

IS MEMORY JUST A TECHNICAL TOOL IN MODERN FICTION?
A LOOK INTO THE GROWTH OF TIME AND MEMORY
IN PROUST AND KAFKA

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ABSTRACT. This paper proposes an insight into the emergence of key concepts in modern narratives, especially related to time and memory in the literature of Marcel Proust and Franz Kafka. Knowing that 20th-century prose draws its novelty from its style and writing technique, we will thus argue that one needs to first inquire as to what modern literature entails before scrutinizing such complex and abstract ideas. Thus, the first part of this study is the *mise-en-scène* for later projections on memory as four-dimensional time in Proust and metaphysical time in Kafka's work, while in itself it defines, exemplifies, and analyzes the evocation technique that leads to this complementing view of time in these two writers. Coupled with inquiries into the great social and political panorama rendered by war and seconded by the shifts in narrative themes and topics, the props of Modernism are explored. Time and memory are themes that we will debate on while providing a view on the new prosodic procedures such as the abandonment of the linear narrative flow, the breaking up with conventional ideas of unity and coherence of the plot and characters, and the encouragement of ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions that challenge the action's traditional moral and philosophical meaning.

KEY WORDS: Modernism, memory, time, Proust, Kafka

Introduction

Modernism is an ideological movement with a wide influence on all forms of art, borrowing its style and direction from philosophy (mainly the Cartesian philosophy developed in mid-18th century, a thought that revives humanism or the old Renaissance passion for man, and not for God, as the measure of all things). Modernism merges a wide range of artistic phenomena which somewhat complicate its precise definition. It should be noted, however, that it manifested itself primarily as a reaction or counter-direction to traditionalism and historicism in all countries, and when it

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was approached for the first time by the French painter Edouard Manet in his famous paintings from 1863 (“Le Dejeuner sur l’herbe” and “Olympia”), it caused scandal and astonishment due to the novelty of his drawing style, which was clearly anti-academic for it did not cherish the traditional lines, and moreover, featured distinctly contemporary scenes and scenery. From the beginning, modernism meant breaking up with traditions and norms, with their need for precision. Quite on the contrary, it professed bringing to the fore spontaneity and artistic negativism, anti-classicism and anti-conservatism, thus denying or contesting all standardized and conformist form of art and ideology. In the end, with the new developments in painting, which migrate from clear lines and depictions, all the other arts would follow suit: “The antipathetic position instantiated by modernizing French painters’s protests against the rigidity of the Académie des Beaux-Arts across the nineteenth century efflorescences in a dizzying array of other forms as well, from the perturbations of Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé to the manifestos of the [...] Futurists” (Mao in Mao 2021: 13).

The banner of modernism is, therefore, the haste for novelty, which for its representatives stands as the only aesthetic value. Therefore, modernism manifested at the end of the 19th century as an *avant-garde* artistic direction which, through its opposition to rules, entailed a destructive and anarchic nature: “Modernism undertakes a true valorization of aesthetic non-value”, as Adrian Marino best describes it as the produce of the *durée* or historical evolvment, in his *Modern, Modernism, Modernity* essay book (1969: 36, 54). This results not only from the tendency towards the new and contemporary, but even from Modernism’s preferred themes: the ugly (*spleen*, in the sense of unsightly, but mainly boring, a sense of abandonment and erosion); the dimorphic, the inexpressible, the cumbersome, the inorganic, the immoral, the vice, etc. In this context, the modernists even propose replacing the notions of art and literature with the notions of anti-art and anti-literature based on its strong anti-realist stance (Engel in Baron and Engel 2010: 65-82).

As a literary trend, modernism took shape in the 1880s and included in its poetic development all the post-romantic movements (such as symbolism, expressionism, imagism, dadaism, and surrealism), while its narrative genres are to be situated right at the end of realism. As for the short story and especially the modern novel, with such diverse authors like Thomas Mann and James Joyce, they show particularities that distinguish them from the classic/traditional novel, and they also present an atypical technique, of evocation, thanks to which the modern novel is no longer a novel by definition. If, by tradition, the classical novel was an act of creation, the modern novel brings tradition to its end and becomes an act of evoking, which makes it enormously difficult for the modern writer to be a novelist.

Modern Narratives: Features and Themes

A post-romantic and post-realist movement, modernism is synonymous with the idea of *avant-garde*, which transcends both classical and romantic principles and sometimes its very own principles. Thus, although it includes symbolist poets and expressionist artists, modernism retains its name even if it turns out to be anti-symbolist and anti-expressionist. Drawing the particular elements and conflicts within the current, Matei Călinescu (1977) penciled and theorized the five faces of modernity, which are accordingly expressed as “modernism, avant-garde, decadence, kitsch and postmodernism”.

Just like anything that takes by surprise, modernism is perceived as scandalous, aggressive, flawed, angry, dynamic and traumatic for the artist and readers alike. For the artist it is traumatic because his poetry, having no previous model whatsoever, sprang from his own consciousness and will, which leads to more personal trauma. The pre-symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire used to urge fellow poets toward achieving the one thought that burns, namely to hit on something new (see Baudelaire in Lloyd 2006: chapter 4); however, for the public modernism is traumatic precisely because it shocks and scares, as Guillaume Apollinaire verbalized the now commonplace phrase stating that the new consists only in surprise (see Apollinaire in Dorra 1994: 308-311). Modernists’ emphasis on first portraying dreams and emotions in both paintings and poetry surpassed the equal amount of tolerance and deference that Horace once bestowed upon these fields in his famous syntagm *ut pictura poesis*: from the onset, modernism defied the reasonable in art, and instead paid heed to absconded realities which only the individual understands, but forever postpones their discernible overtones (in line with Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Verlaine, for whom “modern” poets will be “seers”, thus cursed, see Bays 1979: 10, 13, 105). However, like everything that is deliberately modern, contemporary and rootless, modern poetry ended up in mere fashion, and the necessity of passing from one fashion to another is as modern as this kind of art, hence the impossibility to remember and define all spectres of modernism and even to mark them off of postmodernism. As an ideological and cultural movement, modernism covers the period of the 1880s stretching into the 1930s. This time frame is important, since from then on its name until 1945 would only be found in the realm of visual arts and linguistic theory.

