

Time, Tense, and Narrative Style: Linguistic Insights from Contemporary Narrative Discourse

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In the *New York Times Magazine* of August 9, 1998, inside an article on Raymond Carver, there is a facsimile of a manuscript page from Carver's early story "Fat." In it, what appears below to be computer tracking of changes is actually Gordon Lish's editing hand, deleting words and stretches of text, replacing pronouns with nouns, but most consistently, shifting from the past to the present tense.

...I hurry away to the kitchen and turn in the order to Rudy, who take it with a face. ...As I coame out of the kitchen, Margo, I've told you about Margo, who chases after Rudy. Rudy, she says to me, Who's your fat friend? (Max, p.38)

Stripping the text, as has often been remarked, to its bare bones, the legendary editor thus creates a new style simply by switching the past tense, the preferred tense of traditional fiction, initially chosen by the author, to the present tense. Gordon Lish gives Carver's early stories a minimalist style, different from Carver's later collections of stories. The two styles have been discussed by critics from a psychological angle correlated with biographical information, but whatever the explanation, the fact remains that the early minimalist style has been created to a large extent by a skillful editor, and the major change is the verb tense. Why did Lish feel the tense switch would make for a more effective narrative? What is there about the verb and verb tense that an apparently simple tense switch can define a narrative style? And above all, what can English fiction writers do with just two verb tenses at their disposal?

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An examination of verb tense use in recent fictional narratives in English will address these questions of time and tense in fiction and in the process, reveal creative ways of switching back and forth between the two English verb tenses--issues of equal interest to the literary analyst and the linguist.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines verbs, as opposed to nouns, as "words with time meaning/significance." German grammarians ever since the 17th century have been using the word *Zeitwort*, 'time word,' to refer to any word in language that has reference to points in time. The verb, as the very heart of a sentence, pushing blood as it were to all the other words, appears to be the most prominent among time words as it alone carries grammatical tense. In other words, the verb is related to time in its grammatical realization. English is poor in this respect as it has only two grammatically marked tenses: past ('broke') and non-past ('break').

Time, on the other hand, has a much wider coverage, from the past to the future, with sundry nuances in between. We find it difficult to speak about time without referring to expression of time in language. Philosophers, such as Heidegger, consider talk about time without reference to expressions of time a philosophical desideratum. On the other hand, Weinrich (1964) urges philosophers to take heed of linguistic facts and linguists' accounts of time as revealed in verbal expressions of time. Theologians also delve into the mysteries of time. Greek has two words for 'time': *chronos*, the quantitative measure of time, and *kairos*, the qualitative one; the latter is of particular Christian theological interest, as the appropriate time, "the time for the Lord to act," for instance, at the beginning of the liturgy in both Eastern Orthodox and Byzantine rite Catholic churches. But all of them, philosophers, theologians, and linguists share a basic conceptualization of time which coincides to most of us, at least in traditional Western thought, to a straight line, or "time arrow," signifying the flow of time from the past (to the left of the moment of speaking) into the future (to the right of the present moment) with a point, somewhere in the middle, but continuously moving, of the present time.

In fictional narrative, time, as a fundamental quantity, figures prominently in the structure of the created fictional worlds, sometimes taking even a qualitative, thematic, significance. In an imagined world that pretends to be real, characters relate to each other on different temporal and spatial planes.

The narrating voice, together with the writer and reader, shares these locations, but the writer and reader, working within the lexical and grammatical constraints of English, are at different locations in time and space, and, to complicate matters even more, these locations change over the receptive life of a work of fiction.

Sebastian Faulks, in his novel *Engleby*, is fully aware of these time complications as he addresses these “details of time” in a digressive direct address to his readers:

I like these details of time. 6.31 on Monday 19 November 1973 is the front edge of time. I live on the forward atoms of the wave of time. It's now 6:32. This is the present, yet it's turning to the past as I sit here. What was future when I started (6.31) is now already past. What is the present then? It's an illusion; it's not really if it can't be held. What therefore is there to fear in it? (I'm starting to sound like T.S.Eliot.)

