

# Narrative and Reflective Temporalities

The issues of this essay concern whether there are ways of experiencing time that are specific to narration and whether such ways can also be applied to the experience of time in reflection. In order to tackle these issues, we shall compare and contrast the experience of time in life with both the temporal experiences of narration and the temporal experiences of reflection. We shall begin, then, with a discussion on what the “experience of time” is, in the attempt of providing a theoretical framework for our inquiry on narrative and reflective temporalities.

## The Experience of Time

Time is a puzzling matter. Leaving aside the metaphysics or the ontology of time – namely the problems concerning the existence or the essence of time – and taking for granted that time exists, we will focus exclusively on our experience of time.

The experience of time can be exemplified by different specific temporal experiences, namely simultaneity, succession, present, past and future.<sup>1</sup> Bertrand Russell<sup>2</sup> used to sort these five ways of experiencing time in two groups: present, past and future belong to time-relations between a subject and an object; whereas simultaneity and succession apply to time-relations among objects.<sup>3</sup> The relation between the subject and the object consists in the fact that the subject relies on the object of her own memory or her own sensation. On the contrary, time-relations among objects are essentially the relations of simultaneity and succession, which are independent from

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<sup>1</sup> The ways in which we can experience time can be more than the four we have just mentioned. For a summary, see Robin LE POIDEVIN, «The Experience and Perception of Time», in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2011 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/time-experience/>>.

<sup>2</sup> Bertrand RUSSELL, «On the Experience of Time», in *The Monist* 25 (1915), 212-33.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the paper, the term “object” will refer indifferently to events, facts and objects, such as tables, chairs, etc., as they are commonly intended.

a subject, since «In a world in which there was no experience there would be no past, present, or future, but there might be earlier and later».<sup>4</sup> We shall leave aside both the issue regarding whether the subject can be removed in the case of time-relations among objects – which are, therefore, subject-independent time-relations – and that concerning whether the subject is involved also in the case of time-relations among objects. We shall keep the distinction of two groups of temporal experiences, but we shall replace Russell's criterion with another one. The idea of ordering the above-mentioned temporal experiences in two groups could also be based on the fact that in order to perceive simultaneity or succession we always need two events (or facts) that are somehow related to each other – which is why Russell talks about time-relations among objects. However, in order to perceive present, past and future, assuming that it is possible, we do not necessarily need two events (or facts) related to each other that make the perception available (or possible) since, apparently, we might be able to experience tenses by virtue of experiencing just a single event or fact that is unrelated to other events or facts. Therefore, Russell's distinction of two groups of temporal experiences works also if we use the criterion of the *number of events or facts* that are necessarily connected: two events or facts for simultaneity and succession; only one event or fact in the case of present, past and future.

Within each of the two groups, then, we can further distinguish two ways of experiencing the same temporal experience. Indeed, we can distinguish between the perception of temporal experiences *per se*, and the temporal experiences perceived by virtue of the objects that happen within them. We can take the example of simultaneity in order to see how we can experience it both *per se* and by virtue of simultaneous objects. Suppose that you are listening to the beginning of the first movement of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony No. 8 in F Major, Op. 93*; in this case you have a melody played by the strings section and a clear rhythm produced by the tympani. You can perceive the opening of this symphony as either of the two objects – the strings' melody and the timpani's rhythm – happening simultaneously, or as a unique object consisting in the simultaneity itself, without focusing on the two objects that are simultaneous. The same can be said of succession. Imagine that you are watching the following events: someone is walking in the street and then opens a door. You can experience such events either as two separate events happening consecutively, or as a unique object, which is succession itself. As for the tenses of present, past and future, whether we can experience them *per se* is a problematic issue, since it seems that we are able to perceive them only by virtue of the objects that constitute them. The possibility that we experience tenses is ineffable, less manifest than the experiences of

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

simultaneity and succession. The reason why perceiving tenses *per se* is not so evident is that all of the three tenses, because of their very nature, cannot be perceived. The future cannot be part of our current perception because it is something that still has to happen. At the same time, the past cannot be part of our present perception because it is something that has already happened. Perceiving the present is also a problematic issue, which is related to the controversial possibility of perceiving it as a *specious present*. It was E. R. Clay who introduced the notion of “specious present”:

