

Introduction: Temporalizing the Present

TIMOTHY BEWES

Contemporary fiction issues particular challenges for literary critics; no doubt it has always done so. Life, remarked Søren Kierkegaard, can only be “understood backwards,” but “it must be lived forwards”—an oft-cited passage. What he goes on to say, in a less well-known elaboration, is that “temporal life” can “never properly be understood precisely because I can at no instant find complete rest in which to adopt the position: backwards” (161). What Kierkegaard means by “temporality” is close to Henri Bergson’s notion of *durée*. “The essence of time is that it goes by,” Bergson reminds us; thus the present “necessarily occupies a duration” (137). What more “temporal” form of literature exists than the contemporary novel? Contemporary fiction is a shifting and evolving thing; the exercise of making it the object of scholarly investigation cannot help but diminish its temporal quality, remove it from our understanding, turn it into a phenomenon that exists only in the past tense. There is, to put it more strongly, an ideology of “contemporaneity” that literary studies risks reproducing every time it turns its gaze on the present and with which the contemporary novel, indeed temporal life itself, is always at odds.

In this light, the title of this special issue of *Novel* (a journal devoted to critical scholarship on fiction), “The Contemporary Novel,” seems almost outrageous, and the question it asks—framing an unstable object of inquiry with the definite article—is an impossible one. Yet contemporary fiction in this regard only dramatizes a situation that is common to all literary study. Since understanding can only be achieved by turning one’s head backward, any entity is frozen into stasis by the analytical gaze. Fredric Jameson’s recent examination of Hegel’s concept of understanding (*Verstand*) reveals the temporal implications of the question of scholarly attention.¹ *Verstand*, in Jameson’s remarkable reading, is dependent on the mobilization of categories that, in their very appearance, erase or obscure the “fissure in being itself” that is revealed in a dialectical approach (22). Jameson’s insistence on the “spatialization” of thought—on producing out of any conceptual category an awareness of “what precedes and what follows it” (80) in order for meaning to inhere within it—has much in common with Bergson’s insights into the spatiality of duration. For Bergson, the psychical state that we call the present “must be both a perception of the immediate past and a determination of the immediate future” (137). *Verstand*, by contrast, “is reified, reifying thinking; its domain is that real world of being, of physical objects” (Jameson 81–82). One of its governing impulses is “a repression of contradiction . . . along with a displacement of the contradiction onto the positing of some single stable determination or quality” (88). Every phenomenon is thus stripped of its durational quality (in the specifically Bergsonian sense of *duration*) by the operation of *Verstand*. Such central categories to literary

¹ Jameson’s reading appears in the two newer essays, titled “The Three Names of the Dialectic” (3–70) and “Hegel and Reification” (75–101), that open *Valences*.

study as author, critic, reader, thematic, content, form, plot, style, ideology, when they are made the object of *Verstand*, are situated temporally; but that operation abrogates their own “temporality” (which is also to say their dialectical quality).

The conceptual structures that organized the interpretation of art and literature during the twentieth century—formalism versus commitment, realism versus expressionism, modernism versus postmodernism—all participate in this temporalizing (or rather, de-temporalizing) ideology. Each presupposes a differentiation between subject and object and between the world and the work. Each, that is to say, remains caught in the problematic of representation. Theoretical inquiry within literary studies over the last half century, therefore, has broadly been understood as a project to critique and dismantle the assumptions behind the concepts of reference and representation, if not the concepts themselves. And, as is apparent from Jameson’s discussion, representation is not only a spatial problematic, assuming a gap between object and image that remains to be bridged (or not), but a temporal one. As Theodore Martin observes in the essay that opens this issue of *Novel*, the ability to describe the present implies that it is already past.

From the evidence of the essays in this volume, however, it seems that new modes of critical engagement are emerging for which those reifying and temporalizing conceptual structures (formalism/commitment, realism/expressionism, modernism/postmodernism, etc.) are increasingly irrelevant; indeed, the usefulness of those structures even for understanding the art and literature of the twentieth century has become questionable. We are seeing a disenchantment among literary critics with reading practices focused on the ideological work of the text; with subject-oriented approaches (such as affect and trauma theory); and with formalist periodizing categories such as modernism and postmodernism. In current discussions, the question is more likely to involve the ontology of the work, or the “event” of it. If there is “loss” or “rupture” in the work of contemporary writers, artists, and thinkers, it is primarily ontological; it defines the very world that opens itself up for presentation and can no longer be reduced to a mere consequence of the act of representation.

One way in which this “ontological” interest is manifested is through a new critical commitment to the singularity of literature, a form whose truths and insights seem ever less transferable to, or comprehensible within, standard historical, scientific, or political vocabularies. Another—in the works of artists and writers of literature themselves—is the ekphrastic mode, in which a work undertakes an extended analysis of another artistic work, either another novel or an artistic project or body of work. (We see this in recent works such as Dennis Cooper’s *Guide*, Don DeLillo’s *The Body Artist*, Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, and W. G. Sebald’s *After Nature*.) Yet another is the self-conscious avoidance of the critical register in favor of a “modest,” “generous,” or “sympathetic” interpretive voice. Still another is to attempt to dismantle the barriers between literary and nonliterary discourses not by jettisoning the conventions of literary analysis but by sharpening our attention to the literariness of those “nonliterary” forms. And, as the references in many of the pieces in this issue attest, and despite certain stances and positions taken in

recent criticism,² the emergence of these new modes is just as likely to be inspired by the trajectory of Fredric Jameson's work as to be in reaction against it.

