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## Against Mimesis: On the Loss of Narrativity in Present Tense Narration

### Abstract:

The main argument of this article is that narrative, as a verbal manifestation of some iconic aspects of human experience relating to temporality and memory, among others, can only lose its lucidity and even its recognized psychological function of structuring reality, when rendered in the anti-mimetic mode of using the present tense in the entirety of a written text. On phenomenological grounds it is argued that there is a continuity between how human beings experience time and how it is represented in narrative form. Using the conceptual apparatus of classical narratology and linguistics, it is also shown that a normative understanding of narrative requires the use of the past tense as a default. Some examples of contemporary fiction written in a continuous present tense are used to demonstrate the validity of some of the theoretical considerations underlying the main argument.

### Keywords:

memory, narrative, narrativity, present-tense narration, temporality

## 1. Introduction

That certain branches of philosophy and the study of narrative should go hand in hand appears to be an obvious suggestion. Thus, phenomenology can be seen as an understandable choice in the study of narrative, not least because both fields are preoccupied with the nature of time and how human beings make sense of it. Which is another way of saying that there is a natural continuity between narrative unfolding and the structuring of human experience as lived, as has been argued convincingly by David Carr on phenomenological grounds.<sup>1</sup> Not all will agree with this statement, however, and this has been demonstrated in work by other phenomenologically inclined philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur, but also by the field of narratology itself; the latter being the discipline wherein the nature and description of narrative have been studied extensively in the last hundred years or so. Based in structuralism and a synchronic view of language such as the linguistic theory of Saussure, classical narratology has provided us with a sophisticated theoretical apparatus that allows us to classify and analyze narrative structures of various kinds. This apparatus includes notions such as narrative mode (the manner of how a story is told), the specific type of the narrating agent (as a subjectivity that is within or outside of the narrated events), and importantly for the present discussion, the use of specific grammatical markers such as tense and aspect, all of which contribute to the recognition of a piece of writing as a narrative. Despite its emphasis on a structural description of narrative, classical narratology cannot fully ignore the experiential and temporally defined feature of stories. It might appear strange that structuralism, a theoretical approach that can be rightfully described as one of the most devoid of experientiality branches of linguistics, has nevertheless made room for the consideration of the significance of linguistic categories such as tense or aspect as features of narrative organization. What these considerations are and how they have been put to the test in numerous examples of recent fiction, written in what can be termed a perpetual (or consistent) present tense, will be the main topic of this article. My argument will be that narrative, as a verbal manifestation of some iconic aspects of human experience relating to temporality and memory, among others, can only lose its lucidity and even its psychological function of structuring reality when rendered in the anti-mimetic mode

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1) Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*; Carr, "Discussion. Ricoeur on Narrative."

of using the present tense in the entirety of a written text. This argument will proceed as follows. First, I will consider, echoing the work of phenomenologists, what I will call the strong continuity of temporal experience and its rendering in narrative form. Second, I will propose a definition of narrative, based on narratological and linguistic considerations that speak strongly in favor of such a continuity between time experience and narrative structure. Third, I will examine those considerations in relation to a phenomenologically understood function of narrative organization. Finally, using as examples some recent fictional texts, I will demonstrate the unnaturalness of their structure and purpose and indicate how it affects the reader's experience.

## 2. Continuity Between Time Experience and Narrative Structure

Narratives or stories (I will use the two terms synonymously from now on to refer to a coherent series of reported events) are ubiquitous ways of organizing human experience that have been found in all known human cultures. Yet, despite having been studied over the years from a variety of perspectives by narrative psychologists, story grammarians, literary scholars, linguists, and philosophers, there is still no agreement on what constitutes a comprehensive definition of narrative. As David Carr reminds us, narrative has become the battleground of the disciplines,<sup>2</sup> and one of the main points of contention is precisely the issue of the relationship between narrative and the real world as experienced by human beings. In the so-called standard view (I borrow the description from Carr, 1991), which is a view not grounded in phenomenology, life is not structured like a narrative. Such is the position among some narrative historians, such as Louis Mink and Hayden White, who argue that daily experience has no inherent narrative structure, and the configuration imposed on events in history or in fiction is something secondary, something that is derived from the very act of telling a particular story. For them real life lacks coherence, and coherence is something we impose as a second step in our dealings with reality.

