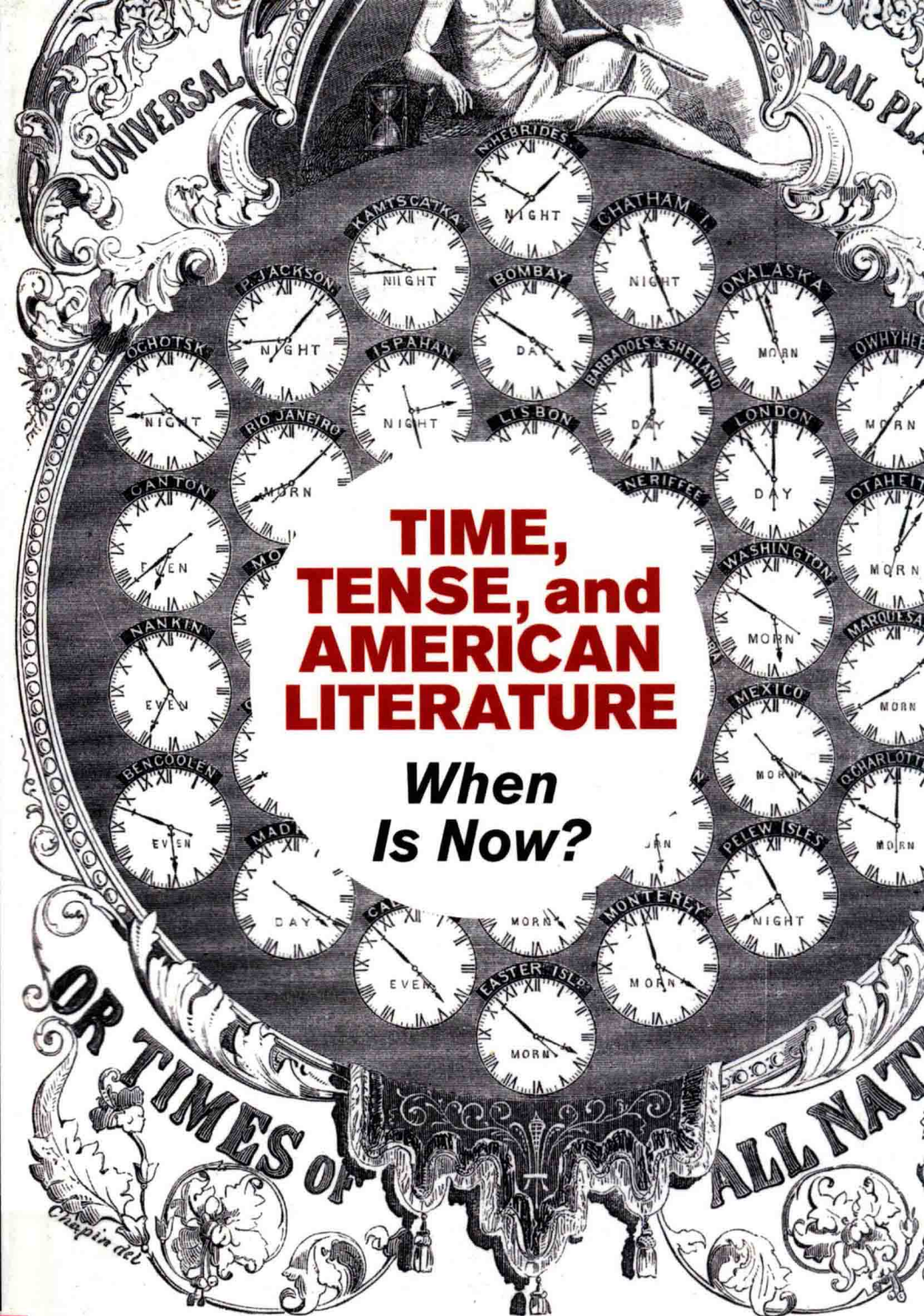




Cindy Weinstein

TIME, TENSE, AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

When Is Now?

