169), a practice that of course continues today in the more playfully disruptive and contradictory chronological formations typical of postmodernism. Since Bakhtin, little significant theoretical work on nonmimetic temporalities was done until quite recently in the studies cited above, particularly those of Yacobi, Ronen, and Heise.²¹

These are important developments that can lead not only to a more comprehensive model of narrative temporality, but also perhaps to a better understanding of the nature of narrative itself. Instead of ignoring the anomalous or "impossible" chronological features or, what is practically speaking little better, indiscriminately lumping all such works together under a single general category, we would do well to identify several of the most significant varieties of antimimetic narrative temporality. We may use the term "metatemporal" to cover both unusual and impossible temporalities. A subdivision of this grouping we may, following Genette, call "achronic" narratives, which designate works that contain numerous events which "we must ultimately take to be dateless and ageless" (Genette, 84); we will add, however, that this category should be greatly expanded and further delineated to include the various unknowable, self-negating, or inherently indeterminate story times present in numerous recent texts.²² Those other works that resist or defy Genettean orders can also be given a general name consistent with the existing nomenclature, that of "antichronies."

This latter group may include David Herman's recent notion of polychrony, "a kind of narration that exploits indefiniteness to pluralize and

too unique, too distant, or too marginal to demand inclusion. But the achievement and persistence of postmodern temporal strategies now means that we can no longer afford to ignore this cache of outrageously antimimetic narrative material. Indeed, it can be considered something of a scandal that narrative theory cannot encompass the works of the most exciting and dynamic creators of narrative of this century. The most urgent task of narrative theory is to construct a poetics of nonmimetic fiction that can finally do full justice to the literature of our time. Paradoxically, by doing so we will be thereby able to recover and disclose the many premodern antecedents of strategies and techniques now identified as the most distinctively "post."

NOTES

I wish to thank James Phelan, Ross Chambers, and Monika Fludernik for their generous comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

1. For a discussion of the subtle differences between Günther Müller's and Genette's conceptions, see Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, 77-88 and 178-82.
2. See, for example, Christian Moraru's insightful analysis of the temporal curiosities of Nabokov's autobiography, *Speak, Memory*.
3. My objections apply equally to accounts of narrative temporality deriving from philosophical hermeneutics. Ricoeur for example postulates a reciprocal relationship between narrativity and the structure of existence (165); 35 in this volume. The narratives I am about to discuss have never existed except on a printed page.
4. Toker prefers to designate Nabokov's temporal structure as an infinite spiral; see her discussion of this point (158-63).
5. Concerning the temporality of novels like *La Jalousie* or *La Maison de rendez-vous*, I must disagree with Ruth Ronen's claim that "chronology does not seem to condition narrative organization or to be relevant at all to the organization of the narrative world" (216). I suggest that it is more useful to affirm instead that the narrative world is ordered by (and indeed may be defined by) a contradictory chronology. Furthermore, its transgressive effects are dependent on the reader's perceiving and reflecting on the implications this chronology has on the fictional world.
6. In addition, Emma Kafalenos has stated that *La Maison de rendez-vous* "contains multiple (fragmentary) *fabulas*, each of which shares common elements with at least one other fragmentary *fabula*" (396). See also Ursula Heise's theoretical analysis of the contradictory temporality of Robbe-Grillet's *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* (113-46), whose narrator "wanders down hallways and streets that always seem to give access to too many temporal dimensions, too many historical moments at the same time" (147).
7. More localized contradictions can also be found in the temporal loops presented in Tom Stoppard's *Travesties* or the comparable chronological irregularities in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*.
8. Brian McHale identifies other examples of "reversal of process" in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*: "Slothrop's family history (GR:203-204), or of rocket production ('faired skin back to sheet steel back to pigs to white incandescence to ore, to Earth,' GR:139)—which seems to presuppose the extension to reality itself of film's capacity to be run backwards"

TIME

delinearize itself" (75), as well as types derived from the examples already adduced, namely the circular, the contradictory, the antinomic, the differential, the conflated, and the dual or multiple. We might also want to reserve some additional theoretical space for still other significant types of temporal construction—I'm sure there must exist some compelling varieties that still elude the framework outlined here—as well as for innovative works that will be written in the future. Finally, at the largest level of generalization, we may want to add some rough edges or admit deliberately blurred boundaries at the limits of this surprisingly flexible and protean category of narrative analysis by considering additional notions like the quasi-temporal or even pseudo-temporal to describe the kinds of works that simultaneously seem to invoke and resist a temporal analysis ("La Chambre secrète" and partially nonrepresentational texts by Stein, e.g., "What Happened").

Despite the large number of narratives whose temporality transcends merely human time, literary theory has for the most part limited itself to a narrowly mimetic framework. To some extent, this is due to some historical accidents and extraliterary interventions. Had Aristotle's lost work on comedy survived, and if it did contain an account of the collapsible chronologies of the dramas of Aristophanes (where those trips to Hades or Cloudcuckooland always happen much too rapidly²³), perhaps some of the excesses of neoclassicism might have been avoided. Similarly, had the Russian formalists not been suppressed and Bakhtin's work on the chronotope left unpublished for several decades, we might have had a better appreciation of non- and antimimetic temporal construction. Or if modern writers' frequent claims of creating new worlds, rather than merely reproducing the old one, been more sympathetically investigated and theorized, we might now occupy a more capacious critical position.