Not that different is the position of Paul Ricoeur, who is credited with producing one of the most important books on time in narrative in three volumes.<sup>3</sup> In these

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2) Carr, "Discussion. Ricoeur on Narrative," 160.

3) Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*. Vols. 1–3.

books he develops the concept of threefold mimesis and uses it to describe temporality and narrativity in fictional writing in comparison to historical texts. He speaks of narrative mimesis (the action of imitation of life) but separates it into three stages: prefiguration (*mimesis* 1), configuration or *emplotment* (*mimesis* 2), and refiguration (*mimesis* 3). On this view time in narrative works by taking into account real time and events (prefigured time) in order to become refigured in the reader's experience by the process of configuration.<sup>4</sup> This is not the place to provide a critique of Ricoeur's rich theoretical discussion but suffice it to say that his theory in no way contradicts the view that there is deep continuity between the world of human action and narrative. He even acknowledges its role at the level of what he calls *mimesis* 1. Still, it can be argued that configuration itself (Ricoeur's *mimesis* 2) can be seen as a fundamental part of our experience of time. Human beings never experience life as a mere succession of events but more often than not a mere succession is transformed in experience into patterns of causality when life or living become a matter of seeing connections between these specific events.<sup>5</sup> While it is true that human life can be described as a sequence of events, what matters also is their retrospective evaluation in memory. What matters is not merely the significance of what happened but what happened in relation to what else. As Carr has put it, narrative is one of the most important features of lived time and what that means is that "only from the perspective of the end do the beginning and the middle make sense."<sup>6</sup> This is the conclusion we draw at the end of an episode, a series of episodes, constituting a life, or at the end of a narrative.

This suggests that emplotment (Ricoeur's *mimesis* 2) in fictional narrative or the fact that when we tell a story we usually know the end, does not preclude the perpetual configurational drive, the ceaseless narrative structuring along causal chains of events in life, or in reading, before such an end can be known. On the contrary, as

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4) Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*. Vol. 1, 54.

5) As has been argued previously (Popova, *Stories, Meaning, and Experience*), configuration is not a secondary step, in the sense used by Ricoeur, if we consider the importance of perceptual causality, discovered and elaborated on by the Belgian experimental psychologist Albert Michotte. The latter has shown that meaning is intrinsic to perceptual experience. Narrative causality then, as a process of configuration of experience, results from perceptual causality, and both can be seen to play a role in structuring human experience at different levels of temporal processing.

6) Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, 7.

Carr has put it, “narration, far from being a distortion of, denial of, or escape from ‘reality,’ is in fact an extension and enrichment, a confirmation, not a falsification, of its primary features.”<sup>7</sup>

The most convincing argument for the claim about the human dimension of both temporal experience and its rendering in narrative form comes from Husserl’s well-known reflections on what it is like to experience a temporal object, that is, an event that changes over time. As he has shown, we do not experience isolated events in a series of unconnected present moments; we grasp configurations, totalities of events, the latter point eloquently described in his famous discussion of “retention,” “presentation,” and “protention” in the process of listening to a melody.<sup>8</sup> The very ontology of any human action in the world thus takes as given the temporal depth of human experience, realized in its continuity, in its perpetual unfolding in time, but also in its configuration as a whole. This is because, hearing the notes one by one not only determines the links between the immediate past, present, and future, but allows us to experience each note “as belonging [to] the temporal whole whose part it is.”<sup>9</sup> Most importantly, it can be argued that this configurational aspect of time experience can be maintained at the level of longer-term, larger-scale, and more complex phenomena. What is of note here is that the nature of such configurations is substantially the same at this higher level and comprises such features as “temporal closure, beginning-middle-end, means-end, suspension-resolution.”<sup>10</sup>

From these considerations it should be clear that both lived experience and its somewhat reductive schematization in narrative constitute a reflection of how human beings configure their time experiences. Configurations at larger or smaller scale take place all the time as we experience the world, and as we tell stories about it. Nevertheless, configuration is no doubt better or more complete once a particular episode (or a story) is over.