CINDY WEINSTEIN

California Institute of Technology



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TIME, TENSE, AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

In *Time, Tense, and American Literature*, Cindy Weinstein examines American authors who employ a range of tenses to tell a story that has already taken place. This book argues that key novels in the archive of American literature are inconsistent in their retrospective status, ricocheting between past, present, and future. Taking *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* as her point of departure, Weinstein shows how Edgar Allan Poe's way of representing time involves careening tenses, missing chronometers, and inoperable watches, thus establishing a vocabulary of time that is anticipated in Charles Brockden Brown and further articulated in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Theodore Dreiser, and Edward P. Jones. Each chapter examines the often strange narrative fabric of these works and presents an opportunity to understand how especially complicated experiences of cultural upheaval, from the founding of the new nation to the psychic consequences of race relations and the Civil War to the rise of modernity and beyond, find contextual expression through a literary uncertainty about time.

CINDY WEINSTEIN is Professor of English and Vice Provost at the California Institute of Technology. She is the author of *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1995) and *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2004). Weinstein also edited *The Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Cambridge University Press, 2004) and co-edited, with Christopher Looby, *American Literature's Aesthetic Dimensions* (2012).

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*To my parents, who gave me time, and to Jim, Sarah, and
Sam for giving it meaning*

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INTRODUCTION

Tempo(e)rality

In the first chapter of the first part of Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*, there is a rather bizarre reference to Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Bizarre because, as most readers will concur, the two texts seem to have very little to do with each other, either thematically or stylistically. Poe's antebellum story is about the grizzly adventures of an all-male group of explorers that includes a scene of cannibalism, a rabid dog, and a watery ending that, *Moby-Dick*-like, kills just about everyone in its apocalyptic wake. Nevertheless, when James's Italian Prince, Amerigo, firmly on land in England, is mulling over the fact that he has no idea why Mrs. Fanny Assingham has helped to forge a marriage between himself and the supremely wealthy Maggie Verver, his mind gravitates toward *Pym*. The Prince likens himself to a "boat mov[ing] upon some such mystery," a simile based on him having "remembered to have read, as a boy, a wonderful tale by Allan Poe, his prospective wife's countryman – which was a thing to show, by the way, what imagination Americans *could* have."¹ He is, of course, referring to "the story of the shipwrecked Gordon Pym" (42), which might well lead one to ask, what on earth is Poe's *Pym* doing in the consciousness of Henry James's Prince Amerigo in *The Golden Bowl*?

Time, Tense, and American Literature will answer this question by way of establishing a rather surprising tradition of American literature, more specifically, novels, beginning with Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* and ending with Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*. If we follow James's lead, which is what I propose to do in the pages that follow, and put *Pym* at the very core of this tradition, American literature takes on a new shape with a clear emphasis on time. Time in *Pym* is front and center, whether it is a watch running down, a chronometer going missing, a narrator having no idea what time it is despite constantly telling us the time, or a novel that is unable to keep its retrospective grip. *Pym*'s temporal difficulty is interesting from a literary point of view because the narrative produced is, I think it is safe to say, weird and challenging. To take just one

example of language that sounds like it has a hold on time, but doesn't, here is Pym describing his days and nights hidden in the bowels of the brig: "This, as I said before, did not occur until the fourth day after his bringing me the watch, and the seventh since I had first entered the hold."² But the difficulty and strangeness of *Pym* gets even more interesting because the novel's temporal incoherence gets attached (in *Pym* itself) to a historical context – in this case, it is race – that on the one hand, helps to make sense of the literature's temporal acrobatics, but on the other hand, has its own version of temporal complexity. In other words, debates about race in Poe's time were saturated with temporal claims, not the least being that blackness stood for a savage past that would be destroyed in order for civilization, progress, and the future, all three coded white, to assume their rightful and inevitable manifest destiny.

