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Can we inhabit (narrative) time?

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Abstract

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With the emergence of time-based movements (such as the ‘Slow Food’ movement and Japan’s ‘Sloth Club’) that question the pace of late-capitalist economies, time is emerging as a critical issue in the twenty-first century. This is of particular interest to authors because so much of time is understood within the context of narrative – and time has always been a key issue for authors in constructing texts. A novel can span one day (James Joyce’s *Ulysses*) or family generations (Jung Chang’s *Wild swans*). It can be recounted from a position in the far-off future (Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*) or the immediate present (Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight club* – the use of present tense offers the illusion of immediacy, though the text is technically recounted from a mental hospital/heaven). Indeed, any author writing a story (or ‘encounter’ between characters) must grapple with where and when it takes place, and where the narrator (or implied author) is positioned in relation to the narrated events. This paper will argue that while time management is critical to strong realist writing, it’s usually masked for the sake of keeping the illusion of story intact. And further, I will argue that this issue of ‘time-masking’ is frequently paralleled in actual life as well (thus the perceived need for a ‘Slow Food’ movement). Jesse Matz calls on writers to ‘discover the rehumanizing temporalities yet available in narrative forms’ (Maltz, 286). I am trying to answer that call with my latest project, an as-yet-untitled novel, driven by the question: how do we inhabit time? Or, how do our individual experiences of time shape the lives we lead? This paper will offer a practical exploration of that project in light of Paul Ricoeur’s essay ‘Narrative time’ and Jesse Maltz’s essay ‘The art of time, theory to practice’ as starting points.

Biographical Note:

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In 1982 Larry Dossey, an American physician, first used the term ‘time-sickness’ to describe patients who were obsessed with the idea that ‘time is getting away, that there isn’t enough of it, and that you must pedal faster and faster to keep up’ (50–51). In the early twenty-first century, a host of grass-roots organisations have sprung up concerned with temporality and the human experience thereof. The Slow Food movement was established in 1989 ‘to counter the rise of fast food and fast life’ (2012), paying particular attention to local food traditions – how food tastes, where it comes from and how our food choices impact the rest of the world. Japan’s Sloth Club was founded in 1999 to ‘emulate some of the basic behaviors of the sloth in order to find a way to live in harmony with the earth’ (2012). Like the Slow Food Movement, the Sloth Club is interested in how one’s pace impacts the larger world. That is, by ‘doing’ less and living simply, they hope to minimise their impact on the world and find joy ‘without consuming an endless chain of meaningless things’ (2012). In a related note, Carl Honoré in his book *In praise of slow* talks about finding the tempo giusto. His advice: ‘Seek to live at what musicians call the *tempo giusto* – the right speed’ (2004: 15).

I’m interested in cultural discussions of time because so much of temporality is understood within the context of narrative. As philosopher Paul Ricoeur states: ‘time becomes human time to the extent that it is organised after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience’ (1984, 3). He also states:

The structural reciprocity of temporality and narrativity is usually overlooked because, on the one hand, the epistemology of history and the literary criticism of fictional narratives take for granted that every narrative takes place within an uncriticized temporal framework, within a time that corresponds to the ordinary representation of time as a linear succession of instants (1980, 169–70).

I interpret this to mean the reciprocal relationship between time and narrative is overlooked because when we look at historical events or literary works, the experience of time is often not evaluated; it is taken for granted that time operates through a linear progression of moments. Ricoeur’s point is that our experience of time is influenced by structures of narrative and structures of narrative are influenced by our experiences of time. And of course, ‘...the humblest narrative is always more than a chronological series of events...’ (1980, 178). Indeed, the choices an author makes about time are not ones made in isolation from the rest of the text. As literary critic Mendilow states, ‘[that within] the whole conception [of a narrative] ... they (being the decisions made about time) account for the structure it assumes, the way it deals with its themes, its use of language’ (1952, 178).

Before we continue, let me establish Ricoeur’s levels of temporality. In his essay ‘Narrative time’, Ricoeur engages with Heidegger’s work in *Being and time* and starts with the hypothesis that ‘starting from the pole of temporality, there are different degrees of temporal organization’ (170). Ricoeur agrees with Heidegger that there are at least three levels of time. The first is ‘that of time as that “in” which events take place’ (170) or Ricoeur’s term ‘within-time-ness’. That is, the first level of time is the ‘now’ of events taking place. A woman, call her Eva, drinks margaritas with old

friends in New York City. The first level of time of that event is the ‘now’ as she experiences it.