It is important to point out that the view that narrative is congruent with lived experience does not come from phenomenologists only. It is also voiced by linguists and

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7) Carr, “Discussion. Ricoeur on Narrative,” 162.

8) Husserl, *Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, 40.

9) Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, 56.

10) *Ibid.*, 57.

psychologists interested in the nature of human thought processes. One such renowned scholar of narrative from a linguistic and cognitive perspective is Wallace Chafe, who in a classic book *Discourse, Consciousness, and Time* (1994) has argued that consciousness and language are inextricably linked, and one of the best proofs for this can be found in the existence of narrative as a form of externalizing experience. I will pick on just a few aspects of his book, namely those that relate to the issue of what can be considered the default position when it comes to telling a story and the various ways a storyteller can deviate from such a default stance. For Chafe, the remarkable capacity of memory allows us as narrators (and readers) to be present at times and in places which do not coincide with the conscious experience of being somewhere else when telling the story. When we tell a story we are reporting on something to people present in our immediate environment and thus our consciousness is at that moment what he calls “extroverted,” which means oriented to the outside world through immediate perceiving and acting.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, through the act of remembering we are transported to a place and time that are displaced from the immediate environment, and then the self-reporting of those events is “introverted,”<sup>12</sup> which means engaged in remembering or imagining. In ordinary storytelling, when we are relating something that has happened in our own past, this results in what he calls a “displaced” consciousness: a “distal,” “extroverted” self at the time of past experiences, through the act of remembering, becomes “introverted,” yet is still present in the here and now of the conversation. The interplay between extroverted and introverted processes or between perception and memory or imagination is a basic characteristic of conscious thought. This is indeed the default (and also iconic) situation we all find ourselves in when telling a story. Chafe speculates about why this maybe the case, in other words why it is that we tend to tell stories about the past and less often about the future, but hardly ever about the immediate present.<sup>13</sup> He comes up with some explanations that include: first, both speaker and listener share an environment which is simply there and does not require further communication; second, ideas from introversion (memory) are more interesting to verbalize than those in the immediate surroundings; third, and perhaps most significant in the context of written

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11) Chafe, *Discourse, Consciousness, and Time*, 197.

12) *Ibid.*, 199.

13) *Ibid.*, 200.

narratives, speakers have had time to reflect on and organize the story they want to tell. This latter explanation relates to one of the main features of narrative mentioned by narratologists, as will be shown below: a story has to have closure, a moment of evaluation and appraisal, which becomes possible only from a point of view that is removed, in space and time, with respect to the described events. In other words, a story includes as a default a retrospective assessment of the past it narrates, or, to use the terms discussed earlier, it constitutes a configuration of those events.

As Chafe has suggested, psychology has provided knowledge about human thought processes that can prove beneficial when discussing the structure and function of narrative organization. One such insight rests on an established and well known (to psychologists) feature of conscious awareness that bears directly on the structure of narrative in general, and on narrative temporality in particular. Discussed first by William James, it concerns the “different pace” of the parts constituting the stream of consciousness. James describes it in the following way: “like a bird’s life it seems to be made of alternations of flights and perchings.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, in order to mirror the flow of experience, whether in perception or in memory, a narrative by default relies on the alternation of narrated flights and perchings, moments of acceleration and deceleration in the unfolding of a story. Thought is in constant change and a narrative needs to reflect that in some believable way. The main point to be highlighted here is that immediate consciousness involves direct sensory input, while displaced consciousness lacks that.<sup>15</sup> It is through scenes that a reader gets the rich details considered mimetic of immediate experience, while summaries are less vivid, but still essential in a configurational sense. Yet, and crucially, the window of conscious thought must allow for the alteration between one and the other. Foci of consciousness or periods of rest (“perchings”) need to be succeeded by flights of accelerated text whereby a lot of action is condensed in a few lines. Previously, it has been argued that time in narrative mirrors the flow of time in consciousness and the oscillating pace of the phases of conscious experience translates into the pace of narrative time itself.<sup>16</sup> This is to say that just as the flow of consciousness alternates between immediacy and displacement, between what is