The language of time is extremely sensitive and often quite funny in *Pym*. It is a barometer for a character's physical condition, even for Poe's state of mind. *Pym*'s temporal logic is also a way into understanding America's racial horror show. Indeed, time in each of the novels in *Time, Tense, and American Literature* discloses a fascinating literary sensibility that is inextricably linked to a historical context without which that sensibility would not, I think, be so able to express itself. Phelps's bizarre writing style is the result of her religious father's inability to guide her and her attempts to come up with some new way, some alternate language, that would help her with her pain. Here is a passage from *The Gates Ajar* where the protagonist, Mary, absorbs her Aunt Winifred's teachings about the goodness of Christ, using language that flits from past to present: "I only put both hands about her neck and clung there; but I hope – it seems, as if I clung a little to the thought besides; it was as new and sweet to me as if I had never heard of it in all my life; and it has not left me yet."³ Indeed, each novel has a prose style that is stylistically unfamiliar and aesthetically challenging, in large part, because it is temporally unhinged, incapable of keeping discrete past, present, future, and conditional. Protagonists and narrators sleepwalk, pass out, lose track of time, keep track of time, and their narratives reflect this temporal overload.

However, each of the novels also references, sometimes directly, sometimes not, a story of cultural upheaval that is specific to a particular set of circumstances being confronted and discussed in American society. That upheaval can be an event, as in the case of *Edgar Huntly* and the ratification debate, and Phelps's with the human death toll wrought by the Civil War. But it can also be a non-event – a more social issue – which is deeply embedded in the cultural milieu. For Dreiser, it is the modernist

consciousness of "19____." ⁴ For Jones, it is race and slavery. Despite this heterogeneity, each upheaval registers some shock to consciousness that is imagined as an irreparable break in the American *gestalt*, dislodging its past from its present, making its future insecure. Temporality is in shards, and these novels reflect that incoherence and help to explain it. Of course, the novels produced by American imaginations aren't the only ones to take up the question of time and experiment with it (a reader would be absolutely right to mention Alain Robbe-Grillet or Jorge Luis Borges, a great admirer of Poe). But where American imaginations are concerned, they do share an undeniable overlapping linguistic framework, which comprises a set of recurring terms and verbal formations that can be retrieved in the wreckage of *Pym*.

The novelistic framework thus seems always to allude to a historical framework, which is represented through a date. Reading the temporal dimensions of these frameworks in relation to one another, both synchronically and diachronically, provides a different and, I hope, more detailed way to understand the relation between key texts and their historical contexts. Not only, then, does this focus on *Pym* help establish a new trajectory for American literature, but because the literary trajectory is intimately connected to a historical one (or ones), we are better able to see how the representation of time, as a literary matter, gets enlisted to resolve, reflect, and/or complicate further the problem of time that is registered in extra-literary contexts. Temporal experimentation, I should also add, is not only the purview of novels. To be sure, much of Emily Dickinson's poetry and many of James's short stories, to take just two notable examples from American literature, are deeply interested in questions of time. It is, however, as Mikhail Bakhtin explains, with the genre of the novel that "time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible."⁵ It is that "thickening" that I am especially interested in making visible, and I do so by painstakingly analyzing how the temporal markers in these novels, which can range from the word "before" to the phrase "now and then," from the presence of a clock to the demarcation of a date, resonate across the archive, but signify in quite different ways.