The relation of experience to time has not been profoundly studied. Its objects are given as being of the present, but the part of time referred to by the datum is a very different thing from the conterminous of the past and future which philosophy denotes by the name Present. The present to which the datum refers is really a part of the past – a recent past – delusively given as being a time that intervenes between the past and the future. Let it be named the specious present, and let the past, that is given as being the past, be known as the obvious past. All the notes of a bar of a song seem to the listener to be contained in the present. All the changes of place of a meteor seem to the beholder to be contained in the present. At the instant of the termination of such series, no part of the time measured by them seems to be a past. Time, then, considered relatively to human apprehension, consists of four parts, viz., the obvious past, the specious present, the real present, and the future. Omitting the specious present, it consists of three ultraentities – not to say nonentities, – viz. the past, the future, and their conterminous, the present. The specious present is a fiction of experience.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, William James<sup>6</sup> further developed the notion of specious present by describing it as a sort of duration, namely as the «short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible». James writes:

Let me sum up, now, by saying that we are constantly conscious of a certain duration – the specious present – varying in length from a few seconds to probably not more than a minute, and that this duration (with its content perceived as having one part earlier and the other part later) is the original intuition of time. Longer times are conceived by adding, shorter ones by dividing, portions of this vaguely bounded unit, and are habitually thought by us symbolically.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Edmund R. CLAY, *The Alternative: A Study in Psychology*, Macmillan and Co., London 1882, 167-68.

<sup>6</sup> William JAMES, *The Principles of Psychology*, Holt, New York 1910, vol. 1, 631.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 642.

We cannot literally perceive the present as it is, but only as a very short duration which varies from a «few seconds to [...] not more than a minute». However, if the specious present, as distinguished from the real present, is a certain duration, we face the paradox of perceiving that duration. In his *Confessions*, Augustine discusses the paradox according to which when we have to establish if an event or interval of time is short or long, we have to ask what it is exactly that is short or long. The answer is that it can be neither what is past, since that is concluded, nor what is present, since the present, by definition, lacks any duration. Furthermore, while an event is still happening, its duration cannot be judged. Augustine's solution is that the thing that we measure in the specific case of the interval of time or duration is in the memory.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it seems that, strictly speaking, we cannot purely experience time, at least not in the case of the specific temporal experience of the duration of an ongoing event (which is a way of trying to experience the present), since this kind of experience involves a process happening in memory. And a process happening in our memory is not, by definition, something that is happening “now”, namely in the moment in which the event the duration of which we want to determine occurs.

As we have seen, the possibility of perceiving tenses *per se* is controversial. Therefore, we now need to evaluate if we can perceive tenses by virtue of the objects which happen in them. The crucial questions, therefore, are the following: Is it possible to perceive an object as present (past or future)? If so, is that a possible way of *indirectly* experiencing the present (the past or the future)?

While perceiving the past *per se* is problematic, we can perceive it through the traces that the past leaves on objects. For example, the situation whereby we go back to the place where we used to spend the holidays in our childhood and that we have not visited for a while is common. In such a situation, we experience the past by virtue of the changes we see on the objects, which now appear old to us. The same happens with the future. We can experience the future by virtue of particular changes we see on objects. For instance, imagine that we go to a place abroad where we are surrounded by everyday goods, such as cars or cellphones, which are more advanced or have a more modern look to them than the same kind of goods we have back home. When we look at these new objects, we can experience what it is like to perceive the future by virtue of a sort of experience of anticipation of what will happen in our country when these new objects will be imported. Finally, as for the present, not only whether we can perceive it in itself is controversial, we might even be skeptical as to whether we can perceive it by virtue of the objects that happen in it. Is it possible to track the traces of the present on objects? We shall leave this thorny question open for further

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<sup>8</sup> See LE POIDEVIN (2011), *op. cit.*, 4.

investigation since, in order to analyze temporal experiences in narration and reflection, we shall not need to answer it.

The general issues concerning the perception of tenses and time-relations we have presented so far will now turn out to be useful in order to elucidate the ways in which temporal experiences are represented in narration and reflection, and the function that such temporal experiences play in these two.