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14) James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 243.

15) Chafe, “A Linguist’s Perspective on William James,” 627.

16) Popova and Cuffari, “Temporality of Sense-Making in Narrative Interactions.”

perceived and what is remembered, narratives too unfold in dynamic temporal frames and in contrasting narrative modes. Relying on the suggestions coming from James and Chafe, I maintain that because the flow of thought necessitates a modulation of pace, which a novel written entirely in the present cannot represent in any intelligible form, such a text remains decidedly non-mimetic and very difficult for the reader. The latter is left to navigate an alien and monotonous temporal landscape, where it is often not clear what is happening now and what is a memory for the narrator or characters.

So the questions that can be raised at this point concern first, whether small-scale configuration that accompanies lived experience can happen at the very same time as it is being narrated, and second, what happens when reading a narrative that goes against the established flow of thought, which, according to James, needs to oscillate between moments of immediacy and moments of displacement. In order to answer this question, in the next section I turn to narratology for insights into some features of narrative that are put into question in narratives written in the present tense.

### 3. What is a Narrative: Some Narratological and Linguistic Basics

Despite some disagreements about a precise definition of narrative, there exists a certain consensus on what its main features are or should be. Here we can enumerate the possibility of a causal arrangement of the events and actions that take place, which are also told from a particular point of view, namely that of a subject called a “narrator.” The latter requirement can be paraphrased as the recognition of intentionality ascribed to the narrating subject and presupposes two additional features of stories: “tellability” or “reportability”<sup>17</sup> and “closure.”<sup>18</sup> The notion of *tellability* describes the necessity that stories should address something interesting and/or unexpected; otherwise there will be no reason to tell them. The notion of *closure* addresses the fact that most stories involve a conflict (*disequilibrium*, in narratological terms) of some kind which is expected to be resolved before the story’s end. Most older structuralist definitions of “narrativity” (which is the very property of being a narrative) have spoken of it as some kind of abstract and immanent story structure, while newer approaches have

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17) Labov, “Narrative Pre-Construction.”

18) Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*.

opened the notion to the possibility of a more phenomenological understanding. Thus, Fludernik sees it in terms of experientiality, which is defined as a “quasi-mimetic evocation of real experience.”<sup>19</sup> In older psychological approaches narratives have also been discussed in the context of “schemas” or “scripts” of real-life scenarios because they were seen to reflect to a degree the implicit logic of human action in the world.<sup>20</sup> Yet, precisely because of its inherent lack of tellability a schema is not a story, especially of the literary kind. Recently, it has been argued that narrative is one of two indispensable principles of mind (the other being analogical thinking), a form of enacted causal organization that both relies on and exemplifies agency, closure, tellability, and intersubjectivity between a teller and a reader.<sup>21</sup>

The common case of narrating something that is past from a present moment in time is indeed the default case of telling a story in a fictional form. It is only by looking back that a configuration, a certain meaning of the temporal order and the causal connections between the events emerges. Perhaps if human thought processes worked differently what would be experienced is a series of passing and unconnected sensations and thoughts, yet we think in causally connected chunks. Narrative, as already argued, is precisely such a configuration, all the more distinct when reliant on a temporal distance, and consequently, on the very distinction in experience between immediate perception and memory. According to Chafe, by studying narratives we gain knowledge about how experience is manifested in consciousness. This is because in narrative we select from the totality of experience only certain events to tell – but additionally, their significance can be judged only retrospectively. Thus, when narrating we commonly resort to the use of the past tense as a default. Grammatical “tense” is defined as “grammaticalized expression of location in time.”<sup>22</sup> Despite some disagreements as to the exact meaning of the past tense used in fiction, there exists a general consensus that the past does mark a deictic relationship between the narrator’s here and now of the discourse and the reported there and then of the described events.<sup>23</sup>

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19) Fludernik, *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology*, 12.