This special edition of *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* presents a number of recent submissions to and commissions for the journal that foreground these issues. In "The Long Wait: Timely Secrets of the Contemporary Detective Novel," Theodore Martin addresses many of these questions directly in his attempt at reframing the genre of the detective novel as a form with its own internal temporality, comprising "an interplay of expectation, deferral, and disappointment." Detective fiction no longer needs to be understood, as critics including Franco Moretti have insisted, as a "retrospective" and therefore reactionary genre focused on the tidy resolution of modern anxieties nor as a "means to an end." Martin's reading of detective fiction impacts not just the recent novels he pays attention to—by Michael Chabon and Vikram Chandra—but the entire history of the genre, which, in his analysis, is primarily a "waiting game," the central lesson of which concerns "what it means to be subject to time." In the work of Chabon and Chandra the mystery plot, and its solution, exist alongside the real drama: the sense of irreducible disappointment that always accompanies the solution. In Martin's reading, the narrative economy of detective fiction enables the genre to render our preoccupations in a particularly transparent form, making visible the simultaneity of "understanding"—*Verstand*—with "understanding's bottomless regret."

Andrew Gaedtke's essay, "Cognitive Investigations: The Problems of Qualia and Style in the Contemporary Neuronovel," approaches one of the perennial questions of literary criticism: the competing claims of first- and third-person narration to represent individual consciousness. For Gaedtke, the issue takes on particular resonance with respect to the dialogue between neuroscientific discourses and the contemporary novel. Gaedtke examines the current phase of the "two cultures" debate (between literary-critical discourse on one hand and neuroscience on the other) through the problem of "qualia"—the representation of first-person sensory experience—in Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* and David Lodge's *Thinks . . .* Like the essay by Thom Dancer that immediately follows it, Gaedtke's essay argues that McEwan's narratives are more complex than has been noticed by most literary critics and furthermore that it is the literary dimensions of his work (such as the unreliability or unverifiability of fictional narration) that have been neglected, not the scientific ones. For Gaedtke, the centrality of narrative to the most significant recent writing on neuroscience shows us the clearest means of closing the two-cultures divide, as the juxtaposition of passages from Antonio Damasio and Samuel Beckett at the end of his essay fascinatingly illustrates.

Thom Dancer's "Toward a Modest Criticism: Ian McEwan's *Saturday*" posits the distinction between epistemological "modesty" and "immodesty" as a way of dramatizing the radical difference between the views of the protagonists in Ian McEwan's fiction and the viewpoints put forward in the works themselves. Dancer's analysis flies in the face of many readers of McEwan's fiction who have criticized his works on the grounds that the views of his objectionable protagonists

² See, most notably, Best and Marcus.

are indistinguishable from McEwan's own. Dancer argues that there is nothing in McEwan's work that suggests we should take the views of his protagonists to be those of the author. This is not to say that McEwan, one of the most invasive voices in contemporary literature, is a "polyphonic" writer. Dancer draws on neuropsychological approaches to demonstrate that McEwan's relation to his characters is far removed from the thought processes provided by the characters themselves, and that the distance is most clearly marked in McEwan's descriptions of how they actually think. Even more provocatively, Dancer argues that the critique of epistemological "immodesty" that is undertaken by the formal elements of McEwan's writing allies him not with Arnoldian secularism but with contemporary "post-secular" thinkers like William Connolly.

Clemens Spahr's essay, "Prolonged Suspension: Don DeLillo, Ian McEwan, and the Literary Imagination after 9/11," differs from the two preceding pieces chiefly in taking a critical view of the work of McEwan, as well as of Don DeLillo, the other subject of this article. Spahr criticizes the attempts in McEwan's *Saturday* and DeLillo's *Falling Man* to reimagine the world—or rather their failure to attempt such a reimagining—in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001. Like Dancer and Gaedtke, Spahr acknowledges the complexity and the self-reflexivity with which these works thematize "literature and art," but for Spahr their perspective remains locked in the "personal"; all ideological conflict is channeled into "middle-class anxiety." Thus what we might call the ekphrastic mode in DeLillo's and McEwan's late works is a morbid one, limited to expressing "the guilty conscience of the middle class rather than the desire for change."