Don't patronize me if you read this thirty years on, will you? Don't think of me as old-fashioned, wearing silly clothes or some nonsense like that... (2007, p. 83)

“Thirty years on” starts being measured from the writerly ‘now,’ which was at one point before 2007, the year of the book's publication. That is a different ‘now’ from that of readerly reception, starting from the moment the novel starts communicating with readers; in fact, different with each individual reader's moment of reception—we are getting deeper into the tangle of time. And yet, when writers sit down with a blank sheet of paper or screen in front of them, the only grammatical time decision they have to make is present or past tense—too apparently simple a choice not to have less than simple consequences.

Time in Language: Grammatical vs. Semantic Distinctions

It is with the naive time-line we have known since grammar school, with no specific beginning or end and no fixed points, that we will start an account of time in language. Let us add that although not all cultures have the same conceptualization of time, *all human languages have ways of locating in time* (Comrie, p.7).

The location in time may be made with various degrees of accuracy, as various languages have different lexical and grammatical ways of expressing location in time: **complex lexical phrases** (e.g., *a second after* I heard the noise); **simple lexical items** (e.g., *now, today*); and **grammatical categories** (e.g., tense).

English, like German, makes the lexical distinction between time/*Zeit* and tense/*Tempus*. The time distinctions are many, the array of lexical ways of locating events in time is large. The grammatical categories, however, are just a handful. Of all the lexical and grammatical ways of locating an event in time, the grammatical category of *tenseis* **the least sensitive**, and of all the languages, English is among the languages with the fewest tense distinctions—i.e., grammaticalized expressions of location in time—captured by the formula *Past/Non-Past*, which accounts for the totality of tenses captured by various grammars of English.

Under the influence of languages that mark grammatically more than just two tenses, many traditional English grammars include aspect and modality under the grammatical category of tense as if to make the array of grammatical choices wider. It is important, however, to make the distinction between *tense* on the one hand, and *aspect* and *modality* on the other. While tense locates an event with reference to the present moment as anterior or simultaneous, the progressive or continuous aspect refers to what can be called the action's "internal contour," showing, that is, whether the event takes place at a certain point in time, in the present or the past, or along a stretch on the time line, again in the present or the past (*Harvey drinks/drank* vs. *Harvey is/was drinking with his friends*). By the same token, the perfect (or perfective) aspect refers to the relevance of the event to a particular point in time, in the present or the past (*Harvey has drunk/had drunk everything in sight and cannot/could not drive himself home* vs. *Harvey drinks/drank everything in sight*). This distinction between verb tense and time-related but non-tense categories, such as aspect, shrinks considerably the English verb conjugation—the present perfect is a present tense; the pluperfect is a past tense; and in both cases the tense is carried by the auxiliary ('be' or 'have') rather than the verb that makes the predication.

Further, what is traditionally known as the future tense in English is an instance of modality rather than of grammaticalized tense (i.e., signaled by an inflection, a bound and obligatory morpheme). Unlike, say, Latin, English involves the addition of a separate word, a modal auxiliary verb (marking a non-tense category: prediction), and is not always obligatory, as in conditional or temporal clauses.

(*If you listen to me, you'll find out the truth or Harvey will be delighted when he listens to Eduardo Dudamel*). This is a claim that disturbs many traditional grammarians, for it practically reduces the number of grammaticalized tenses in English to two--**present and past**—far fewer than both in the grammars of languages that were traditionally deemed models of conceptual complexity (e.g. Latin), as well as of languages that were thought to fall short of that ideal (e.g., Apalai). It will have to suffice for the purpose of this account that it is crucial to make the distinction between *grammatical form* and *time reference semantics*, whereby tense is strictly a category realized by verb inflection (Quirk et al., 1985, p.76), with reference to moments in time.

Thus, present tense refers to events located simultaneously with the reference point or including the present moment, and the past tense to events that happen prior to the present moment. In other languages, e.g., some African or Amerindian ones, there are grammaticalized expressions for events happening after the present moment or at different distances from the present moment in the past or the future. Not in English.