20) Rumelhart, “Notes on a Schema for Stories;” Schank and Abelson, *Plans, Goals, and Understanding*.

21) Popova, *Stories, Meaning, and Experience*; Popova, “Narrativity.”

22) Comrie, *Tense*, 9.

23) See Fludernik, “Narratology and Literary Linguistics,” for a discussion.

Perhaps the most detailed study of the use of grammatical tense in fictional forms is offered by Suzanne Fleishman. She introduces the idea of “narrative norm,” which is a form of linguistic competence, described by a set of tenets. Two of those, also relevant to our current discussion, are that (a) “narrative experiences are understood to have occurred in some past world (real or imagined) and are accordingly reported in a tense of the PAST,” and (b) “narratives are informed by a point of view that assigns meaning to their contents.” Fleischman (1990) discusses at length some uses of the narrative present in particular older genres such as the “epic,” the *romancero*, an orally composed form of song-poetry, neither of which she considers to be a narrative form, and in the *nouveau roman*, which she equally describes as “the breakdown of narrative,” rather than an example of one.<sup>24</sup> She writes further that all three represent descriptions rather than narrations and are “anomalies that illuminate the norm” of narration.<sup>25</sup> All three are narratives “against the grain” and the reason for this is that they go against a natural understanding of what constitutes a “narrative norm.” As she shows, both the epic and the *romancero* represent narration without time, while the *nouveau roman* becomes the discourse of visual perception, yet the common feature of all three is a “preference for descriptive circularity over linear plot.”<sup>26</sup> A narrative norm, as defined by Fleischman, clearly spells out what an iconic or mimetic narrative is or should be. Moreover, as she elaborates, despite the fact that the norm is often breached, “the rhetorical and stylistic effects produced by infringement are possible only because the norm is in place.”<sup>27</sup>

It should be clear from what was said so far that both narratological studies and phenomenological insights speak to the advantages of telling a story in the past tense. It makes sense experientially, practically, and structurally, as it allows the reader to follow the story in congruence with lived time. It allows for an evaluation of events that comes with the assumed passage of time, and it never mixes perception and memory. But let us now look in the next section at the “unnatural” form of narrating in the present tense and the difficulties it creates for the reader. For the reasons discussed below, I remain highly unconvinced that it is a natural way of telling a story.

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24) Fleishman, *Tense and Narrativity*, 208.

25) *Ibid.*, 184.

26) *Ibid.*, 211, 215.

27) *Ibid.*, 184.

#### 4. Present-Tense Narration and the Breakdown of Narrativity

There has been intense discussion, mainly in the literary critical literature, in the last 10 years or so about the growing fashion of present tense narration in fiction.<sup>28</sup> Despite being praised for its vividness, immediacy, and strong dramatic effects present-tense narration has also been called problematic, defamiliarizing, and able to “jar ... on the reader’s nerves like a razorblade.”<sup>29</sup> There have been theoretical arguments, proposed by, for example, Avanessian and Hennig, that the narrative usage of the present tense signifies a move away from privileging narration in storytelling to privileging fiction. This in itself constitutes an acknowledgement that such fiction knowingly and perhaps willingly aims at severing the link with the experiential naturalness of narration as it has endured. Space limitations here would not allow me to provide a thorough evaluation of all instances where the use of the present can be seen to be problematic for the reader of narrative. I will provide just a few examples of such difficulties.