It is, of course, ironic to use *Pym* as exemplary of much of anything, much less for how a novel might explore and expose the novelistic artifices deployed in their telling of time. There is really nothing else like *Pym*, and yet as difficult as it is to categorize, it establishes the foundation for an alternate story about American literature. *Pym* is a strange book, made up of part fiction and part non-fiction (many passages are plagiarized), with a story-line that tries to build up to a crescendo, but really can't (how could

one get more of a crescendo than a scene of cannibalism?). Let us recall that *Pym* starts its textual life as two installments in Harper and Brother's, and, because of economic incentives, grudgingly became a novel. Poe didn't really want to write a novel, and my chapter on *Pym* will demonstrate how that generic antipathy is central to its very (anti)novelistic being. However, *Pym* represents so fully the complexities of time – how literary narratives tell time and how cultural discourses embody specific notions of time – that this very eccentric novel becomes an ideal entry point into rethinking time in American novels. It is also ironic, although fitting considering his deep knowledge of American literature, that James, an author whose narrative style is so very unlike Poe's, would help to make this point in *The Golden Bowl*, a novel so unlike anything Poe would, or perhaps could, write.

I realize that there are even more ironies involved in using Poe's *Pym* as my reference point, not least of which is that *Pym*, as my reading in Chapter 2 will explain, is at some fundamental level, precisely about the absence of a point of reference, especially a temporal one. The fact is, however, that all of the novels I discuss either look ahead to *Pym*, which is the case with *Edgar Huntly*, or make greater (or a different kind of) sense, I hope to prove, when put in relation to *Pym*, which is the case with Phelps's *The Gates Ajar*, Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, and Jones's *The Known World*. This relation is not self-conscious as it is in *The Golden Bowl*, although it's hard to believe that these authors were not well-versed in Poe (and we know for a fact that Dreiser was a great admirer of Poe). But the relation is, nevertheless, there. It exists in the verbal echoes that reverberate across these very different novels that share a temporal grammar that I am playfully calling "tempo(e)rality."

Tempo(e)rality is the term I use to describe novels whose hold on sequence is wobbly. To put it simply, what happens first, what happens second, what is before and what is after is often difficult to discern, and, as a consequence, tense, particularly the past tense, loses its position as a temporal anchor. I should say that many novels have shifts in tense (Ishmael narrates much of what happens aboard the *Pequod* in the present tense; Huck's lyric homage to the Mississippi River is narrated in the present tense; John Updike famously writes in the present tense), but tempo(e)rality is different both in the self-consciousness with which questions of tense are enunciated and in its attendant effects, at a sentence by sentence level, on the narrative. Here is an example of tempo(e)rality taken from *Pym*: "Shortly afterward we could perceive a sensible diminution in the force of the wind, when, now for the first time

since the latter part of the evening before, Augustus spoke" (116). This temporal language – "shortly afterward," "when," "now," "first," "latter," "before" – is an assault on temporality, despite its seeming articulation of temporal exactitude. It is the language of sequence, but sequence subverted. It is tempo(e)rality.

Here, it is worth stating the obvious, which is that most novels are written retrospectively. Something has already happened and the narrator retells that event or events using the past tense. That pastness is often, although not always, conveyed with some reference to a date, a former time, in the opening lines of a novel. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* begins, "Late in the afternoon of a chilly day in February, two gentlemen were sitting alone over their wine." *The House of Mirth* opens with: "Selden paused in surprise . . . It was a Monday in early September." The first sentence of *The Human Stain* is, "It was in the summer of 1998 that my neighbor Coleman Silk – who, before retiring two years earlier, had been a classics professor."⁶ Tempo(e)rality, as the following chapters will show, often uses such markers of calendrical time in order to show how the chronological sequencing of dates is incapable of capturing anything real or authentic about how a person experiences time, especially a character, like Edgar Huntly, who sleepwalks through the Pennsylvania woods, or Arthur Gordon Pym, who passes out, or Mary Cabot, who grieves, or Clyde Griffiths who kills, or all of the characters in *The Known World* who are enslaved.

