

Heterogeneity of Temporality and the Narrative: A Retrospective Glance from Postmodernism to Greek Classics *

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Abstract

The postmodern narratives manifest divergent forms of literary representation of time, notably as circular, contradictory, multi-linear; depicting also the chronological crisscrossing and temporal leaps of events. Noticeable in the works of late modernism also, such facets of temporality suggest a discernible continuity from late modernism to postmodernism. The dramas of Shakespeare too offer instances of his encounter with time as a complex entity, and his play “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” portrays the plural relation of a single frame of time to human beings. This paper is based on the curiosity concerning the absorbing question if the above characteristics of time as multilinear, plural, chronologically multiple can be traced back to Greek antiquity and thus postmodern narrative’s relation with ancient Greek narrative can be hypothesized. Interestingly, invoking the reign of justice in nature, Anaximander had underscored the passage of contradictory phenomena into each other as the cornerstone of temporality commanding human destiny. Euripides’ Medea and Homer’s the Iliad illustriously testify to express time in its reverse flow, and in its plural, enigmatic elasticity. Greek classical literature, to a reliable extent, proves an allegiance to the imagination of time in its heterogenous dimension, which resists being categorized into the conception of a harmonious time. Such an instance allows for affirming a tangible convergence across history, enacting an affinity of late modern, postmodern period with the classical Greek antiquity concerning the literary portrayals of time in its heterogeneity.

Keywords: Postmodernism’s unconventional temporality, notion of Aussparung, Time’s reverse flow, The Iliad and time’s elasticity

“The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite
 That ever I was born to set it right!”

-William Shakespeare, “Hamlet” (Act I. Sc.v. 210-11)

Greek Temporal Notions of ‘Kairos’ and ‘Chronos’ and the Inception of Narrative

Man is strikingly distinct in being able to experience time in diverse forms and human being was aware of this diversity since remote antiquity in Greece. Ancient Greeks, by and large, made use of two words to express time, namely ‘Kairos’ and ‘Chronos’. ‘Kairos’ and ‘Chronos’ referred to the qualitative and the quantitative experience of time respectively. Another difference underlying ‘Kairos’ and ‘Chronos’ pertained to the former being a moment of standstill or break and the latter being an uninterrupted continuity. ‘Kairos’ and ‘Chronos’ stand for time in English, ‘Zeit’ in German, and ‘temps’ in French. ‘Kairos’ illustrates the qualitative dimension of time, suggesting the opportune point of time or the appropriate moment to act.

As distinct from 'Kairos,' 'Chronos' conveys predominantly the quantitative notion of time. Accordingly, 'chronology' or 'chronicle' alludes to an account of what happened in course of a definite period of time. Chronos signifies continuity and Kairos a moment of vision or *Augenblick*, signifying a break with the continuity (Murchadha 3-4).

Both the denotations of time affiliate to the category of causality. Chronos is conceivable as a well-connected series of events driven by the causal attachments unfolding in time. For documenting history, Chronos has served as the guidepost. Kairos, as a visionary moment of break in continuity, gains importance in the hands of a literary author to amplify it into an entire gamut of plot, fictional figures, and an opulent imagery. A literary text spins a web of events through the text in such a fashion that the reader is persuasively called on to trace and reconfigure the alignments of causal links permeating the text diversely. It is this configuration of causal link underpinning the description of events which aligns the historian and the fiction-writer, and which also underlines the vitality of narrative as a model which both the historian and the fiction-writer seek to work out in their works in relatively different ways.

Narrative's Double Lineaments: Story and History

The notion of narrative carries within itself two-pronged semantic value. Narrative stands for story as much as for history, and as such comfortably contains an allusion both to historical narration and fiction-writing. Several European languages bear testimony to the ambivalence in the notion of narrative. In French, Italian, German, Norwegian, the words for 'history' and 'story' are interchangeable. History resorts to narrative to re-create the past, whereas fiction focuses on redrawing the emotions and suspense in the plot through the fictional characters aiming to sustain the audience's attention (Chamberlain 142). It is interesting to note that classical Greece abounded equally in fictions and in historical accounts, thus endorsing the simultaneous flourishing of narrative in the domain of literature and history. Homer prevailed over the literary scene, and Greek historians like Herodotus and Thucydides dominated the horizon of history.