First, I will mention the loss of contrast for specific effects which appears with present tense usage on occasion in books written mostly in the default mode of the past tense. They may include the so-called “gnomic present,” used to refer to universal truths expressed occasionally by the narrator in a story, as in the final sentence from *The Great Gatsby*: “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”<sup>30</sup> Or, they may be an instance of the “historical present,” used in brief segments to highlight a climactic moment and linked to a performative mode<sup>31</sup> and

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28) There has been a considerable number of books preoccupied with the topic of present-tense narration in fiction. They include the following: Avanessian and Henning, *Present Tense: A Poetics*; Gebauer, *Making Time*; Huber, *Present-Tense Narration in Contemporary Fiction*; and Kucała, *Of What Is Passing*. All these studies are valuable in providing detailed typologies of the kinds of present-tense narratives that have been written in recent years. None of them take a phenomenological stance on time experience, however, and one of them (Gebauer, *Making Time*) approaches time from an analytic perspective, that is, in terms of *before* and *after*, not *past*, *present*, and *future*. In addition, the narratological details of the typologies provided are too particularized and addressed to the specific novels only. That is why a review of them is beyond the scope of this article.

29) Fludernik, *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology*, 249.

30) Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 187.

31) Fleischman, *Tense and Narrativity*.

also noted by Chafe<sup>32</sup> with respect to conversational narratives. When everything is in the present, no such contrast is possible to highlight or maintain.

A related issue is the very distinction between a habitual and a singular event in such narratives. Indeed, by using a tense characteristic of general “gnomic” truths, texts written entirely in the present tense are often experienced as narrating only habitual and not individual and unique events. This has been noted by some theorists who point out the difficulties associated with realizing the difference between something that has happened only once and a regularly occurring event. The following example from Michael Ondaatje’s (1992) *The English Patient* demonstrates this point clearly as it is only at the last sentence “that one recognizes the scenario as a recurrent one”:<sup>33</sup>

She stands over the sink, gripping it, looking at the stucco walls. She has removed all mirrors and stacked them away in an empty room. She grips the sink and moves her head from side to side releasing a movement of shadow. She wets her hands and combs water into her hair till it is completely wet. This cools her and she likes it when she goes outside and the breezes hit her, erasing the thunder.<sup>34</sup>

We have seen in the examples, provided by Fleischman, that entire texts, written exclusively in the present, can be said to lose their narrativity. They are described as either descriptions or records of visual perception where nothing happens, as in the example of the *nouveau roman*. In other words, they represent the “breakdown of narrative,” and therefore of time experience. We can argue further that while the experience of order in the process of reading is maintained in such texts by the very sequentiality of the narration itself, other temporal features such as duration, pace, or larger scale causality get problematized. This is to say that what narratologists call *plot* becomes more difficult to discern. A solution is found by some well-known writers, who use present tense narration, in the form of auxiliary means (such as *paratext*) in order to overcome the narrative disadvantages created by the present tense. One example is

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32) Chafe, *Discourse, Consciousness, and Time*, 209.

33) Fludernik, “Chronology, Time, Tense and Experientiality in Narrative,” 127.

34) Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, 23.

Anthony Doerr, whose many bestselling novels are written entirely in the present.<sup>35</sup> The author nevertheless uses extensive deictic signaling as chapter headings throughout his long narratives, providing the reader with precise dates and places, thus shaping a clear unfolding of events and greatly facilitating the reading process. The mere following of the complex plot lines of these novels would be impossible without such additional directions for understanding the timeline of when something happens. A similar point can be made about the recent historical novels (*The Wolf Hall Trilogy*), written by Hilary Mantel and following the life of Oliver Cromwell as well as being told from his perspective. Without some widely available knowledge about the historical past, concerning her protagonist and shared by her readers, the novels written in the present by Mantel would have been more difficult to comprehend.<sup>36</sup>