Naomi Mandel's essay, "Fact, Fiction, Fidelity in the Novels of Jonathan Safran Foer," frontally articulates a case that, with varying degrees of specificity, is common to several other pieces in this issue: that a consideration of the status of the work as fiction must be central to any discussion of its "ethical" significance. Mandel addresses the question of the responsibility of fiction when it deals with historical events that, in their violence and horror, are widely understood to be "unspeakable" or "incomprehensible." Her discussion turns on the question of "fidelity": in particular, on the competing models of fidelity in the work of Holocaust scholars such as Dominick LaCapra and Berel Lang, on one hand, and in that of Alain Badiou on the other. For Mandel, categories such as unspeakability, fiction, fact, and fidelity are reframed in Badiou's work in such a way that the possibility of an engagement with the past remains while the constraining sense of history as "the sole arbiter of what is true" is dispensed with.

Aarthi Vadde's essay, "National Myth, Transnational Memory: Ondaatje's Archival Method," approaches some of the same questions through Michael Ondaatje's engagement with the archive, a counterpoint to the historical novel that, following Michel Foucault's late essay "The Lives of Infamous Men," preserves the "affective intensity" of historical narratives in the face of the artificialities of conventional historical "understanding." The material presence of the archive in Ondaatje is a means by which he consistently "disrupts the narrative's temporal unities"—unities that remain intact in the historical novel as traditionally conceived. The implications of Ondaatje's archival method are thus spatial (perhaps we should say geographical) as much as temporal; indeed, what Vadde describes as the "discrep-

ant geographies of loss” that proliferate in Ondaatje’s fiction are the mechanism by which the collective imaginary of the works is opened toward what she calls “a larger and less uniform geography.”

Nathan K. Hensley’s essay, “Allegories of the Contemporary,” approaches the issue of temporality through the concept of “discontinuous historicism,” which enables him to bring together works as different as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, and Jonathan Franzen’s 2001 novel *The Corrections*. What Stevenson’s, Agamben’s and Franzen’s works have in common, he argues, is an enterprise of “mediation” with respect to the periods of imperial transition in which they are composed. In each case, the mediation attempts to do justice precisely to the transitory (durational) quality of the moment. In place of standard historiographical narratives, Hensley adopts the motif of the “life cycle” from Moretti’s work in *Graphs, Maps, Trees* and from Giovanni Arrighi’s in *The Long Twentieth Century*. Hensley’s method—bringing into conversation texts that we have had little occasion to treat alongside each other before—amounts to a new conceptualization of literary-historical time in which the timeless interpretation is forsaken for allegories of “the specific dynamics of force and order that attend moments of geopolitical transition.” The similarity of this allegorical mode across Hensley’s three texts arguably conceals as much as it illuminates; Hensley insists that his method does not result in a more thorough “disclosing” of the text—and yet, for Hensley, the move is a necessary step in getting beyond the ideological readings to which all criticism predicated on the metaphor of “representation” is limited.

Finally, Erdağ Göknaç’s “Secular Blasphemies: Orhan Pamuk and the Turkish Novel” provides us with something that literary scholarship has not yet given us: the Turkish Pamuk. Göknaç’s essay situates Pamuk firmly in the Turkish cultural and literary context and argues for the equal importance in Pamuk’s work of two elements constitutive to the Turkish novel: *din* (religion) and *devlet* (secularism). For Göknaç, the public utterances of this writer, whose reputation in the West is tied so closely to his political declarations, are a distraction from his real political significance. The combination of *din* and *devlet* is emblematic of a larger refusal of conceptual categories in Pamuk’s work. In Pamuk’s “imaginary” Turkishness, then, authenticity, oppositions of self and other, or categories such as modernity, nationalism, or orientalism no longer have autonomy or unity. As Jameson might put it, Pamuk’s Turkishness registers “the fissure in being”—no less so than Hensley’s concept of “discontinuous historicism,” Ondaatje’s “archival method,” Badiou’s fidelity to fidelity, McEwan’s modesty, or the temporality of disappointment that inheres in the detective fiction of Chabon and Chandra.

As will be obvious from this summary, the contributors to this issue of *Novel* are not necessarily in agreement with each other on the questions that are pre-occupying scholars in the field of contemporary fiction: the material (spatial and temporal) qualities of the work, the politics of literary description, the methodological principles underlying the relation between critic and work. Nevertheless, they share a commitment to rethinking the categories of author, critic, and reader as well as terms such as *realism*, *modernism*, *intention*, *expression*, *the archive*, *experimentation*, and *contemporaneity* itself—that is, to rethinking their temporality. These

essays demand attention not only for the critical readings they undertake but for the various models and theories they put forward of how to engage the contemporary novel. Above all, this issue of *Novel* establishes the need for new conceptions of and approaches to contemporaneity if we are to make sense of the temporalities of the current moment.

Works Cited

- Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*. Trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer. New York: Zone, 1988.
- Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus. "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations* 108 (2009): 1–21.
- Cooper, Dennis. *Guide*. New York: Grove, 1998.
- DeLillo, Don. *The Body Artist*. New York: Scribner, 2001.
- . *Falling Man*. New York: Scribner, 2007.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Valences of the Dialectic*. London: Verso, 2011.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *Papers and Journals: A Selection*. Trans. Alastair Hannay. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996.
- McEwan, Ian. *Atonement*. London: Cape, 2001.
- Sebald, W. G. *After Nature*. Trans. Michael Hamburger. New York: Modern Library, 2003.