The Narrative Turn and Cultural Contexts

Out of the innate inclination of the human being to express his emotions and to document in words the happenings around him, fiction and history have accompanied man since his existence with a language. Story and history being as old as man, recent decades have witnessed a renewed rekindling of interest in story, history, and in narrative. The pervasive influence and assertion of narrative in the areas of social and behavioral sciences as well as in humanities led Ken Plummer to announce the inauguration of a "narrative turn". In the context of historical studies, Lawrence Stone called attention to the curious convergence between 'history' and 'story' in some of the representative European languages in his seminal 1979 essay "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on an Old New History". Almost simultaneously, a notable shift toward narrative also occurred in the domain of humanities and ethnography, when Clifford Geertz called for re-assessing the symbolic universe surrounding human location in cultures. Clifford Geertz insisted on an engagement with the imaginative universe of culture, which seeks to decipher the acts and activities of human agents in terms of signs (Chamberlain 142-143). In this interpretative perspective, culture was "not a power, something to which social events, behaviours, institutions or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly-that is thickly-described" (Chamberlain 143). A swelling of intellectual interest into the world of signs thickly spilled over into literature and humanities, and through culture studies the engagement with narrative occupied the literary critics.

‘Narrative Turn’ and Coinciding Debate of Postmodernism

As “narrative turn” arrived in 1970s, the domains of humanities and social sciences resonated with the debates on postmodernism. Postmodern debate provoked several perceptible shifts of emphasis, including a shift from time to space. Webspaces represented one of those most conspicuous markers of postmodernist preoccupation with space (Heise 1). Speculating about space can’t preclude reflections on time as its complementary element, and hence in postmodern era the idea of temporality imagined in its multilayered fabrication thrived alongside hyperreal conceptions of space. The pre-eminence that the temporality obtained in the postmodern debate and the value attributable to time in the cultural backdrop of postmodernism have been amply emphasized. Postmodern conceptions of time and temporality imbue the narrative texts composed during this period and a departure from the modernist narrative construction is notably manifest in them. Alongside, it has also been stressed that with regard to the narrative strategies, postmodernist novels inaugurate a disjunction from the modernist paradigms of the turn of the twentieth century (Heise 1-2). The coinage of the term “narrative turn” and almost simultaneous emergence of postmodernism apparently alludes to a distinct juncture, indicative of some innovative and unconventional departures in narrative texts and narrative models.

Postmodernism and Inadequacy of Structuralism: Circular, Multi-layered Temporality

Brian Richardson suggests that although the theoretical models of Genette are adequate to deal with most of the nonfictional narratives and, largely, with the works of the realist and modernist fictions, they fall short of accounting for the distinct traits that distinguish the postmodern narratives from the majority of texts prior to the emergence of postmodern narratives. Postmodernist narratives contain certain kind of temporal irony within the narrative framework. (Richardson 47). Postmodern narrative can be conceived of as an endeavor to outstrip the categories of structuralist narrative theory, which Genette was an iconic representative of. All six kinds of temporal reconstructions identified in postmodern narratives diverge from the conventional narrative patterns.

Deviating from the long-held norm, postmodern narratives tended to represent temporality in its circular dimension. Not conforming to the linear chronology of everyday human existence, fictions continuously returned to their beginnings without reaching an end. “*Finnegans Wake*”, Queneau’s “*Le Chiendent*” (1933), Nabokov’s “*The Gift*” (1937-38) were some late modernist novels betraying this writing style. Some other fictional works of this category include Julio Cortazar’s “*Hopscotch*” (1963/7), Gabriel Josipovici’s “*Möbius the Stripper*” (1974), John Barth’s minimalist Möbius-strip narrative “*Frame-Tale*” (from *Lost in the Funhouse*) (1987) (Richardson 48). Such narratives were starkly incommensurate with the idea of a linear progress in time which dominated the philosophical and literary imagination of the West since the Enlightenment. Recording of time by chronometer during Enlightenment was a step towards linear visualization of time, when “time’s arrow was conceived to be linear both forwards and backwards” (Harvey 793). Postmodern text’s nonconformity with the temporal linearity is betokened also in the repetitional pattern of the individual occurrences taking on diverse textual overtones.