Second comes the issue of the previously discussed matter from psychology about the pace and flow of conscious thought. This is mirrored in narrative by an inherent pace or speed in the manner in which a narrative is told. Classical narratology describes two specific narrative modes of telling, namely “summary” and “scene.”<sup>37</sup> “In *summary* the pace is accelerated through a textual ‘condensation’ or ‘compression’ of a given story-period into a relatively short statement of its main features.”<sup>38</sup> In a scene, on the other hand, the purest exemplar of which is a dialogue, but includes the description of short or punctual events, there is an iconic, nearly identical rendering through narration of the events as they are assumed to have occurred. One way to describe the important distinction between the two narrative modes of summary and scene is to explain the former as a retrospective take on the described events (i.e., from a later temporal perspective), and the latter as a perspective synchronous with the unfolding of the events. Such a distinction very often presupposes an evaluative dimension as well. Accelerated events (as in a summary) are, as a rule, assumed to be less significant

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35) Doerr, *All the Light We Cannot See*; Doerr, *Cloud Cuckoo Land*.

36) A similar point is made in Kucala, *Of What Is Passing*, 113, regarding the well-known facts about Oliver Cromwell and how they make the present-tense narration used by Mantel in *The Wolf Hall Trilogy* easier to understand. The book provides a comprehensive overview of present-tense narration in a variety of historical novels, arguing nevertheless for the advantages of what she calls, following Fludernik, a “poetics of immediacy” that they serve to provide.

37) Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*.

38) Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, 55.

than the detailed scenes which are given in full. In Anglo-American criticism of the early twentieth century a similar distinction exists under the description of narrative techniques called “telling” and “showing,” respectively. In the vocabulary of James and Chafe, discussed above, we can formulate them in terms of “flights” and “perchings” of conscious thought processes.

The problem of maintaining the distinction arises naturally when an entire fictional text is being narrated in the present tense. There is no way to differentiate between something happening now, or in the past and occurring as a memory in the consciousness of the narrator or the protagonist. In fact, there often appears to be a deliberate blurring of experience and memory, as well as contemporaneous blurring of a character’s experience and the narrator’s commentary. In the example below, the author relies on a clear deictic marker to suggest a singular event or a series of events, but it remains uncertain whether what is described is not simply a commentary, as in:

Here at the close of year 1533, his spirit is sturdy, his will strong, his front imperturbable. The courtiers see that he can shape events, mould [mold] them. He can contain the fears of other men, and give them a sense of solidity in a quaking world; this people, this dynasty, this miserable rainy island at the edge of the world.<sup>39</sup>

Analysis of more passages is beyond the scope of this paper, yet, what remains important is to emphasize the regularly encountered impossibility to distinguish between summary and scene, telling and showing, or an author’s commentary from a protagonist’s experience in narratives of this kind. What should be clear from the discussion is that there is an iconic dimension to narration and it involves the use of scene versus summary, or the proximal (synchronous) positioning of the narrator versus a distal one with respect to the unfolding events. This constraint does not by default require the use of the past tense. Scenes producing mimetic illusion can be narrated in the past or in the present, as numerous examples show. What is crucial is the alteration in the flow of thought between these two modes, if we believe in William James’ suggestion that

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39) Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, 522.

this is the natural mode of thinking, and of narrating too, according to Chafe. This, it can be argued, is the crucial constraint on mimesis that narratives written entirely in the present ostensibly neglect. Hereby lies, I believe, the main reason for and the explanation of their difficulty, felt limitations, and often sheer incomprehensibility.