The second level of time is one based in historicity, that is ‘the weight of the past’ (171). This is linked with remembering or recovering. The next morning, Eva remembers drinking margaritas on Long Island with her housemates from college. The experiences of dancing on the couch and mixing Don Julio tequila with lime juice is not taking place in the ‘now’. It is ‘recovered’ and it is weighted. But it’s not so clear-cut: even the first level of the experience, the drinking and dancing, was infused with second-level experience because Eva has strong memories and an emotional past with her friends. They haven’t seen each other in many years.

For Ricoeur, the third level moves beyond historicity to a reckoning with time. He cites (1980, 173) expressions like ‘having time to’, ‘taking time to’, and ‘wasting time’ as well as all the adverbs of time (such as then, after, later, earlier, since, till, while, until, whenever, now that etc.) that carry a weight of temporal awareness in their use. He says: ‘It is our preoccupation, not the things of our concern, that determines the sense of time’ (173). Thus, it is not the drinking or the dancing on the couch that determines Eva’s sense of time. It’s the fact that she’s aware of how much time has passed: she’s checking her watch, wondering how much sleep she’s going to get. It’s her awareness that she has a report she needs to work on and she’s wondering when that will get done. According to Ricoeur, it’s this awareness of time that determines her experience of it. You can extrapolate this further into Eva’s life. She is thirty-eight years old and wants to have a child; she is aware of ‘time running out’. She never has ‘enough time’ to finish her work in the workday so she’s bringing it home at night. She wants to quit her high-profile publishing job to start a slow-food farm in Vermont. Not only is Eva aware of third-level time on a micro-level (when will the party be over? how much sleep will she get?), she’s aware of third-level time on a macro-level (she may have left her run too late to have children).

Ricoeur states that writers as well as literary critics are often not critically engaged with the operation of time within narrative: ‘The art of storytelling is not so much a way of reflecting on time as a way of taking it for granted’ (1980, 175). Joan Silber in *The art of time in narrative* (11) uses the term ‘classic time’ to describe fiction that ‘attracts no notice in its treatment of time, that follows an approach readers take for granted’ (11). The whole artifice of realist fiction is that we buy the ‘truth’ of the story.

To talk, as any writer does, of capturing, framing, and leaping across time, is to lean on metaphors to report on the ephemeral. It’s the fiction writer’s task to put the reader through the strangely desirable misapprehension that three decades have passed during the five hours it took to read certain pages. (Silber 2009, 7)

I argue that realist writers, consciously or not, mask time in order to keep the illusion of story intact. And when I teach undergraduate writers about time, my first task is to draw their attention to it: ‘The passage of time in narrative does not just happen to be there. It is constructed. Even the shortest story needs to be in control of its use of time’ (2011). Students must be aware of this because mastering the passage of time in

narrative is critical in writing coherent texts. As creative-writing theorist Joshua Lobb (2004) states:

[I]n conventional realist fiction the practice of ‘configuring’ succession is directed primarily towards the creation of a totalised and unified work: in other words, the selection of a temporal sequence, like the choice of a specific narratorial voice or the mode with which to represent consciousness, is a central determinant in the establishment of the coherence of a text.

That is, clear temporal sequences are critical if a text is to be coherent for its reader. If the reader doesn’t understand when events are taking place, the text will not be unified and the illusion of the narrative will not be intact. However the fact so many theorists and writers alike overlook the way time operates in narrative points to some level (unconscious or not) of ‘time-masking’ within literary works. I tell students: ‘While being aware of how time operates in your stories is critical, your reader should be so engaged in the narrative progression they don’t notice it’ (2011). That is, the writer should consider how they structure time within a narrative but they should do so in a way that is seamless for the reader so they don’t ‘bump their nose’ on the text’s construction of time. For someone interested in crafting a narrative that draws the reader into the story, this may seem like a good thing. But I wonder: is narrative time-masking a useful skill to teach to students or is it propagating issues of time crisis?

‘Time-masking’ is a pertinent consideration for movements such as the Slow Food movement and the Sloth Club if we consider the link between temporal experience and narrative. Narratologist Jesse Matz argues that ‘time’s failures provoke narrative forms, which, in response to narratological analysis, ready the tools through which we reconstruct everyday temporal opportunities’ (275). In other words, our negotiations with time in ‘real’ life inspire narrative works, which are analysed and can help us reconstruct our lived experiences of time. In keeping with Matz, my understanding of ‘narrative temporality’ is not necessarily a linear one but rather an understanding of the many temporalities that can exist within narratives. He goes on to say that ‘narrative’s temporal dynamics, its performance of durations, frequencies, speeds, and other time-schemes, might constitute an ‘art of time’ through which to practice temporal diversity’ (275). Hence, life can imitate art. If we write about time with more critical awareness, then perhaps we can live time with more critical awareness. Matz is particularly interested in how theoretical work on the art of time might translate into practice, and muses that a public narratology project might be a way to do this (287). Of course this raises many practical issues. What would a public narratology project look like? And indeed, is writing about time the same thing as resolving issues of time crisis? Obviously not. Matz himself recognises this: ‘What exactly does it mean to “deal aesthetically” with time crisis? Is aesthetic dealing real *solving*?’ (274). Many texts deal explicitly with concepts of time, whether you think of HG Well’s *The time machine*, Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas carol*, Audrey Niffenegger’s *The time traveler’s wife*, or even Douglas Adams’ *The hitchhiker’s guide to the galaxy*. But are they actually addressing time in ways that will help us elucidate issues of time crisis?