Tense as a Deictic System

As we have seen, time, as well as its grammatical expression, tense, are defined with reference to a point, a particular speech situation: the ever moving present moment for time (*now*), the present location for space (*here*), and the speaker and hearer for persons (*I* and *you*). In tense it is assumed that the speaker and hearer share the same present moment although, with the advent of modern technology, not necessarily the same locations (there are languages that have separate grammatical categories for speaker and listener as separate spatial points of reference). In a telephone conversation, for instance, the speaker is *here* and the listener *there*, farther than in face-to-face interactions. These new technologies allow for the two persons to be at considerable distances from each other, but also at temporally different points from the present moment of the speaker. Thus, the assumption of shared time and space reference becomes questionable. We will examine later how the same temporal assumption holds in fictional discourse, where the writer and the reader are rarely if ever sharing the same spot in time and space although it is conventionally held that they share the same deictic center.

All systems that rely on reference points are called *deictic systems* (Fillmore, 1975). Tense is deictic, with the present moment of the speaker/hearer, assumed to be a single point in time, as its *deictic center*. The present tense relates the events to the deictic center, and the past to a time stretch prior to the deictic center.

The deictic center acts as an anchor, a weight that holds the speaker/writer in a moment of time and a place in space from which the narrating events are seen. The shift from the deictic center is not done randomly, or else the hearer/reader gets lost, and the text loses cohesion and often even coherence.

In oral informal narratives such shifts occur often, and most often randomly. Chafe points out that "conversational narratives slip into the historical present from time to time, but they never use that tense exclusively; the present always alternates with the past. *A consistent use of the historical present during an entire narrative would depart from conversational practice*" (1994, p. 231, emphasis added).

Tense Shifts in Novice Writing

Inexperienced writers exhibit in their writing many features of oral conversations, among which, with ever more frequency, unjustified verb tense shifts (Nemioianu, 1990). Let us now consider a student text discussing the protagonist in Soseki's *Kokoro*, a Japanese classic written at the beginning of the 20th century. In the English translation of the novel the narrative tense is the past:

He [Sensei] *lost* trust in his family, and later even *got rid of* all his ties to his ancestors. Giving up his ancestors' land and deciding to continue school *are* symbolic of his attitude towards the past. Sensei eventually *falls* in love with the same girl that his best friend *loves*. He *did not mean* to do it; it just *happens*. (emphasis added) What is happening in this text is the unjustified switch between verb tenses, with incohesive results. In this summary of a fictional plot, the writer relates the events, presented in the original narrative text in the past tense, in a combination of present and past tense, switching back and forth, when the reader least expects it. Fluent, articulate speakers of English narrate orally every day, in and out of conversations, most often in the past tense ("I got out of the car and asked him, what are you doing here, I go, you shouldn't be here...") or maybe, at least partially, in the historical present ("I get out of the car and there, in front of me, is this hubbloodymangous man, with a black patch over his right eye...").

Expert writing about literature uses the past tense for literary history pieces and the present tense for literary analyses, including summaries of the plot (89% in a sample of ten issues of the *PMLA* from the 1990s). An analysis of a literature text, when the original is in the past tense, as is most often the case in traditional fictional narratives, brings the text under the microscope, as it were, and as such the critical writing is not very different from a science lab or a social science report of an experiment. The commentary is, therefore, in the present tense, while the quotations from the original, the analyzed samples, are in the past tense. The deictic center is the present moment of the analyst, and even though the narrated events in the analyzed text are in the past tense, they are brought to that center, so that the writers, who may have died years or centuries before the commentary, *say/present/use*, etc., as if they were present spatially and temporally at the deictic center provided by the commentator. It is a common practice, and a rather counter-intuitive one for novice writers; and as such it is trumped by conversational practice. The temporally unjustified shifting between the present and past tense in novice writers' formal writing about literature is therefore interference from orality. It is not a grammatical problem, and it cannot have a simple grammatical explanation.