## Narration

### *Temporal Experiences*

#### *Simultaneity*

We have already introduced the difference between perceiving simultaneity and succession both *per se* and by virtue of the objects that constitute them. In the case of simultaneity, as we have said, we can perceive the opening of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 8* either as two objects – the strings' melody and the timpani's rhythm – happening simultaneously or as a unique object consisting in the simultaneity itself. In cinema, for instance, the split screen technique is a tool that allows the viewer to perceive either that two scenes are simultaneous, or that the two scenes constitute a unique object that is simultaneity itself. In Brian De Palma's film *Sister*, the scene of the man dying in the bathroom is simultaneous to the scene of the woman looking at the bathroom window from her apartment right in front of the window. By virtue of the split screen, the two scenes are perceived as simultaneous and the viewer is able to grasp the entire situation as a unique object. The same happens in everyday situations. Suppose that you are at the window of your apartment, looking at the street, and you notice that while a man is walking quietly on the sidewalk, a taxi is also crossing the street. You perceive the two events as two different simultaneous events, but you also see the entire situation as a unique object, which is simultaneity itself.

Whereas in music, film and everyday life we can clearly rely on two different ways for perceiving simultaneity, in narration<sup>9</sup> we have only one option: perceiving simultaneity by virtue of the occurrence of simultaneous events. Because narration evolves in time, we can be conscious of simultaneity only by reading of two events that occur one after the other and that can be considered as being simultaneous in relation to the plot. Considering that we are bound to read a novel progressively in time, this does

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<sup>9</sup> Although cinema as well could be considered as a narrative art, by "narration", in this paper we shall refer exclusively to prose fiction.

not allow us to be conscious of simultaneity in itself. In order to experience simultaneity, we would need to experience events presented at the same time and not merely described as happening at the same time – that is, the events should be immediately present in our perceptual field, as in the case of music, film and everyday situations.

### *Succession*

The perception of succession is different from the perception of simultaneity. In narration, in fact, together with the perceptual experience of succession – occurring when we are simply conscious of two consecutive events – by virtue of the objects that constitute it, we are also able to perceive succession in itself. Indeed, events can be not only described as happening one after the other, but they are literally *read* as happening one after the other. Trivially, that is due to the fact that the action of reading requires that strings of words are read in sequence. In fact, that is why we experience succession in itself not only when we read passages describing actions, events or facts that are effectively consecutive, but also when we read actions, events and facts that are not supposed to be consecutive at all in the plot. Therefore, in narration, we perceive succession in itself not only when we read about events referring to simultaneous actions, but also when we read sequentially about non-consecutive facts.

### *Tenses*

The perception of tenses *per se* seems to be very problematic in the case of normal perception. Similarly, we are not sure whether we can experience them when reading, say, a novel. Therefore, if there is a way of experiencing tenses in narrative, that must be by virtue of the objects that are involved in the experience of time. Let us start by analyzing the experience of the past.

We can experience the past when a narrator relates facts or events that bring the reader to the past. This can be done, for instance, by virtue of a particular event that evokes past states – when a narrator, for example, introduces a past situation by virtue of a present experience that recalls it – or when a narrator refers directly to something that happened in the past life of a character. The well-known episode of the madeleine in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* is an example of the first situation:

Et tout d'un coup le souvenir m'est apparu. Ce goût, c'était celui du petit morceau de madeleine que le dimanche matin à Combray (parce que ce jour-là je ne sortais pas avant l'heure de la messe), quand j'allais lui dire bonjour dans sa chambre, ma tante Léonie m'offrait après l'avoir trempé dans son infusion de thé ou de tilleul. La vue de la petite madeleine ne m'avait rien rappelé avant