Jesse Matz calls on writers to ‘discover the rehumanizing temporalities yet available in narrative forms’ (286). For the remainder of this paper, I will consider how to do this within the context of my latest project, an as-yet-untitled novel driven by the question: how do we inhabit time? Or, how do our individual experiences of time shape the lives we lead? Obviously, as alluded to above, it’s tricky to write a realist novel engaged with issues of temporality because I don’t want to rely on obvious orchestrations or gimmicks that pull the reader from the illusion of the story (such as hodge-podge time sequences or long character monologues on the nature of time). But I do want readers to consider the temporalities represented within the novel. It seemed to me one way to proceed was to limit the narrative layers (characters, plot, setting, pacing, structure, point of view etc) in time-based ways.

Firstly I considered setting. I wanted to use setting to explore temporal frameworks so the novel is set at a twenty-year high-school reunion – an event/setting defined by temporality. After all, one can’t depict characters at a twenty-year reunion without some recognition of the twenty years that have passed. This provides an opportunity to engage with Ricoeur’s first and second levels of temporality without it feeling too contrived. In terms of geographical location, the reunion occurs on a small island off Seattle in the Puget Sound of the United States because it’s isolated, accessible only by boat. This decision was made for two reasons: one, it’s similar to the place where I grew up and I felt comfortable depicting the environment; and two, I felt setting the reunion in a remote place could serve to heighten the dramatic tension. The reunion itself will take place at the island’s Country Club, however specific scenes will take also place at the high school (which they break into, in the late hours of the reunion).

The characters for this project all represent different attitudes towards temporality. The important task for me is to write about characters who are directly influenced by their conceptions of time without boring readers. One strategy I’ve found is to make temporal situations for characters one of background as well as foreground. That is, notions of time figure in recounting (Ricoeur’s second level of temporality) as well as primary experience (Ricoeur’s first level of temporality) and these both figure in Ricoeur’s third level of temporality for the characters (the way the characters grapple with time). Consider Eva, who you’ve already met. Her first-level temporal experience will be the reunion itself. Her second-level temporal experience will be her past: she moved to New York for college and stayed (to work in publishing) but quit her life to start a Slow Food collective in a farming community in Vermont. However there are also deeper second layers to her second-level experience of time – there are her memories of high school and childhood as well. She is also aware of third-level temporality because she’s interested in slowing time. She’s been trying to have a child for five years and is very aware she may be unable to conceive.

In my creative work, novels especially, I’ve frequently found intersections between the many narrative components. That is, character influences plot, which influences structure, which influences point-of-view etc. In this vein, we have Eva, and her backstory – the source of her characterisation – is intimately linked with plot: that is, she has tried to have children and cannot (this is action that supports the characterisation and both [hopefully] support my thematic intentions regarding narrative time).

Another critical figure in the novel is Harriet, Eva's best friend from high school. Harriet lives in a constant state of trying to find more time in her days. She dropped out of college, moved back to the island and had four kids with a wealthy, loving but conservative man. She struggled with postnatal depression, linked with a lack of time for herself. Her mother is suffering early-onset dementia and has little memory: time has lost meaning for her. For Harriet, first-level temporality would be her experience of the reunion and her family (as she lives on the island) during the time period represented in the novel. Her second level temporality would be comprised of her back story, both in high school and in the more immediate past. Her third-level temporal awareness is of an organisational nature: she's busy coordinating six different schedules. It is a constant concern for her but not one she has time to pontificate.

Also at the reunion are two brothers, Lang(ston) and Byron, who represent the vanity of time. The siblings are musicians, based in Seattle, who have been on the cusp of making it big, without actually cracking it, for years (second-level temporality is the back story of their musical careers and earlier memories from high school). Lang worries they've missed their chance and is confronted with issues of aging and talent. He considers Botox and plastic surgery as ways to maintain the currency of youth (third-level temporality).