Texts such as the Kokoro fragment of a summary are temporally odd because of the absence of the tense cohesion imposed by a stable deictic center. Its explanation is to be found in what Chafe calls "the flow and displacement of conscious experience" (1994). The novice writer, involved in the immediate experience of writing about a novel narrated in the past tense, maintains the tense of the original narrative, anterior to the moment of his writing experience. When he makes a comment about the significance of a character's narrative action—"Giving up his ancestors' land and deciding to continue school *are* symbolic of his attitude towards the past."--he switches to the present tense, the deictic center of his writing, and also the convention of the literacy analysis. But then, instead of switching back to the narrative past, he stays with the present tense, as if by contamination, only to return again to the past tense towards the end; but not for long, for in the very last sentence, after the semi-colon, the present tense is reinstated. This very last tense shift makes the text slightly ambiguous: is the final statement about the character or is it the writer's personal statement that such things as were stated before just happen?

The first shift to the present tense is justified and stylistically acceptable; its maintenance beyond the comment is not; and the final shift to the present tense renders the text awkward if not incoherent. Of course, the whole paragraph could have been in the present tense as is the case with similar texts written by expert writers, for the entire paragraph is commentary even if it includes retelling of narrative elements.

Within Chafe's discourse theoretical framework, the novice writer's consciousness is staying with the narrated events, at a distance even from the narrating consciousness and that of the reader, whose didactic center is the present. When he makes the general comment about the symbolic attitude of the character, the novice writer moves his deictic center to the expected present, but stays there longer than expected, and moves again to an anterior time at the end. These shifts occur unconsciously, as they do in informal conversations. With novice writers it is as if the verb tense, by contamination from one sentence to the next, establishes an ever moving deictic center, rather than a stable didactic center triggering the verb tense use.

From Past to Present in Fictional Narratives

The traditional fictional narrative tense is the past tense. This conventional use throughout several centuries of English literature has the aesthetic impact of separating the events remembered or imagined from a distant perspective and their actual narration, which is done from the deictic center of the present moment of creation/writing. Dickens, for example, would thus set apart the narrating act from that of the narrated material in, say, *Bleak House*. Chafe says that to remove this convention is "like replacing a statue with a living model, a portrait with its subject." (p. 232)

An example from such a traditional narrative, Eudora Welty's story "A Visit of Charity," shows the narrating "advantages" of such a view, expressed in the past tense.

It was mid-morning—a very cold, bright day. Holding a potted plant before her, a girl of fourteen jumped off the bus in front of the Old Ladies' Home, on the outskirts of town. She wore a red coat, and her straight yellow hair was hanging down loose from the pointed white cap all the little girls were wearing that year.

She stopped for a moment beside one of the prickly dark shrubs with which the city had beautified the Home, and then proceeded slowly toward the building, which was of whitewashed brick and reflected the winter sunlight like a block of ice. As she walked vaguely up the steps, she shifted the small pot from hand to hand; then she had to set it down and remove her mittens before she could open the heavy door. (p.113)

The narrator, or narrating voice, and the author, are at a distance from the place where the events of the story unfold and from the protagonist, the fourteen-year-old girl visiting the nursing home. From that point, the deictic center from which language choices are made—and most relevant for our purpose, verb tense—is the narrating time, from which all fictional events are imagined as taking place at a time and place prior to the narrating time, in the past tense. In other words, the narrated past is evoked from the perspective of the narrating present.

From that distance, the narrator is looking at the mid-morning scene from a definite distance, as if seeing it from above or at any rate from an angle that allows full view of the girl, the setting around her, and her movement from the bus stop to the home, and finally in front of the heavy door of the nursing home. The distance is both in location (the outskirts of a known town) and time (“that year”). The “visit of charity” takes place in an indefinite but certain past. The story is sandwiched between this beginning and a symmetrical ending, with the girl running to “meet the big bus rocketing through the street. She jumped on and took a big bite out of the apple.” (p. 118). With the narrator, we see the bus leaving, moving into another space and time, out of the narrator’s and our consciousness. The past tense provides a long perspective, much like a camera moving from an indefinite distance closing in on the character arrived in front of the door to the nursing home, where the story itself is about to unfold, and then, at the end, moving back at a distance again, to capture the girl running away from the nursing home, where she and we were, where the visit of charity took place, to the bus at a distance from the nursing home, and thus taking in the whole. Then it is turned off.