que je n'y eusse goûté; peut-être parce que, en ayant souvent aperçu depuis, sans en manger, sur les tablettes des pâtissiers, leur image avait quitté ces jours de Combray pour se lier à d'autres plus récents; peut-être parce que, de ces souvenirs abandonnés si longtemps hors de la mémoire, rien ne survivait, tout s'était désagrégé; les formes – et celle aussi du petit coquillage de pâtisserie, si grassement sensuel sous son plissage sévère et dévot – s'étaient abolies, ou, ensommeillées, avaient perdu la force d'expansion qui leur eût permis de rejoindre la conscience. Mais, quand d'un passé ancien rien ne subsiste, après la mort des êtres, après la destruction des choses, seules, plus frêles mais plus vivaces, plus immatérielles, plus persistantes, plus fidèles, l'odeur et la saveur restent encore longtemps, comme des âmes, à se rappeler, à attendre, à espérer, sur la ruine de tout le reste, à porter sans fléchir, sur leur gouttelette presque impalpable, l'édifice immense du souvenir.<sup>10</sup>

Marcel has the experiences of tasting a madeleine dipped in tea and of smelling its characteristic fragrance. These two sensory experiences recall the past situation in which Marcel used to pay his aunt Leonie a visit and she used to offer him an infusion of tea or lime, accompanied by a madeleine. The sensory experiences of smelling and tasting have the evocative power of reminding Marcel about his past; the mere visual experience is not enough in order to activate his memory.

The following passage, taken from Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, exemplifies, instead, the second way of experiencing the past, namely by directly referring to something that happened in the past life of a character:

À douze ans, sa mère obtint que l'on commençât ses études. On en chargea le curé. Mais les leçons étaient si courtes et si mal suivies, qu'elles ne pouvaient servir à grand-chose. C'était aux moments perdus qu'elles se donnaient, dans la sacristie, debout, à la hâte, entre un baptême et un enterrement; ou bien le curé envoyait chercher son élève après l'Angéus, quand il n'avait pas à sortir. On montait dans sa chambre, on s'installait: les moucheron et les papillons de nuit tournoyaient autour de la chandelle. Il faisait chaud, l'enfant s'endormait; et le bonhomme, s'assoupissant les mains sur son ventre, ne tardait pas à ronfler, la bouche ouverte. D'autres fois, quand M. le curé, revenant de porter le viatique à quelque malade des environs, apercevait Charles qui polissonnait dans la campagne, il l'appelait, le sermonnait un quart d'heure et profitait de l'occasion pour lui faire conjuguer son verbe au pied d'un arbre.

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<sup>10</sup> Marcel PROUST, *À la recherche du temps perdu. Vol. 1: Du côté de chez Swann* (1913), Gallimard, Paris 1988, 103-04.

La pluie venait les interrompre, ou une connaissance qui passait. Du reste, il était toujours content de lui, disait même que le jeune homme avait beaucoup de mémoire.<sup>11</sup>

The narrator relates an episode of Charles' childhood concerning his fragmentary education. The passage relates how superficial and lazy his teacher was: a priest who not only limited himself to teaching Charles very rudimentary notions, but who also treated him with a sort of indulgence.

As for the temporal experience of the future, there are plenty of cases in narration in which events that are going to happen in the future are anticipated, as in the cases of prolepses of any kind or in premonitory dreams. In Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig*, for example, Aschenbach dreams that he is witnessing a Dionysian orgy, which if read in the light of the end of Euripides' *The Bacchae*, might be interpreted as a powerful and suggestive anticipation of Aschenbach's death. In fact, just as Pentheus, who refused to honor the cult of Dionysus in Thebe, was dismembered when caught peeking at the Bacchae's rites, so Aschenbach, who had always rejected any kind of "Dionysian" impulse, would pay for his repressed passion for the young Tadzio with his life:

Angst war der Anfang, Angst und Lust und eine entsetzte Neugier nach dem, was kommen wollte. Nacht herrschte, und seine Sinne lauschten; denn weither näherte sich Getümmel, Getöse, ein Gemisch von Lärm: Rasseln, Schmettern und dumpfes Donnern, schrilles Jauchzen dazu und ein bestimmtes Geheul im gezogenen u-Laut, alles durchsetzt und grauenhaft süß übertönt von tief girrendem, ruchlos beharrlichen Flötenspiel, welches auf schamlos zudringende Art die Eingeweide bezauberte. Aber er wußte ein Wort, dunkel, doch das benennend was kam: «Der fremde Gott!».<sup>12</sup>

Finally, with regard to the present, since we can be generally skeptical about the possibility to perceive it *per se* in life and since we have left the evaluation of the eventuality to experience it indirectly to further investigation, we shall not discuss whether we can perceive it in narration.