As a third point in this discussion of difficulties created by present tense narration I would like to address the question of human memory. It is uncontroversial that literary narratives directly impart processes of remembering: they are mimetic of memory processes in as much as they embody processes of remembering a story (real or imagined) that they represent in a written form. A similar claim has been made recently by Basseler and Birke, who have argued that literary narratives “stage concrete processes of remembering thereby constituting ‘mimesis of remembering.’”<sup>40</sup> For the two authors, in order to constitute such a mimesis of memory, narratives have to fulfil two structural criteria: they need to feature (1) a center for subjective perception of the narrated events, that is, a narrator or reflector character from whose point of view we learn about them, and (2) two different time levels – that of the narration and that of the events told.<sup>41</sup> These two criteria bear close similarity to the narrative norm, proposed by Fleischman and discussed previously. Moreover, thus defined, the two structural principles work well to show that narratives written exclusively in the present remain dissociated from their ability to be mimetic of memory. The question that arises then is what are such narratives mimetic of, and more importantly, can they be mimetic of anything, given the nature of human thought processes?

The issue of the relation of conscious experience to time becomes particularly salient when we turn to psychological work on memory, and in particular the work of Edel Tulving who has devoted many decades of research to explaining the peculiar familiarity of “the presence of the past in our daily experiences.”<sup>42</sup> The crucial

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40) See Basseler and Birke, “Mimesis of Remembering,” 213.

41) Ibid., 217. While providing a good variety of examples, substantiating their claim in various degrees, the authors remain more interested in providing a typology of written fiction in terms of its ability to represent a mimesis of remembering, and less with the nature of time experience as determinable through language and conscious awareness. Therefore, I see the thrust of their argument as quite distinct from my aims as they are developed in this article.

42) Tulving, *Elements of Episodic Memory*; and Tulving, “Episodic Memory and Autonoesis: Uniquely Human?”

point of his lifelong work is bringing into prominence the unique capacity of human consciousness, a term he uses synonymously with awareness, to travel in time and remember personally experienced events. It is the expression “to travel in time” that brings into focus the problematic nature of narrating exclusively in the present. How can the reader know when something is a memory or a current event? Tulving introduces the distinction between “noetic” awareness (associated with general semantic knowledge of the world) and “autonoetic” awareness, or autobiographic (episodic) memory, which is an experiential record of one’s important life experiences. Episodic memory has a unique relation to time because as Tulving puts it, it is the only kind of memory that “allows people to consciously reexperience past experiences.”<sup>43</sup> It is not difficult to see how a novel, told from a certain chosen point of view and relaying the events of a life or a period of a life (as in first-person narration, but also from a reflector-character’s point of view) measures up to such an understanding of memory and, in fact, constitutes in verbal form its best mimetic approximation. It will not be an exaggeration to say that this recognizable feeling of the past that defines episodic memory and accompanies us throughout subjective life is perhaps, to a large extent also responsible for the attraction that both storytelling and its incarnation in literary fiction hold for us. No such experience is available through present-tense narration, as the latter can describe only the present.

## 5. Conclusion

Human experiences are unique, made up of continuous change, of unrepeatable small moments and events, some significant, some less so, but all in their entirety making up a singular life that is unlike any other. It is impossible for two experiences, even within the same person, to ever be the same. Yet, language must describe what is subjective and unique in the general terms of what is available in its grammatical and lexical structure, otherwise it risks incomprehension. It is the artistic articulation in narrative or poetic form of a peculiar style that makes a text memorable and distinctive. Style is often considered essential in a verbal work of art but even then it needs to remain faithful (at least to some degree) to what is available to us, readers, through

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43) Tulving, “Episodic Memory and Autonoesis: Uniquely Human?,” 16.

experience, both phenomenal and linguistic. I have argued that there is an iconic and mimetic level to understanding stories which has to do with the very processes that underlie human experience of time, its passage and its reconstruction in memory. Phenomenology, psychological work on consciousness and narratological studies all agree that it is easier, more natural, and perhaps more rewarding and instructive to tell a story in the past tense. If by reading narratives we gain knowledge about ourselves, it makes sense for them to observe a principle that has become a norm through the validation of experience. That norm still remains a principle at large in the way we tell stories orally and in written form – but it is not an absolute rule, as the current fashion of narration in the present tense brazenly shows. While there are exceptions and the creativity of writers allows for deviations, such aberrations can only serve to confirm the strength of the norm.

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