While Genette’s idea of frequency and story harps on the interlinkage of events in a retrievable and noncontradictory sequence, many postmodern narratives contravene this conception. As postmodern texts consist of no single, unambiguous story, they not only resist the notion of story (*histoire*), but also demonstrate intricate temporal conundrum. In postmodern texts, the story becomes discernible by incorporating within one textual frame several layers of irreconcilable strands of fictional description. Thus, postmodern narratives unfold a plenitude of viewpoints to traverse and unravel the hidden textual meanings. Seeking to explicate such

immensely dense temporal possibilities of such narrative texts, Brian Richardson quotes from Ursula Heise: “Postmodernist novels thereby project into the narrative present and past an experience of time which normally is only available for the future: time dividing and subdividing, bifurcating and branching off continuously into multiple possibilities and alternatives” (Richardson 49).

Multilinear Postmodern Narratives Dissenting from Mimetic Structure

Postmodern narratives offer the spectacle of handling temporality from doubly linear perspective too, in which the narratives move forth and back in time precluding the plausibility of straightforwardly distinguishing the two. The text propels the reader into future without letting him hold on there, and immediately pushes him back. Time swings in opposed directions simultaneously and the text compels to decipher the textual content by way of meandering through varied temporal substrata. Ilse Aichinger’s ‘*Spiegelgeschichte*’ (1952) illustrates such configuration of temporality. Brian Richardson cites following passage from ‘*Spiegelgeschichte*’ to underscore such subtle narrative intricacy: “Drei Tage später wagt er nicht mehr, den Arm um deine Schultern zu legen. Wieder drei Tage später fragt er dich, wie du heisst, und du fragst ihn. Nun wisst ihr voneinander nicht einmal mehr die Namen... Ein Tag wird kommen, da siehst du ihn zum erstenmal. Und er sieht dich. Zum erstenmal, das heisst: Nie wieder” [“Three days later he no longer dares to put his arm round your shoulder. And three days after that he asks you what your name is, and you ask him his. And now neither of you knows the other’s name... A day will come when you will see him for the first time. And he you. For the first time means: never again”] (49) Brian Richardson analyzes the antinomic structure of the text by identifying it as following a narrative pattern different from the mimetic text. Mimetic texts narrate the story in the past tense with a retrospective angle enjoining the audience to receive the story prospectively. In the antinomic texts, in which both narrator and reader move prospectively, layers of time are blatantly diffused in the interlacing of the temporal dimensions of portrayal between present and future (Richardson 49). In transgressing the mimetic structure, the postmodern narrative texts thus decidedly deviate from the conventional narrative paradigms.

Differential Chronological Interlacing in Postmodern Narratives

Postmodern texts evince a strategy to keep the narrative in a tapestry of chronological crisscrossing. In the narrative construction, one temporal layer is superimposed over another. In Woolf’s “*Orlando*”, the ageing of the eponymous character occurs quite differently in comparison to the surrounding people. Such a temporal overlapping within single life of a man appears in the depiction of a man who goes out after breakfast a man of thirty and returns home a man of fifty-five at the time of dinner (Richardson 50). Steadiness and certainty cease being the core yardsticks of fathoming human life. This kind of narrative strategy is invoked by Caryl Churchill in her play *Cloud Nine*, by Borges in “*The Secret Miracle*”, and by Rushdie in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, in which the protagonist’s ageing overtakes that of the people around him. Critics have identified this trait of postmodern narratives as betokening differential temporality. Postmodern narratives also distinguish themselves by their propensity to simultaneously depict multiple temporal zones spilling into one another. Pinget’s *Passacaille*, some later novels of Claude Simon, Juan Goytisolo’s *Landscape After the Battle* are some narratives of this kind. Milan Kundera’s “*Slowness*” also betokens this particular narrative style. In “*Slowness*”, the protagonist is positioned face to face with the hero located at the temporal lag of two centuries, and subsequently both encounter the narrator himself (Richardson 51). Such texts substantiate time being literarily imagined and scripted not only across days and year, but across centuries. The compelling force behind such narratives works seeks a converge of temporal layers across broader spans instead of neat temporal demarcation.

