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A Case for the Narrative Present

Irmtraud Huber Explores the Literary Potential of Contemporary Present-Tense Narration

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Aims and Objectives

In her monograph *Present-Tense Narration in Contemporary Fiction. A Narratological Overview* (2016), Irmtraud Huber sets her sights on exploring the various ways in which contemporary (Anglophone) authors make use of present-tense narration. Her production-oriented survey of present-tense narratives positions itself within the narratological discourse on narrative present-tense usage. Huber not only demonstrates that the present tense has turned into "a narrative option almost on par with the more traditional choice of past-tense narration" (p. 2), but also reveals how contemporary fiction deals with the set of problems this specific tense imposes on the traditional concept of narrative as "beholden to a mimetic situation of narration" (p. 17).

Rather than exploring theoretical shortcomings and research desiderata in the field, Huber seeks to provide a snapshot of how contemporary authors deploy the present tense in narrative fiction. She thus discusses over forty present-tense novels which have been published over the last two decades. The aim of her study is to overcome the skeptical attitude which literary critics often assume towards the narrative present. While critical voices argue that the narrative present tense is predominantly used in order "to evoke the contemporary moment," Huber maintains that "present-tense usage in contemporary fiction is much more heterogeneous in its rationale and effects" (p. 2). The result is a carefully considered book which features a significant number of examples illustrating the literary potential of present-tense narration.

The Diachronic Development of Present-Tense Narration

In the chapter "Past and Present of Present-Tense Narration," Huber first traces the historical development of present-tense usage in English fiction. This overview not only summarizes the latest state of the art in the field, but also prepares the book's main argument. Since the rise of the novel during the eighteenth century, Western narrative fiction has been characterized by a tendency towards "believable and realistic narrative situations," preferring "the use of the past tense" (p. 6): "After all, in real life, we cannot experience and narrate both at the same time. It is only ever possible to tell of events that happened to us in retrospect, since we need time and leisure to narrate them or write them down" (ibid.). The present tense, by contrast, is mainly – albeit not exclusively – associated with simultaneity. Its extensive usage has therefore long been avoided in conventional narrative and instead been reserved for experimental, (post-)modernist texts which either foreground the discourse mode of description or point towards other genres (i.e., drama and poetry) (cf. pp. 6-13).

Drawing on previous work by Armen Avanessian and Anke Hennig, Huber delineates how, over the course of literary history, the present tense has succeeded in casting off these associations. By the end of the twentieth century, the present tense had transcended its previous status as a "non-narrative and non-fictional" tense (p. 13) and turned into a "tense of narration proper" (ibid.), which now serves as a new "signpost of fictionality" (p. 14). With reference to this process of aesthetic emancipation, Huber eventually argues that contemporary present-tense narratives are no longer interested in propounding plausible narrative scenarios. The genre of the present-tense novel rather "highlights its own status as fiction, as a self-justifying discourse which no longer seeks to imitate non-fictional forms of communication" (p. 20).

Next, Huber proceeds to explore the different ways in which contemporary writers deploy the present tense as both a proper narrative tense and a specific indicator of fictionality. In order to systematize her survey, she introduces four main types of contemporary present-tense narration, namely narrative deictic narration, retrospective narration, interior monologue, and simultaneous narration (cf. pp. 18f.). By providing forty-three case studies compiled from the longlists and shortlists of the Man Booker Prize from the year 2000 to the present (cf. p. 3), she demonstrates how each of these types manifests itself in contemporary fiction.

As "[t]he effects and conditions of present-tense narration depend largely on the narrative situation in which it is used" (p. 19), Huber relates her categories to the three typical narrative situations established by Franz K. Stanzel. This allows her to structure her chapters on the different types of present-tense usage (i.e., chapters three to six) according to the same pattern. Each of the four chapters are hence subdivided into three separate sections on first-person, authorial, and figural narratives. The monograph's last chapter covers all those present-tense novels which qualify as so-called "mixed cases," either because they cannot

be attributed to a specific type of present-tense narration or because they blend different narrative situations with each other.