Time, Tense, and American Literature thus tells two different stories at once: a chronological one in which tempo(e)rality is embedded both in a cultural discourse, which is specific to a historical referent, and a literary one in which tempo(e)rality is embedded in the verbal minutiae of a novel's prose. To put this another way, I tell both a macro-story that reads temporal patterns in dialectical relation to particular historical contexts, and a micro-story, using the tools of narrative theory provided by Roland Barthes and Gerard Genette, among others, which highlights words designating time, and in so doing, accounts for the fabric of literary texts in a slow, detailed, and, hopefully, satisfying way.

Tempo(e)rality is, therefore, at once an experiential and linguistic phenomenon that represents a breakdown in temporal logic. It looks (and sounds) like this in *Edgar Huntly*: "How long my miseries endured, it is not possible to tell. I cannot even form a plausible conjecture. Judging by the lingering train of my sensations, I should conjecture that some days elapsed in this deplorable condition."⁷ Or this in *An American Tragedy*:

It caused her, at his behest, to wait a while longer, the while, as he now explained, he would not only have saved up some money, but devised some plan in connection with his work which would permit him to leave for a time anyhow, marry her somewhere and then establish her and the baby as a lawful married woman somewhere else, while, although he did not explain this just now, he returned to Lycurgus and sent her such aid as he could. (439)

Tempo(e)rality usually takes the form of a character marking out units of time in the face of experiences that make that impossible, which then produces a narrative that is unable to maintain its hold on retrospection. Logic goes haywire (if Edgar “cannot form a plausible conjecture,” why does he go on to conjecture?) and words marking temporality start getting in each other’s way, congealing and repeating (“a while longer,” “while,” “now,” “for a time,” “while,” “now”). Tempo(e)rality is what happens when the narrative goes into a temporal rabbit hole.

This leads to yet another irony about using *Pym* as a reference point for an analysis of time, tense, and American literature. After all, Poe’s novel defiantly and often comically sabotages linearity, and my chapters are organized sequentially, beginning with *Edgar Huntly*, written in the late eighteenth century, and ending with *The Known World*, a twenty-first-century novel. But as much as *Pym*, and the other novels that I discuss, upends the logic of chronology through its temporal shenanigans, the fact is that the novel is also inextricably enmeshed in the time of its composition. It announces itself as such in the Preface, where the year 1837 appears. That date locates *Pym* in a particular historical moment, and as hard as the novel works to unhinge itself temporally (and it succeeds admirably), it cannot pull away, we shall see, from the question of race. Indeed, even though the various characters in *Pym* lose track of time by passing out, having a watch run down, or losing a chronometer, the historical referent of 1837 maintains its presence.

Despite the fact, then, that one of the most obvious features of tempo(e)rality is an inability to keep track of time, that inability is embedded in a particular historical context. The protagonist in *The Gates Ajar*, for example, writes about her experience of grieving over the death of her brother, “I have been sitting here in the dark and thinking about it, till it seems so horribly long and so horribly short; it has been such a week to live through, and it is such a small part of the weeks that must be lived through, that I could think no longer” (3). To be sure, Mary’s sense of time is off-kilter because of her grief, but she is grieving at a particular time, which is the time of the Civil War. The dedication to her father, Austin Phelps, is dated

October 22, 1868, as well as the fact that Roy is described as one of “the soldiers” (48) and is also imagined to be with Uncle Tom in heaven. Like *The Gates Ajar*, each of the novels I consider directs the reader to a historical reference, sometimes a particular year, which, in the case of *Edgar Huntly*, is 1787, and *Pym*, as I’ve mentioned, is 1837. Sometimes the time frame is more open-ended. For Phelps, it is the period before and after the Civil War, and for Dreiser, it is sometime in the twentieth century, “January 19 — “ (792). *The Known World* careens from year to year, which is a feature of its distinctive tempo(e)rality. As this quick run-through may suggest, tempo(e)rality has many common features, but can be built into novels in different ways and changes over time.