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<sup>11</sup> Gustave FLAUBERT, *Madame Bovary: Mœurs de province* (1857), in: Id., *Œuvres Complètes*, Louis Conard Libraire-Editeur, Paris 1930, vol. 1, 8-9.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas MANN, *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912): *Text, Materialien, Kommentar mit den bisher unveröffentlichten Arbeitsnotizen Thomas Manns*, Carl Hanser Verlag, München-Wien 1983, 74.

## *The Function of Succession, Simultaneity and Tenses in Narration*

The temporal dimension defined by the forms of succession, simultaneity, past and future is essential since it allows for the understanding of facts and events that are related, so that we can get the meaning of the narration. Moreover, such temporal dimension enables us to express value judgments about the actions of characters, evaluations that refer to the meaning of narration as well in a broad sense.

When we are able to evaluate a certain event by means of the aforementioned four kinds of temporal experiences, we can grasp the structure of the plot of which the event is a part. This ability is fundamental to acquiring the meaning of the narrative. For example, we understand Emma Bovary's action, that of taking arsenic, in order to commit suicide, because the succession of events that led to this final action is clear to the reader: namely, the fact that Emma's debts are out of control, the fact that Rodolphe refused to lend her money, and the fact that everybody else refused to help her financially. Along with succession, the perception of simultaneity is also crucial to make sense of the plot. Perceiving two facts or events as simultaneous, for example, is basic to the comprehension of the narrative situation of the alibi. Suppose that the story of a homicide is recounted in a novel. The narrator might describe the homicide and say that, at the same time in which the homicide took place, a certain character was doing something that is not related at all with the homicide. The simultaneity of the two events, the homicide and the other action in which the character is involved, gives the reader crucial information about the plot, since it rules out that that character is the murderer.

Therefore, as we have seen, simultaneity and succession are temporal experiences of great importance to the understanding of the plot's meaning. In addition, they are also crucial because they allow the reader to express value judgments. That is, locating an event in a temporal dimension facilitates judging and analyzing the behavior of the characters. Knowing that Emma Bovary had affairs *after* she and Charles got married allows us to judge her as an adulterer<sup>13</sup>; a judgment that would not have been legitimate if she had had affairs *before* she got married. In the same way, the simultaneity between the event of Emma's rendezvous with Leon in Rouen – while she should have been taking piano lessons – and the event of her husband Charles meeting Emma's piano teacher pushes the reader to formulate a value judgment: Emma is an adulterer.

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<sup>13</sup> It might seem a superfluous thing to highlight, but being recognized as an adulterer was supposed to determine a negative value judgment according to the social norms of the historical time in which Emma lived.

The representation of the past and the future is also decisive when it comes to getting the meaning of the plot. When Marcel's past is evoked by the taste and smell of the madeleine, the reader gets to glimpse the emotional tone of Marcel's relationship with his aunt and the kind of family environment that he was surrounded by when he was a child. Such information is important for the understanding of Marcel's character and, consequently, the meaning of the whole story. Similarly, knowing a few significant episodes from Charles' youth is important in order to outline his character as a simple and modest person, qualities which, as an adult, will lead him to embrace certain bourgeois values a-critically.

Moreover, the same applies to the representation of the future. After reading Aschenbach's premonitory dream, we understand not only the meaning of some of the actions he does after the dream (i.e. trying to look younger by means of the use of make up), but we comprehend more clearly also the nature of his attraction to Tadzio. That is to say that, if the dream is interpreted in a Dionysian key, we can make sense of Aschenbach's attempts to look younger, being that the theme of rejuvenation is linked to the cult of Dionysus and to its characteristic overcoming of the binary opposition "young/old".<sup>14</sup>

## Reflection

As we have seen so far, in the case of narration all the temporal experiences we took into account are constituted by events and facts. The temporal experiences of simultaneity and succession occur when we have more than one event, whereas the temporal experiences of tenses occur also when we have just a single event or fact (at least, we do not need to relate two events, or facts; the presence of just one event or fact is sufficient for us to experience tenses). Apart from simultaneity, which is perceivable also in itself, all the other temporal experiences are perceived indirectly, namely by virtue of the perception of the events and facts which happen in them.