A Systematic Survey of Contemporary Present-Tense Usage

Huber's first type of present-tense narration, i.e. narrative deictic narration, is identical to Monika Fludernik's (2003) category of deictic present-tense usage. Since Fludernik subsumes all those narrative passages in which the present tense refers to the communicative situation between fictive narrator and narratee under this category, Huber regards it as "the often least conspicuous and most traditional" manifestation of present-tense narration (p. 23). She observes that, in contemporary novels, references to the here-and-now of the discourse level often extend to such a degree that they develop a plot of their own. The extensive present-tense passages consequently turn into a consistent frame narrative embedding the principal storyline of the diegesis, which is usually related in the past tense (cf. pp. 23f.).

The profile which Huber creates for deictic present-tense narration can be best illustrated with regard to her reading of Colm Tóibín's *The Testament of Mary* (2012). The novel, a retelling of the life of Jesus from the first-person perspective of his mother, juxtaposes the past tense with the present tense in order to distinguish between the narrative planes of story and discourse, respectively. The past-tense passages concentrate on Mary's reminiscences of her son's life and constitute the main plot of the narrative. Instead of merely offering narratorial commentary, the deictic present-tense passages add a subplot on the discourse level, addressing Mary's current situation. As the narrator of her son's life, she is confronted with "her inability to defend the truth of her memories and ultimately her and her son's humanity against religious mystification" (p. 25). Huber therefore concludes that Tóibín's novel is not only an account of the life of Jesus from Mary's point of view, but also represents the narrator's own story (cf. pp. 25f.).

If used as retrospective narration, Huber explains, the present tense points from the here-and-now of the narrative's discourse to a past moment of the diegesis (cf. pp. 39f.). Although noting that this second type of present-tense usage is closely related to the familiar concept of the historical present, she nevertheless draws a distinction between the two uses. Unlike the conventional historical present, which occurs intermittently within past-tense narrations, the retrospective present is used consistently throughout an entire narrative discourse, with the result that it no longer "serves to mark narrative peaks or moments of transition" in an otherwise past-tense context (p. 39). As Huber's survey of retrospective present-tense narration in contemporary novels such as Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007), Tom McCarthy's *C* (2010), and Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room* (2001) reveals, this specific type of present-tense usage does not violate the temporal distance between the level of enunciation and the level

of the enunciated, irrespective of the narrative situation in which it occurs (cf. p. 54).

Like narrative deictic and retrospective narration, interior monologue, Huber's third category of present-tense usage, also circumvents the logical improbability of a narrative situation in which story and discourse levels coincide temporally. Interior monologue can be encountered in those narratives which she refers to as "narrative[s] without a narratee" (p. 55), i.e. narratives which focus on the internal state(s) of one or several characters. In lieu of "indicat[ing] a narrative situation for which there would be neither time nor location or addressee," such narratives pretend "to reflect the current thoughts of the protagonist" (ibid.). By obscuring the act of narration proper, interior monologue thus avoids any problem that might be caused by a seeming simultaneity between experience and its narrative mediation.

Her reading of Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010) as an extended interior monologue indicates that Huber's notion of this particular mode of thought representation depends predominantly on the "proximity of the narrative perspective to the [protagonist's] perception" (p. 56) as well as the lack of any imaginable addressee. Donoghue's novel showcases an inexperienced autodiegetic narrator, namely a five-year-old boy who has spent his entire life in a single room together with his mother. Apart from occasional visits by a man called Old Nick, Jack and Ma are cut off from the outside world. Since he perceives his surroundings "through childish and innocent eyes," Jack fails to recognize "[t]he horror of [his] situation" (p. 58): For the last five years, he and his mother have been held captive by her rapist. Despite this instantaneous insight into Jack's perception, Huber nevertheless rules out simultaneous narration as a possible interpretation of Donoghue's novel. Doubting that he could "hardly even imagine an audience for his story" (p. 59), she excludes any narrative scenario in which the narrator could tell his experiences to somebody else.

