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Timing: How Long and How Often?

Time plays a fundamental part in narrative fiction. The sequential related events of plot imply the passing of imaginary time (what theorists call story time). Narratives take time to tell and receive. Writers create narratives in time, and if the stories of their lives and authorship are recorded, they become part of the non-fiction narrative of literary history. Alternatively, much of what we believe we know of a remote time may be derived from a narrative dated from that period. Genres as well as writers have their times, and very often criticism’s narratives about the rise of a genre or the disappearance of another intersects with history. Readers, too, are rooted in their own cultural times and locations, which in turn affect what fictions they read and, to some extent, the way they read them. Finally, many narratives are set in a particular time, which becomes an intrinsic part of the fiction’s setting. Despite these commonsense connections of time and narrative, the ‘time’ discussed by narrative theory has little to do with the ‘time’ of history. When they refer to ‘time’ in narrative, most theorists mean some combination of the temporal unfolding of narrative in the act of reading, the duration of time depicted in the plot, the pace at which the narration relates the events of the plot, and the order or disorder of the events of story time. Narrative theory relies on the conceptual division of story time (the time that transpires in the imaginary story world of the plot) and discourse time (the amount of narration expended on the relation of the story events—really a quantity of pages, though it would have a correlate in reading time). To reintroduce the time of history, or philosophical meditations on conceptions of time in different eras, to the discussion of narrative form significantly changes the subject.

For instance, Raymond Williams, one of the founding thinkers of contemporary cultural studies, brings historical time into contact with the
literary history of forms. Williams argues that one can discern in a particular time period the dominant, residual, and emergent forms of expression. The old, the new, and the everyday forms of a particular time overlap with one another, though Williams emphasizes the scrutiny of the ‘social present.’ There we find the emergent forms in which new ‘structures of feeling’ are embodied. Williams argues that in any given historical moment in a culture, old, new, and everyday forms coexist, overlapping with one another: ‘The effective formations of most actual art relate to already manifest social formations, dominant or residual, and it is primarily to emergent formations (though often in the form of modification or disturbance in older forms) that the structure of feeling, as solution, relates.’ Williams’s terms place scrutiny of form into a social and temporal matrix that many structuralist narrative theorists would set aside. (Contextual narratology is more welcoming to cultural studies approaches.)

In order to convey the most influential methods for examining time in narrative fiction, without suggesting that I can take on historical, philosophical, or scientific understandings of time, I use the narrowing term ‘timing.’ Timing is a matter of the fiction writer’s craft, like the timing of a stand-up comedian. Repeating details, dwelling on some events to the exclusion or reduction of others, employing story-stopping descriptions or leaping over events with gaps, modulating the pace of narration with scenes and summary: these are the techniques of timing as employed by storytellers, filmmakers, and novelists. For a storyteller or a novelist or a kindergartener, mastering the use of timing in narration helps to avoid boring or irrelevant storytelling.

We criticize a boring narrative by saying that it drags or that it is slow, both terms referring to our expectations of good timing. These terms do not just report the experience of untrained readers reacting to unfamiliar texts. Since we don’t in fact have all the time in the world to give to the imaginary related time of narrative, we need the compression, speeding up, and skipping that makes a coherent story about centuries, generations, or lives other than our own manageable. We also need narratives to slow down to linger on significant scenes or thoughts, to repeat in order to explain, enhance clarity, or heighten drama, and to be ample enough to afford a temporary escape from our own time. Of course, in order to enter fictional worlds imaginatively, we give time to the reading experience. A reader’s sense that a fiction is ‘slow’ or ‘fast’ may have more to do with how many pages are turned during a session of reading than with the narrative’s timing. Indeed, the conventional uses of timing in narrative may be virtually unnoticeable to many readers, who may react only when a narrative