Another character at the reunion, Andreás, is a computer-systems analyst who commutes between London and Sydney for work. In England, he was riding the Piccadilly line the morning of the 2005 suicide bombing and lost his left leg. He's obsessed with time in the minutiae and how has affected his life: 'If I'd left the flat five minutes later, the train would have left without me. If I hadn't crossed the street, against the light, I might have been in a different car...'. He's a character where the first, second, and third levels of time come together. His missing leg is a steady reminder in the present (first-level temporality) of the recounted past, the terrorist attack (second-level temporality) and thus inspires a steady stream of third-level temporality awareness.

And the final character, Tom, is obsessed with time as it relates to capitalism. He never left the island. He's worked in construction and factory-line work, frequently for minimum wage (second-level temporality) and he is an avid reader, obsessed with Marx. He considers time as the basic unit of the late-capitalist system and fantasises of a global minimum wage and moving to Australia (inspired by his former English teacher, Mr Cannon, who set Melbourne poet Pi O on the syllabus). He will be influenced by readings from Moishe Postone's *Time, labour and social domination* as well as Paul Lafargue's *The right to be lazy*.

So what actually happens to these characters? Plot should be easy to link with temporality. As Ricoeur states: 'A story is *made out of* events to the extent that plot *makes events into* a story' (1980, 171). That is, things need to happen and the happening of things is what creates a story. And even the simplest story 'escapes the ordinary notion of time conceived of as a series of instants succeeding one another along an abstract line oriented in a single direction' (174). For example the way analepsis and prolepsis (flashback and flash-forward) operate, the position of the

recounter, the way things can occur simultaneously (but be read before or after one another) all counter the idea of time as a series of events that follow in a linear way. With regards to plot, I'm still exploring how I can structure events so that attention is drawn to concepts of time without belabouring them. While authors of postmodern texts may feel comfortable pulling the reader from the story, I'm still attached to the immersive quality of realist fiction. In terms of specific plot points, I haven't mapped this well enough to discuss as yet. Certainly it's easy to fall into the melodramatic (a bomb, for instance, is certainly a device with temporal standing).

The position of the narrator is another aspect with which I must contend. As Ricoeur states: 'To tell and to follow a story is already to reflect upon events in order to encompass them in successive wholes' (178). That means there's already a sense of historicity to the recounted narrative experience. The narrative endeavour, by nature of the fact someone is telling the story, 'brings us back from within-time-ness to historicity, from 'reckoning with' time to 'recollecting' it' (178). The ultimate example of this is deathbed narration, where characters

reconstruct their lives from the perspective of its imminent end, exploiting death's finality to determine life's real meaning. Past moment leap out of sequence to assert their essential primacy and a new order of events enables enlightening juxtapositions (Matz, 282).

In this way, point of view and structure are inextricably bound. I have considered using an omniscient narrator, who we find out at the end of the book is actually a former English teacher who has died. I've also considered giving each character a narrated section and ensuring they move at different paces. This latter option is most likely at this point as it can draw attention to the contrasting relationships between characters and temporality via voice and pace.

And finally, of course, time can be addressed in the choices I make in regards to tense and verb choice. Gérard Genette's *Narrative discourse* considers the temporal categories of order, duration and frequency with reference to the work of Proust. He coins the phrase 'pseudo-iteration' (1980, 120–21) for the way Proust uses the imperfect verb form (such as 'I used to see him there') but then goes on to describe an event located in a specific time and place. I'm still mapping through how this might figure in my novel and due to space limits cannot elaborate further here. However I flag this as an important potential strategy.

Needless to say, this project aims to draw attention to temporal diversities – whether that fulfil's Matz's call to discover more humanising temporalities yet available in narrative forms remains to be seen. I'm aware this is a risky paper on many counts. My very premise of trying to represent narrative time is fraught. In answer to my question 'Can we inhabit (narrative) time?' I don't know that it's actually possible. As well, I'm discussing a project that is still in its very early stages. And I would not be surprised if the final novel that emerges (fingers crossed) varies greatly from the one I've described here. For while I'm excited by the idea of writing something that tries to address issues of temporality, I'm also aware that nothing is more stolid to read than a book driven by an author's preconceived idea of what that book is supposed to be about. Richard Ford at the 2007 Sydney Writers' Festival said if an author is faced

with a decision about whether to let story take precedence or authorial intention, it's important to side with story. There is also great pressure in committing to write a novel. But I've realised with my previous projects that if I keep waiting to discuss process until they're on terra firma, then it never gets discussed. Once a novel is written, I'm more interested in discussing the next project. I hope that I haven't jinxed myself here with this. Time will tell.

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