Although present-tense narration "calls for a careful decoding of the respective narrative situation" (p. 69), Huber's study suggests that the three categories of narrative deictic narration, retrospective narration, and interior monologue generally enable the reader to resolve conceivable problems of present-tense usage by resorting to a mimetic understanding of fictional storytelling. However, this does not apply to simultaneous narration, her fourth, and final, type of present-tense narration, which challenges the mimetic paradigm of narrative without offering any convincing naturalization strategy. As Huber points out, narratives which draw on simultaneous narration bridge the temporal gap between the narrative planes of story and discourse, thus generating narrative scenarios which are logically impossible: In homodiegetic narratives, on the one hand, the simultaneous present does not allow for a plausible time of narration unless this act is imagined as a current report or a live commentary. In heterodiegetic narratives, on the other hand, simultaneous narration does not yield a plausible standpoint from which the narrator could relate the story. Because the heterodiegetic narrator has been deprived of his or her hindsight, he or she can

neither control nor evaluate the unfolding of the plot any longer and therefore loses his or her narrative authority (cf. pp. 69f.).

Attending to this "basic conundrum of [simultaneous] present-tense narration" (p. 70), Huber investigates how contemporary present-tense narratives "deal with [their] temporal impossibility [by] variously obfuscating, ignoring or flaunting it" (p. 70). In her analysis of Jim Crace's *Harvest* (2013), she stresses the immediate and inconclusive character of simultaneous first-person narration, which is brought about by the fact that the narrator cannot yet know how the story is going to end (cf. pp. 71-75). Such ignorance on the part of the narrator, as Huber states, asks for the reader's participation, with the effect that readers are invited "to weigh the moral implications of the character's actions and to contemplate their consequences" (p. 73). Recognizing, however, that simultaneous present-tense use does not necessarily have to bring about *non-sequitur* novels in the sense of Christian Paul Casparis, i.e. novels which defy causality and closure, Huber also adduces different manifestations of this specific type of present-tense narration. With reference to the historical novels *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012), she demonstrates how Hilary Mantel's unmistakable writing style skillfully combines the present tense with figural narration in order to generate the narratives' "close proximity" to the protagonist, which "foregoes any historical distance" (p. 78).

Conclusion

Readers with a more pronounced theoretical leaning will note that Huber occasionally borrows concepts from narrative theory to reinterpret them for her own purposes. More specifically, she discusses narrative deictic narration in figural narratives, even though Fludernik (2003, 124) introduces the deictic use of the present tense as a category which "covers the narrator's communications with the reader/narratee and comprises authorial commentary, gnomic and proverbial statements and addresses to the narratee." Deictic present-tense usage thus refers to the act of narration, yet such foregrounding of the discourse level is conventionally ruled out by the figural narrative situation. Similarly, Huber's study displays an idiosyncratic usage of the concept of interior monologue, for she does not distinguish it from less immediate and more coherent modes of thought representation such as psycho-narration or narrated monologue (cf. Cohn 1978). As she herself concedes, the narratives which she construes as examples of an extended interior monologue "depart from the radical modernist experiments with association and fragmented thought structure to develop interior monologues that are strikingly narrative, presenting an entirely coherent line of thought and events" (p. 56).

However, given that Huber's monograph primarily focuses on describing different manifestations of present-tense narration, these drawbacks are insignifi-

cant. *Present-Tense Narration in Contemporary Fiction* provides its reader with a comprehensive survey of different usages of the present tense in contemporary narrative fiction which accounts for the diversity of individual narratives by sensibly eschewing any form-to-function mapping. Thanks to her clear and vivid style of writing, Huber presents her findings in a varied and appealing way, keeping the reader's attention as she proceeds in her line of argumentation. Additionally, the lucid and systematic structure of her study, which is complemented by an abstract at the beginning of each chapter, offers the reader excellent orientation throughout. The book likewise contains, along with an index, a tabular overview of all primary sources in the appendix, which makes the book ideal for selective readings. Taken as a whole, then, Huber's study makes for an inspiring read which gives valuable food for thought to any literary scholar interested not only in concrete manifestations of present-tense narration, but also in major works of contemporary fiction.

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