In any event, there are and always have been two major literary traditions, one mimetic, the other antimimetic; one more concerned with the object of representation, the other with the act of invention. The nonmimetic tradition stretches from Aristophanes and Menippean satire (including Lucian's postmodern "A True Story") to Rabelais and the more unusual medieval tales to Ariosto and Shakespeare. Romanticism provides another rich body of relevant texts, as do the large, strange, and still prolific family of narratives claiming descent from *Tristram Shandy*.

Nevertheless, in the history of criticism and theory, mimetic thinking has dominated for centuries. More recently, there has been a widespread desire by structuralists and nonstructuralists alike for theoretical constructs that would cover all narrative, fictional and nonfictional, classic and contemporary, high and low. For decades, a universal narrative theory was considered a plausible aspiration; obvious counterexamples seemed too few, too new, too obscure,

much longer than it should: "By th' clock 'tis day, / And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp" (II. 4. 6-7); in the presentation of this scene, an equal and opposite chronological violation has transpired, as the duration of the entire night is radically compressed. For a full discussion of this play's temporality, see my article, "Hours Dreadful and Things Strange."

19. John Sutherland is forced to imagine an unmentioned ride in a cab to account for this anomaly (215-24).

20. Concerning this text, Kafalenos however astutely points out that the order of its presentation is indeterminate: "throughout the process of reading, the reader cannot fail to be aware that control of the *synzhet* sequence lies, literally, in her hands" (385).

21. Partial exceptions to this statement include A. A. Mendilow's suggestive account of *Orlando* (228-31), and David Leon Higdon's discussion of what he called "polytemporal time" in his book, *Time and English Fiction*, which does draw attention to the "destroying, ignoring or reconstituting clock time" (12) done by authors like Sterne, Lewis Carroll, and Beckett.

22. As David Herman points out, "temporal indefiniteness should not be conflated with timelessness or achrony: not knowing the exact temporal positions of several events occurring within a larger narrative sequence does not make those events achronic. Further, both the achronic and the temporally indefinite should be distinguished from the temporally multiple" (75). These are precisely the kinds of distinctions narrative theory now needs to be making.

23. In the *Peaces*, Trygaeus's flight on a giant dung beetle to the halls of the gods is so rapid that he metadramatically protests to the zealous prop man who is physically changing the scene.

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(1994, 110)—not, that is to say, of a sequence of linear story progressions arranged in an antichronological discursive order.

9. The narrator of Martin Anis's *Times Arrow* finds himself similarly confused: "Wait a minute. Why am I walking backward into the house? Wait. Is it dusk coming, or dawn? What is the—sequence I'm on? What are its rules? Why are the birds singing so strangely? Where am I heading?" (6).

10. An important exception to this statement is Tamar Yacobi, who employs the category of "backward movements" to describe the following powerful antinomic sequence in a poem by Dan Pagis, a few lines of which can suggest the intensity of this work that verbally, subjunctively, "undoes" the Holocaust:

The stream goes back into the throat.

The gold teeth to the jaw.

The fear.

The smoke to the tin chimneys and further inside

Back to the hollow of bones.

And already you will be covered with skin and sinews and you will live,

You will still be living.

Sitting in the living room, reading the evening paper.

Here you are! All in time. (112)

11. Another unexpected instance of this strategy can be found in Ben Jonson's masque, "A Vision of Delight," in which seasonal and diurnal temporalities are collapsed into the time of their enactment on stage. Though a notorious stickler for observing neoclassical temporal strictures in drama proper, Jonson utilized a very different poetics when constructing his masques.

12. For a discussion of the play's temporality from the perspective of narrative theory, see my paper, "Time Is Out of Joint" (1987, 302-304). That article also analyzes the unusual temporalities of a number of other dramas, many of them mentioned in this essay, and discusses contradictions between the actual time of performance and the time said to elapse during that period.

13. Thus, characters like Redcrosse both languish for a long time in captivity and are rescued swiftly from that captivity.

14. Other theorists who have recently contested the story/discourse distinction include Ruth Ronen, who uses the example of Robbe-Grillet's *La Maison de rendez-vous* "to demonstrate the impossibility of divorcing the order of events from modes of telling" (216), and Patrick O'Neill (35-57), who has argued against the stability of this conceptual opposition: "Perhaps the most striking thing of all with regard to the world of story, as far as narrative theory is concerned, is that ultimately we cannot ever 'say what really happened,' for that world, because of its status as a narrated world, finally both evades and exceeds description" (38). For an excellent discussion of indeterminate *synzhet*s and ambiguous or multiple *fabulas*, see Kafalenos. Culler's earlier discussion of these terms is misleading; see Fludernik for a sound critique (320-21).

15. For a more extended discussion of this practice, see my article on denarration.

16. For a comparable analysis of the problematics of duration in *How It Is*, see Ursula K. Heise (147-75); on the oddities of the temporality of *Waiting for Godot*, see Schechner.

17. For more discussion and additional examples of postmodern fictional "worlds under erasure," see McHale, 1987, 99-111.

18. *Macbeth* is in fact still more innovative temporally. In the *fabula*, night stretches

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