Shakespeare's 'Double Time' and Time as Sovereign Arbiter over Humans

During the assessment of the specificities of the postmodern temporality in narrative texts, a return to Shakespeare acquires topical relevance. In particular, the notion of dual or multiple time in Shakespeare has been underscored in this context and it has been emphasized that "double time" characterizes many of the works by Shakespeare. Double time in Shakespeare denotes the typicality concerning narrative in as much as different plot lines begin and end at the same moment, yet they implicate different numbers of days to unfold. For example, in "A Midsummer Night's Dream", four days and three nights pass for the duke and his entourage in the city, while, at the same time, -only two days and a single night pass for the enchanted lovers in the enchanted forest. In Shakespeare's works, time thus appears to be thwarting the norms and conventions that may otherwise be expedient to human beings. Appearing as a character in *The Winter's Tale*, time prides itself on its prowess to unsettle human judgments about itself beyond all calculations (Richardson 51). In as much as the delivery of a synchronous and proportionate account of time represents the aim of the narrative, this disparity between the law of time and human ability to comprehend the same places the narrative at a receiving end. An enigmatic departure from temporal synchrony thus exists in Shakespeare as an antecedent of postmodernism.

Modernism premising Postmodernism: Significance, 'gap', and twisted Temporality

Like the postmodern authors using the device of temporal overlapping to address the incoherence between significant and insignificant moments of life, some of the modernist writers also attempted to twist the significance of time for narrative in respect of its importance for the protagonists. Wallace Martin alludes to Henry Fielding observing in *Tom Jones* that extraordinary episode enjoins that it be narrated without constraints. But a long stretch of time devoid of any remarkable happening indicates merely an interlude. Commensurate with the significance inhering the events, some chapters, according to Fielding would contain only a day, and others, years. Wallace Martin designates the narrative technique intrinsic to such texts as techniques of omitting time (124).

To maintain the distinction between significant and non-significant events in the narrative, Thomas Mann had also resorted to what he called "*Aussparung*" ("Gap"). He employed this "*Aussparung*" ("Gap") in his Joseph-novel. When Joseph advises the king to look about for a wise and knowledgeable and fore thoughted man, Pharaoh straightforwardly answers that concerning knowledge and wisdom, Joseph is incomparable all over Egypt. The king's unrestrained showering of praises on him is also largely pervaded with abridgements (Müller 73). Such narratives weave together and omit the events alike. Temporal moments are accorded narrative merit or left aside in terms of the enormity of significance they carry for the author. Fictional narratives differ from the mundane life in being suffused with the sublime meanings. Sublimity, however, scatters selectively through life. Hence, narratives forgo several events in favor of tiny moments permeated with passion, pathos, and sublime. Arguably, "Even James Joyce and his school are not able to completely represent this saturation of every tiny element of time. Gaps cannot be avoided, even when complete accuracy is intended indiscriminately" (Müller 75).

Narratives make the absent into present by means of visualizing through language. Narrative texts supposedly possess a language body, by virtue of which what is narrated is entirely different from those which is inherent in the narrated event. This explains why Wallenstein's life, Jean Valjean's life are quite distinct from their lives as rendered by Alfred Döblin or Victor Hugo. This distinction helps however even a more vivid and lively presentation of the characters (Müller 69-70). By eschewing a minute re-creation of the life, and instead

concentrating on significant dimensions of temporality in the lives of the characters, the narratives provide us certain ideal figure worth imbibing.

Days/Seasons or Rewards/Penalties as opposite faces of time in Greek antiquity

One of the earliest instances of diversity as the hallmark of time related to the observation of temporal opposites in nature. Ancient Greek author, Anaximander had highlighted the transition of opposites into each other as the key of existence and pointed to change in nature from summer to winter, day to night. He termed such transitions as a pattern of judicial reciprocity (Allen 64). Much of the ancient Greek writings corroborate human negotiations with time as a figure of justice dispensing reward and retribution. Enjoying sovereignty over human fate, time manifested its multiple faces and literary works recorded them. Ancient Greeks viewed life and its dissolution as natural counterparts and believed in an intricate perpetuation of the authority of time as a judging power dispensing penalties over the acts that ran counter to justice.

Humans Outgrowing Their Age: Temporal Incongruity in Classical Greek literature

Postmodern narratives depict men as ageing faster than those surrounding them. Greek narratives of antiquity too exhibit instances of an infant outgrowing ages and his hair turning grey. Hesiod conceived his own age as the age of iron in which not happiness and prosperity, but pain and toil ruled the day. The incessant labor depletes the children, and forsaking their tenderness they merge into the tired folk. Hesiod wrote that the circle of day and night bore witness to the gruesome adversities of men, and Zeus will wipe these men out, who have grey hair on their temples when they enter this world. Such a depiction of time as a rigorous sovereign presents a panorama of time being out of sync with human existence on this earth (Allen 65).