In reflection, strictly speaking we do not have events and facts that are narrated and constitute a plot. Reflection is typically characterized by considerations and remarks that can be detached from specific events and facts, since these considerations and remarks are supposed to be autonomous with respect to a story; they are comprehensible irrespectively of specific narrative situations. Whereas in narration there are events and facts that happen in a certain way and in specific places and times,

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<sup>14</sup> See Massimo FUSILLO, *Il dio ibrido: Dioniso e le "Baccanti" nel Novecento*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2009, 15-30, 43-46.

speculation disregards any contingency.<sup>15</sup> Even if, in a work of fiction, for example, there are cases in which specific situations and stories suggest particular reflections, the meaning of these reflections is independent from those situations and stories. That is, such reflections are *self-sufficient*. Consider the discussion on the senses of reality and possibility in the opening pages of Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. This discussion is closely related to the opposition between Ulrich's character and that of his father, but it remains perfectly intelligible even if detached from that particular opposition, which is essential in order to outline the portrait of the novel's protagonist. That happens because the content of reflection is constituted by problems and issues (i.e. the difference between reality and possibility, the existence of God, whether the human mind is physical, what is beauty, etc.), which are independent from contingent facts and events. Take the following passage from George Berkeley's *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* as an example of reflection:

It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing amongst men, that houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word all sensible objects have an existence natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding. But with how great an assurance and acquiescence so ever this principle may be entertained in the world; yet whoever shall find in his heart to call it in question, may, if I mistake not, perceive it to involve a manifest contradiction. For what are the forementioned objects but the things we perceive by sense, and what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations; and is it not plainly repugnant that any one of these or any combination of them should exist unperceived?<sup>16</sup>

This is the starting point of Berkeley's discussion on materialism. Berkeley reflects upon the issue of whether the world exists as separated from us or exists only as our mere perception. His reflection, correct or incorrect as it may be, is supposed to be timelessly valid, independently from facts and events. And we might add that a reflection can be considered always valid if, in order for its content to be evaluated, we can withdraw from the contingent conditions of both reading and writing. By "contingent conditions", I mean the historical time in which the writer and the reader live, and the specific personal and psychological situation in which both are. Thus, in order to get the meaning expressed in a reflection, not only do we not need to take facts and events into account— since there are none of these in reflections — but we can also withdraw from the contingent conditions in which both the reader and the writer are.

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<sup>15</sup> See Guido MAZZONI, *Teoria del romanzo*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2011, 13-72.

<sup>16</sup> George BERKELEY, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, ed. Jonathan Dancy, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, 104.

Therefore, given that events and facts as usually presented in narration cannot be found in reflection, and given that the issues discussed in reflections are supposed to be always valid, we now have to ask what is the temporal experience, if any, that better characterizes reflection.

### *A-temporality, or the Temporal Experience of Reflection*

The temporal experience that seems to characterize reflection is *a-temporality*. The lack of events and facts in reflection suggests that we can perceive neither simultaneity nor succession as temporal forms of narration (neither *per se* nor indirectly). At the same time, the absence of events and facts that evoke past events or anticipate future happenings implies that, in reflection, we cannot have the temporal experiences of past and future (neither *per se* nor indirectly). Moreover, a reflection expresses a content that can always be judged as true or false, regardless of contingent conditions. And we experience this kind of content in a sort of absence of time.

Experiencing a-temporality might be considered identical to experiencing a sort of “permanent present”, since it seems that even if reflection is deprived of a conventional temporal dimension, during reading, it appears to be constantly “present” to the reader.