The reader of these words, receive the events at a different moment in time (and a different space) than that of the narrating present—it is a difference of some 60 years at least.

My deictic center, in this present moment (although the writing was done at a different present moment, which in the meanwhile has become past), allows me an even longer perspective upon events that happened in a remote past. As we said earlier, however, the assumption is that the speaker/narrator/writer and the hearer/reader share the same deictic center—another unspoken convention, a common practice, not hard to adhere to in the third person narrative.

There are temporal complications in narratives, however, that go well beyond the fact that the present moment, the didactic center, continuously moves along the time arrow, where what is asked of readers goes beyond the desire to be experienced as modern and relevant thirty years later. John Updike's *Towards the End of Time* is such an example.

It is a first person narrative about events taking place in the future, sometime in the second decade of the 21st century (by now already the past!), after an imagined Sino-American war. The time line is considerably more complex than in a straightforward narrative such as Eudora Welty's, but as it is written in English, the only tenses the author has to work with are the two that his language offers him. Had he been a speaker of the South American language Apalai, he would have had four grammaticalized past tenses (immediate, recent, distant, and a historic past) (Fabb, 1997, p. 196). In another language he could have had grammatical means of expressing degrees of distance into the future, which would have probably helped him in this quasi futuristic novel.

As it is, the narrative starts thus:

First snow: it came this year late in November. Gloria and I awoke to see a fragile white inch on the oak branches outside the bathroom windows, and on the curving driveway below, and on the circle of lawn the driveway encloses—the leaves still raked, the grass still green. I looked into myself for a trace of childhood exhilaration at the sight and found none, just a quickened awareness of being behind in my chores and an unfocused dread of time itself, time that churns the seasons and that had brought me this new offering, this heavy new radiant day like a fresh meal brightly served in a hospital to a patient with a dwindling appetite. (p. 1)

The first person narrative happening “this” year has an intimacy and immediacy unexpected in a novel that is meant to take place in a near future time.

With the same kind of deictic center, the present, the narrating consciousness in the Updike novel evokes future events while the one in Eudora Welty's story, invisible and almost omniscient, relates a past event. And yet both tellings are realized in the past tense, which provides ample proof of its versatility. The deictic center in Updike's novel is an imagined present *after* the future events of the narrative unfold, and it is assumed to be shared by writer and reader. It is no wonder the past tense is the preferred narrative tense—not because stories strictly speaking belong to the past, but because it—the past tense—allows for more temporal layering. But the temporal layering does not happen through verb tense choice alone. The November at the beginning of the novel can well be a past November, not in a distant past, though, for it is “this year.” The beginning gives no indication to the reader that the novel is set in a future time. The placement of the events in the future cannot be realized through verb tense, but by lexicalized time expressions. It is just as well considering that what was future at the time when the novel was written is recent past now and will become even more distant past in the coming years. In a fictional narrative of this kind we do not have a story that will take place—that the author predicts will happen—but rather one in a hypothetical past time. The future time becomes past, and the readers are given an imagined scenario, framed lexically and grammatically in the past tense, to consider in all its detail. The narrative past tense is the saving grace of fiction taking place in the future, for sooner or later that future time becomes the past.

In both Welty and Updike, in different ways, the temporal framing of the narratives is in the past tense although the present tense appears, of course, in the remembered conversations among the characters. In Tim Winton's *Shallows*, however, the present tense has equal billing with the past tense in the temporal framing of events.

In the Prologue, there are two moments in time, almost 150 years apart, both related in the present tense:

Here it is 1831 on the southernmost tip of the newest and oldest continent, the bottom of the world. In the wintery gauze of dawn, the American whaler *Family of Man* weighs anchor and leaves the harbor and its search for deserters. An hour later, the Governor of the British colony of Angelus, a globular man with regally inflamed haemorrhoids, watches the races. [...]