Therefore, tempo(e)rality is, paradoxically, best analyzed chronologically. Although the verbal echoes that I identify cut across time periods and would seem to defy linear explication, the fact is that the specific rabbit hole into which tempo(e)rality goes looks somewhat different depending upon the historical reference within which it appears and which is often foregrounded in the novel. By tracking these echoes in chronological order, the outline of a new narrative about time in American literature emerges, one that takes its cues from the novels themselves and which takes shape (and becomes more persuasive, I think) as the echoes build upon one another, reverberating within and across texts, and reappearing in the most unlikely of places. A different literary tradition, based on tempo(e)rality, gets inscribed and expanded as each author taps into *Pym* – not as self-consciously as James, but nevertheless – and its formidable repertoire of narrative high jinks, which includes unstable tenses, rampant adverbs, and unceasing repetition. For instance, without an analysis of the word “would” in *The Gates Ajar*, my reading of the ubiquity of the word “would” in Jones would not make sense. Neither would it behoove me to defy chronology and begin *Time, Tense, and American Literature* with *The Known World*, where one of the ex-slaves talks about “appreciat[ing] the difference between then and now, even on the awful Richmond days when the now came dressed as the then.”⁸ It only makes sense to discuss this passage after having laid out the importance of the word “now” in *Pym* and the significance of the words “now and then” in Dreiser. Tempo(e)rality is a language that is spoken in these texts, and if we listen carefully enough and read closely enough, we can hear them talking it.

Tempo(e)rality is thus best read intensely. What this means is that my analyses ratchet up the pressure on close reading, and, I would add, the words that get closely read, to an unusual degree. By doing so, our understanding of these individual novels is deepened and renewed, and

their relations to one another are amplified. Close reading is also the only way to get at the aesthetic peculiarities that are a key feature of tempo(e)rality. *Time, Tense, and American Literature* is, therefore, as much about how to read time as it is about time. My aim is two-fold. On the one hand, I want to detail as vividly as possible, through an intensification of close reading, how words designating time create patterns, heretofore either unnoticed or unexplained by literary critics, within and across texts. For this purpose, I use the vocabulary provided by narrative theory. Genette's explanation of analepsis and prolepsis, for example, in addition to Barthes' structural (and ideological) analysis of tenses, gives me a way to explain the complicated grammatical formations that run throughout the texts I consider. On the other hand, like the texts themselves, which frame themselves in relation to a particular historical context, I situate those patterns in the time of their production.

At this point, it should be evident that the texts I discuss are focused (or in other cases, distracted) by a certain temporal word or words. With this verbal preoccupation in mind, I take philosopher Elizabeth Grosz's challenge to "revel in the untimely" by focusing on the temporal "nicks and cuts [that] disrupt our expectations."⁹ Grosz comes at the question of time from a philosophical and scientific perspective, and uses the Darwinian conception of "the event," which she explains as that which "erupt[s] onto the systems which aim to contain them, inciting change, upheaval, and asystematicity into their order" (8). It is hard to think of a better way to describe the texts I discuss, which not only tell stories of upheaval, but also are themselves temporally ruptured by it. *Edgar Huntly*, for example, whose subtitle is "Memoirs of a *Sleep-Walker*," is especially hung up on the word "first." Edgar's untimeliness is a function of his inability to remember what happened first (how can he know? he is a sleepwalker), as well as the novel's shared rhetoric with the Constitutional debate over ratification and worries about precedents or "firsts." Edgar's related inability to know what happened "first" or "before," another key term in the novel, lays the foundation for tempo(e)rality in *Pym*, where the inability to keep track of time or, as my chapter title says, "when is now?" morphs into a disintegration of other categories, especially race, from which the novel tries to recover. Phelps's rendition of tempo(e)rality has a religious imperative that seeks to console those who have lost loved ones in the Civil War by explaining that the dead are with us, and that when speaking of those who have passed, one should use the present tense. The result is narrative havoc, or tempo(e)rality. For Dreiser, the question of how to write a novel in the present tense – the logic for doing so is quite different from Phelps – creates