### *The Function of A-temporality in Reflection*

The function of the temporal dimensions exemplified by succession, simultaneity, past and future in narration is to let us grasp the meaning of narration (in terms of plot, the psychology of the characters, and value judgments). A-temporality, which is the typical temporal form of reflection, has the function of allowing us to evaluate the content of reflection. That is to say that, since we experience reflection in a sort of a-temporality, we can establish whether the arguments and ideas expressed in it are actually true or false. A-temporality assures that we evaluate the content of a certain reflection exclusively on the basis of the logical rules of reasoning, separately from contingent facts and events. Let us consider the speculative passage nestled in a work of fiction, Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig*:

«Denn die Schönheit, Phaidros, merke das wohl! nur die Schönheit ist göttlich  
und sichtbar zugleich, und so ist sie denn also des Sinnlichen  
Weg, ist, kleiner Phaidros, der Weg des Künstlers zum Geiste. Glaubst  
du nun aber, mein Lieber, dass derjenige jemals Weisheit und wahre  
Manneswürde gewinnen könne, für den der Weg zum Geistigen durch

die Sinne führt? Oder glaubst du vielmehr (ich stelle dir die Entscheidung frei), daß dies ein gefährlich-lieblicher Weg sei, wahrhaft ein Irr und Sündenweg, der mit Notwendigkeit in die Irre leitet? Denn du mußt wissen, daß wir Dichter den Weg der Schönheit nicht gehen können, ohne daß Eros sich zugesellt und sich zum Führer aufwirft; ja, mögen wir auch Helden auf unsere Art und züchtige Kriegersleute sein, so sind wir wie Weiber, denn Leidenschaft ist unsere Erhebung, und unsere Sehnsucht muß Liebe bleiben, – das ist unsere Lust und unsere Schande. Siehst du nun wohl, daß wir Dichter nicht weise noch würdig sein können? Daß wir notwendig in die Irre gehen, notwendig liederlich und Abenteuer des Gefühles bleiben? Die Meisterhaltung unseres Styls ist Lüge und Narrentum, unser Ruhm und Ehrenstand eine Posse, das Vertrauen der Menge zu uns höchst lächerlich, Volks- und Jugenderziehung durch die Kunst ein gewagtes, zu verbietendes Unternehmen. Denn wie sollte wohl der zum Erzieher taugen, dem eine unverbesserliche und natürliche Richtung zum Abgrunde eingeboren ist? Wir möchten ihn wohl verleugnen und Würde gewinnen, aber wie wir uns auch wenden mögen, er zieht uns an [...].<sup>17</sup>

The above-cited excerpt is a very common case of reflective insert in a fictional narrative<sup>18</sup>, one in which Aschenbach discusses the idea of beauty in relation to poetry. In order to attest whether the concepts expressed in the passage are sound, we have to identify Aschenbach's thesis and see whether the statements in support of such a thesis are true. The thesis is that poets can neither be wise nor respectable; the statements in support of the thesis are:

- 1) Beauty is visible and divine;
  - 2) Beauty is the path towards the sensible (which is also the path towards the spirit);
  - 3) If you try to reach the spirit through a sensible path, you can be misled by Eros (which is inextricably bound to our sensible life);
  - 4) Eros has the power to get caught on lust;
  - 5) Lust represents the abyss;
  - 6) The abyss is degradation;
- Therefore:
- 7) Poets can neither be wise nor respectable.

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<sup>17</sup> MANN (1973), *op. cit.*, 79.

<sup>18</sup> See Stefano ERCOLINO, *The Novel-Essay, 1884-1947*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2014.

We are able to evaluate the validity of Aschenbach's idea according to which poets can neither be wise nor respectable by evaluating the truth of each statements (1-6) and the move which leads from the statements (1-6) to the conclusion (7). We do this without taking into account any contingent condition, namely without referring to particular events and facts, which are not mentioned at all in the reflection. Therefore, being that a-temporality is that particular temporal experience characterized by the absence of events and facts and by the abstraction from contingency, we can affirm that a-temporality is the temporal experience that allows the assessment of the truth of Aschenbach's reflection. The analysis of *Der Tod in Venedig's* essayistic insert that we have just illustrated might be easily applied to other reflective passages in fictional and philosophical writings.

According to the investigation conducted so far, we shall therefore conclude that the absence of contingent events and facts is what typifies reflection, and that a-temporality is its characteristic temporal experience. In the case of narrative, instead, the presence of contingent facts and events in the narration allows for a wide range of temporal experiences, such as simultaneity, succession, past, and future.

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