And now it is the year 1978 in Angelus, Western Australia. The town's station wagons form a glass perimeter around Angelus Oval. Two teams of men slog about the turfy mud, upending one another, punching and kicking the soggy leather kernel from one end of the swamp to the other.

In the first chapter, "Angelus," the second moment from the Prologue is brought to the reader's attention, but the tense has shifted to the past:

In the bay, east of the town of Angelus, cries resounded in the night. A tent stood silhouetted on moonlit sand and, beside it, the shape of a tractor. The interior of the tent was warmed by a gas lamp. A man and a woman lay naked on their bedding. A man read a musty journal, resting it on the woman's buttocks. She listened to the lovemaking of whales out in the bay...(p.1)

A little further in the first chapter, but still on the same day as the events above, a different character is introduced in the present tense.

The same day, as he leaves his sad hulk of a car and gathers the pile of blankets in his arms, smelling the sharpness of their mothball odor, William Pell remembers something that happened ten years ago and he chuckles at himself as he sets out up the winding gravel track towards the Reserve. (p.3)

What is happening in Agelus? In the Prologue, we are encountering a narrating consciousness that is located in the "here and now," but with the twist, echoing Edward Lear's humorous switch in the epigraph: the "here" is in 1831 and the "now" is 1978. In the prologue, the place is the same, at two different historical moments, an indication early on, perhaps, that history will be a significant thematic dimension in the rest of the novel. The deictic anchoring point is "now," the representing time, 1978; the time of the initial "here," 1831, is definitely a past time. (The publication year, 1984, is a future time; no trick here, for it is not unusual for a novel to take six years from creation to production.) And yet the verb tense used at both times is the present tense. Are the readers being signaled that the present and past tenses will form a unified time reference in the novel? That is a hypothesis that attentive readers will keep on hold.

The first chapter introduces two sets of characters: the young man and the young woman who listen to the lovemaking of the whales in the moonlight, on the one hand, and William Pell, who gets out of the car and walks toward the Reserve, on the other. The first set of characters is introduced in the past tense, and they stay in the past tense throughout the novel; William Pell is acting in the present tense throughout. Together they are acting the plot in this small whaling town in Western Australia: the young couple fight for the protection of whales, a current conservationist position, but in the past tense; William Pell, whose actions and thoughts are in the present tense, embodies a reactionary view--the killing of whales, which ensured the livelihood of the inhabitants of Angelus. In other words, the new is couched in the past tense, the conventional tense of the fictional narrative, while the old finds its way into the narrative in the present tense. Thus, Winton creates a time conceit realized to a large extent through the alternation of the two verb tenses in English. The outdated position of the defender of whale killing in Angelus, marked by the use of the present tense, has a further significance: his is a frozen position. The fight for the preservation of whales is at the heart of the plot, and the use of the past tense creates a perspective and a narrative layering of time that is more likely to be accomplished by the past tense. The opponents' views and actions in the present tense are not only, ironically, non-current, but they are also ossified, motionless.

In a final example, Ron Hansen's *Mariette in Ecstasy*, the tense throughout the narrative is the present tense:

(The story starts with vignettes of nuns, Sisters of the Crucifixion, in their convent, Our Lady of Sorrows)

Sister Dominique says a prayer to Saint Peregrine for her Canadian nephew's cancer as she dashes flour on a kitchen table and turns over a great slab of dough that rolls as slowly as a white pig.

Sister Emmanuelle hunches over a pink sewing cushion, her quick hands tying off bobbins and pins as she creates lace periwinkles for the white corporal that the holy chalice will rest on. (p. 4)

Sister Sabine is in a jean apron as she strolls toward the milking barn between Guernsey cows, her hands riding their camel hides. (p.5) (and continues with the actual narrative, the story of a new postulant, Mariette.)

