

How Soon is Now?

In a famous passage from the eleventh book of the *Confessions*, Augustine gives voice to what may be one of the central conundrums when thinking about time: “If no one asks me, I know what it is; if I wish to explain it to him who asks, I do not know.” The inexplicability of time, or at least the difficulty of explaining the perception of time, is perhaps one of the constants in literature. All literary production, implicitly or explicitly, can be said to be driven by the attempt to come to terms with time – whether by diverting the reader’s time, by suspending it in the immersive act of reading, by explaining and negotiating all kinds of change, whether brought about by growing up, by ageing, by facing life’s challenges, by the desire for change, the demands of explaining the past or shaping the future, and ultimately, by the unavoidable fate of death. In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur argues that human beings’ conceptualisation of time essentially underlies a process of narrativisation: “time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode” (1984: 52). Narrated time, according to Ricoeur, seeks to close the gap between phenomenological time and cosmological time, that is, narrated time helps to understand the dichotomy between individually felt and experienced time as a human being and time as the abstract concept working in the universe.

As a medievalist and trained classicist, that is, as someone who reads and interprets the literatures of Antiquity and the Middle Ages, I am used to engaging with time and temporality on various interlaced levels. A crucial aspect concerns the continuum of secular and sacred time, which is particularly prominent in medieval saints’ lives. The stories of holy men and women who became witnesses for their faith, often through violent deaths, are marked both by a fundamental temporality and the suspension of time: saints are human beings and as such bound by the same temporal restraints as their contemporaries and readers, yet as members of the community of the saints, they partake in the eternal presence of the divine. In medieval practices of devotion, the saints are claimed back by the devotees and reinstated as time-bound beings that can affect people’s lives through their intermission. This paradox underlies the medieval concept of time: the timeless eternity of Heaven, to which every believer aspires, and the realities of everyday life (the time of the seasons, the market, the church year, and so forth). In the liturgical calendar, secular and sacred time meet: remembering a saint’s feast day commemorates an individual’s successful suspension of time, yet takes place within the mundane frame of everyday time.

Beyond the level of subject matter and the impulse to narrativise time, the act of narration itself is characterised by time and temporality: the sequential nature of narrative suggests chronology, but of course authors play both with the limitations and possibilities of narrative sequence, as elements such as reverse chronology, flashbacks, asynchronies, or counterfactual scenarios amply demonstrate. One of my

interests concerns a very specific narrative element and its use in the negotiation and construction of time: the list. Enumerations or lists are a marked feature of narrative texts since Antiquity, and they usually bring the narrative to a halt in their listing. The plot is discontinued and on hold for the time being. How does this affect the reading process, and how does temporality thus function as what Foucault termed a 'heterochrony' – a slice of time that suspends our normal notions of temporality?

Yet, even though 'time' has featured in my academic work throughout, I am also acutely aware of the many aspects of time that were not covered by my own research as well as by the discipline I am working in. In my academic career so far, I have greatly profited from interdisciplinary exchange, yet this exchange was usually conducted jointly with other disciplines from the humanities. As a junior fellow at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS) I had for the first time the opportunity to seriously engage with academics working in the natural sciences – an exchange that allowed me to reconceptualise my view of the world, in such exciting and diverse areas as medical research on ageing, the biological uses of moss, and the functions of protein in cells, but also, more generally, about how biologists, physicists, mathematicians, and chemists think, approach their problems, and construe their solutions. If anything, interdisciplinary exchange can not only teach us anew, but improve the way we think.

My title *How Soon is Now?* is borrowed from Carolyn Dinshaw's 2012 study on asynchrony in medieval texts, and I would like to pass on the question to the fifteen scholars of whom I hope to be a part: when is 'now' for us, and how can it be described and analysed from the different fields from which we come? For me as a medievalist, 'now' is usually a past 'now'. Yet, when I open a 13th century manuscript in the British Library, my 'now' of reading it converges with the content on the folios, creating a unique presentness of its own. Such a unique presence, I would argue, is also on offer in the UBIAS Intercontinental Academia, which to me can accomplish something truly extraordinary: bringing together not only the temporalities of the sciences and those of the humanities, but also the temporalities of several nations, several continents, and several academic traditions, the Academia promises to transcend the various temporal realities in the shared presence of the exchange on 'time'.

What I am interested in and what I hope to gain:

- Interdisciplinary exchange beyond the humanities – natural sciences divide
- Meeting and working with open-minded scholars who share my enthusiasm for collaborative work and the theme 'time'
- Approaching 'time' from various angles in order to broaden our understanding of the concept
- Engaging with new and different theories and analytical tools

- Making a considerable contribution to the theoretical debate on time by developing joint methods and bringing together the strengths of the different disciplines and fields, across national boundaries

What I can offer:

- A thorough philological training in reading and interpreting (literary) texts
- A broad and profound training in literary theory, especially narrative theory and, as part of that, structuralism
- My previous interdisciplinary experience
- My interest in and work on narrative theory and the implications of narration and time
- A medievalist and classicist's perspective on literary history, the historicising of narrative forms and functions as well as of notions of time and temporality

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