Reverse flow of time in *Medea*

Remarkably, ancient Greek writers experienced the reverse flow of time and delineated it in their works. The allusions to such temporal antinomy are to be found in the Athenian playwright Euripides (c. 484-406 B.C.). In *Medea*, the chorus considers Jason's violation of his oath to his wife as an undermining of a moral order sustained by promise-keeping. The lament on such undermining results in holy rivers flowing backwards toward their sources and the order of things undergoing a reversal (Allen 65). Such instances resist the claim that the Western narrative since inception flourished on a linear conception of time. Dealing with the time in its reverse flow, ancient Greek authors share the same quandary as the postmodern writers.

Selective Portrayal of the significant in the *Iliad*: Analogy to Modernism

Leaving the insignificant events out and dwelling at length on the significant ones characterizes modernist writings in as much as the ancient Greek literary works. Aristotle had noted that a crucial feature binding *Iliad* and *Odyssey* was that "each converts a very small amount of real time within a story of extended historical sweep into a very lengthy chunk of narrative and poetic time" (Allen 67). Experts of classical literature agree on treating *Iliad* as a book about the Trojan war. Disparity appears in the narrative in the amount of time apportioned to the events in accordance with their dissimilar significance. Even as the poem requires around twenty-five hours of performance, it gives an account of merely fifty-three days of the decade-long war. The *Iliad* devotes exceedingly longer description to the days of despair for Achilles. When Achilles holds back from fighting, it constitutes a crucial moment of the narrative and the depiction of the mood of resignation of Achilles runs into pages. The portrayal of a single day of Hector's victory on the battlefield and the ensuing sense of loss of Achilles expands into

seven and half books (Allen 67-68). The dejection of Achilles makes time appear stand still, and the entire narrative engages in capturing this extremely slowed down time in words.

Elasticity of Time: Distinctive Greek Poetic Trait

Time had no stable relationship with the narrative among the ancient Greeks. The progress of time defied any conventional assumptions of regularity. As emotions determined the intensity of temporal moments, the poetic narrative also tended to bend its lengths corresponding to those emotional states. Conforming to the intensity of emotional states, the experience of time remained intense or shallow. Such intensity or shallowness was mirrored in the writings of the Greek authors. As Danielle S. Allen observes: “The central poetic effect of the *Iliad* is to render time’s elasticity. It speeds up and slows down, in our experience of it. And in the *Iliad*, the causes of all these changes are one man’s emotions: “Sing, muse, of the wrath of Achilles.”” (69). Time, for the Greek authors, was evidently elastic and this was reflected as either the ‘slowing down’ or ‘speeding up’ of the temporal experience.

Conclusion

A comprehensive account of the narrative praxis from Greek classical antiquity to the postmodern era testifies to the belief that time is entailed in human experience as a crucial element which man has attempted to contend with diversely. Ancient Greeks conceptualized time in relation to nature and myth. Nature presented a play of transitions of contradictions to them in diurnal-seasonal variations, and simultaneously, time stood as the cosmic arbiter dispensing rewards and penalties. In Shakespeare also, time appears as the sovereign arbiter over humans. From classical antiquity to modernism, writers and poets stretched or twist narratives according to chosen significance, and the instances in this regard can be found in the *Iliad*, in Henry Fielding, and in Thomas Mann. If the idea of multi-linear time is specific to postmodern narratives, the reverse flow of time has been conceived in Greek classical writings too. A child with grey hair on temple in Hesiod’s writings corroborates an analogy with the postmodern writings indicating differential temporality. Postmodern narratives invoke multi-layered temporality and comparably ancient Greek narratives betray the chances of time being speculated in terms of its elasticity. Admittedly, man of Greek antiquity deciphered the qualities of time from nature and myth, whereas human speculations over time in postmodern era took shape amidst a technological-intellectual climate informed by web advancements. Notwithstanding a conceivable thread of analogy correlating classical Greek literature to modernism and postmodernism, such a huge gap cannot be lost sight of. What needs to be underlined that during the differing frames of reference for the perception of time, the notion of temporality exhibits the aspects of heterogeneity from the Greek antiquity to postmodernism in various forms. This does make room for a historical inquiry of time as also for conceding that time has a metaphysical dimension to it for man, so that some of its characteristic features have endured through the ages.

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