Hours later Mother Saint-Raphael thinks it important that the most worshipful sisters see the postulant as she is and not as she is being imagined, so just after Vespers twelve of them slowly walk one by one through the infirmary and stare down at Mariette in infatuation and fear and relief as she stares up in a trance and seems to smile at their procession, and Sister Aimee permits them to softly touch Mariette wrapped hands. (p.62)

Chafe is of the opinion that entirely removing the past tense as the narrative convention would turn a statue into a live model. In Hansen's *Mariette in Ecstasy*, where the past-tense narrative convention is overturned, one can hardly say that the sisters portrayed in their daily activities around the convent are "live models." Although the sisters are at work, each at her own station, what the reader experiences is quite the contrary impression: each vignette, in the present tense, and the powerful effect of their accumulation, has an icon-like quality, more of a statue than a live model. The actions each nun is carrying out, repeated every day, for all their lives, have permanence and transcendence. The present tense is not the historic present of conversational narratives; neither is it the present tense of the narrating deictic center. The novel is set in 1906 in Upstate New York, but the present tense of the narrative refers to an other-worldly present time, one that has always been, is, and will be, a present tense that is and at the same time transcends the "here and now," and not a historic present tense from some historical "then." The present tense through which the readers see the life in the convent and the specific plot surrounding Mariette is a hieratic present. It is as if time has stopped: *chronos* has made room for *Kairos*. It is not the present tense in Tim Winton's *Shallows* either, where it harkens to ossified past habits of the mind.

The deictic center of the narrating voice in *Mariette in Ecstasy* is shared with that of the reader. The narrating voice is describing a series of icons and the reader is imagining them—both are at a distance from the object of their viewing. The present tense makes them two-dimensional—there is no spatial depth to the images of the nuns.

Here as in *Shallows*, the present tense is not conveying immediacy or movement, as it does in Carver's story with which we started, but rather permanence: the demotic permanence of obstinacy in Winton's novel; a hieratic one in Hanson's.

This analysis is hardly an exhaustive look at time representation and tense use in fictional narratives; nor does it include a "representative" sample of English contemporary narratives. It is a hand-picked survey of tense use in some fictional narratives in English: from the exclusive reliance on the past tense in more traditional narratives, to a mixture of present and past, to the exclusive use of the present. After all, that is about all one can do with only two grammatically marked tenses; and it appears that fiction writers are acutely aware of this "insufficiency" in the verbal system of English. But even within this insufficiency there is evidence of creativity. New verb tenses cannot be created in English or any other language, but the existing tenses can develop new functions, over and beyond the ones already at work in the language. Creative writers can use this apparent drawback of the English verb system to their advantage, forging, as we have seen, conceits that play around with the grammatical category of tense.

The temporal moments covered in fictional worlds are diverse. They are all seen from the deictic center of the present time of narrating; the reception of these "times" by the reader complicates temporality even further. However, the latter does not seem to interfere with the verisimilitude of the fictional work: the reader of a science fiction novel is grabbed by futuristic events even when those are not, strictly speaking, futuristic any more; Orwell's *1984* is a prototypical example.

In English, grammaticalized verb tense is the least sensitive linguistic tool for determining temporal relationships, as our examples from fictional narratives have shown. The exact temporal relationships among events related in fiction is established in the first place lexically—how else would we know that *Mariette in Ecstasy* takes place at the beginning of the 20th century and *Toward the End of Time* in a future moment relative to the time of its writing?—and only secondarily through the grammatical category of tense. This may well be the explanation for the ever more frequent tense inconsistencies in inexperienced writing. But it is also the reason why more recent fiction uses the binary tense system in English for effects other than location in time: for thematic comments, for character portrayal, for humor, for stylistic impact.

The finite verb form carries the sentence, be it in the present or past tense. It anchors it and the larger text and contributes significantly to its cohesion and coherence. Temporal shifts and shifts of consciousness are signaled lexically rather than through verb tense. Verb tense maintains texture. We have seen that in fictional discourse verb tense shifts have stylistic—not temporal—consequences. The new functions of the two verb tenses in English, coming from the most expert of writing, need to be incorporated into a theory of tense in English, for they show how creativity works in language even with scant linguistic raw material.

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