Precisely like modern poetry, modern prose crosses the boundaries of the 20th century and defines a literature of the post-war era (situated at of the end and especially after the First World War, see, for instance, Jackson 2003). The term “literary modernism” marks a definitive aesthetic turn and explores new cultural sensibilities in the context of the grand panorama of contemporary historical futility and anarchy (portrayed in T. S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” from 1925). Therefore, Modernism

manifests itself in disagreement with the order, stability and meaningful life of the 19th century, a riotous element against the old Victorian optimism and morality, which is why it is often felt as pessimistic, unclear, hopeless, momentum, earmarked and morally relativistic. Along with its pessimism and moral relativism, the modern novel introduces techniques and means of achievement foreign to the previous realistic prose, and they are especially visible in Thomas Stearns Eliot dramas as well in the novels and short stories of Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, Knut Hamsun, James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, etc.

The new narrative technique implies – in reaction to the “literature of exhaustion” (term used by John Barth to sketch literary realism in his essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967/1984: 62) – a “literature of plenitude/replenishment” (the same Barth in his essay “The Literature of Replenishment” (1979/1984: 193). Among the scores of features which Barth proposes in relation to said techniques, the following stand out due to their sudden surge in both modern novels and plays: the radical abandonment of the linear flow of the narrative; abandoning the conventions regarding the unity and coherence of the plot and characters, as well as their effect; encouraging ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions to challenge the action’s moral and philosophical meaning; the self-deprecating tone by which the false and naive claims of bourgeois rationality are ridiculed; the opposition between inner consciousness and rational, public, objective discourse; the appeal to subjective distortions pointing to the gradual disappearance of social life as represented by the 19th-century bourgeoisie.

Withdrawing to one’s self or to another space, in other words the individualism that characterizes the modern novel, only helped incriminate it for its narcissistic connotations, as it was disinterested in factuality and indeed socially uninvolved, while entirely oriented towards the form of the novel. The interest in form, and not in the social hides, however, a much deeper concern than the simple dissociation from tradition, namely the desire for artistic autonomy as opposed to realist mimesis. Modern narrative language no longer respects conventional meanings, thus one cannot be sure of the significance of a word or idea in the modern novel.

For this reason, modern writing approaches postmodernism through obscurantism and non-egalitarian tendencies. Hence the partisanship of some of the modern authors with Nazism and Fascism, seen in the case of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound or the Norwegian Knut Hamsun. As T. S. Eliot put it (1920: 27, 28), art must not be understood as its own, individual production, but in intertextuality or intercontextuality, and the artist must be judged in the light of the past and compared with all the other works that preceded him, in the hope of establishing a tradition of the history of ideas. Along with the novel, modern literature became aware of the importance of studying artistic creations comparatively, and at the same time of the need to change

the emphasis from action and character to the role of the narrator or stage director, hitherto almost unseen in literary productions. This doctrine is, in fact, the cornerstone of the New Criticism that unfolded in Europe and the United States between the 1920s and 1930s.

Perusing the themes and motifs of modern prose, one must remember that the area covered by them cannot ignore either the entire cultural history or ideas up to that time, nor the events that gave a new face to the political map of the first half of the 20th century, when “Europe has ceased to be the centre of the world” (Hayes 1992: 2ff). The theme of the novel is meaningless outside the political stage. Thus, the new configuration of the world map not only redirects attention from Europe to more exotic worlds, and especially to the Americas, but its axis changes completely in comparison with the political map of the 19th century, and the reasons are plenty: 1) the redrawing of territorial borders after WWI and the disintegration of the empires (Austro-Hungary no longer exists; in 1918 Russia loses vast territories, which will be regained only in 1945; Germany also loses internal and colonial territories in 1919, regaining some in 1945, same in England, France, China, etc.); 2) social-political division and inconsistency following territorial-colonial annexations; 3) a new ethnic consciousness given by the re-formation of large states (the birth of small countries, such as Finland, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, that gained independence from the USSR) and governmental reattachment (Germany loses percentages of its Polish, French and Danish population following the signing of various peace treaties after the wars); 4) mass killings (German anti-Semitism leading to the Holocaust, or the extermination of tens of thousands of Chinese by Japanese troops, etc.); 5) a new, grotesque, terrifying and absurd means of torture: the German concentration camp and the Russian gulag; 6) emigrations caused by racial and political terror; 7) the emergence of democratic states in 1940, such as the British Isles, Scandinavia, Switzerland, Netherlands-Belgium, Luxembourg, and West Germany; 8) feminist movements and the struggle for electoral rights and humane working conditions (see the role of the Weimar Republic and Chancellor Gustav Stresemann in 1926-1929 Germany (in Hayes, “France and Germany: Belle Epoque and Kaiserzeit”, 1992: 24ff); earlier feminist movements in Denmark and Norway 1890-1900); 9) the emergence of Communist parties in countries with old imperial traditions, due to social inequality and capitalism. By way of its class struggle polity, Communism even invaded new territories, such as North America, where as a unique phenomenon its partisans were declared illegal by administrative forces and the FBI, which led to a real “social witch hunt”); 10) the feeling of non-belonging and *méfiance* in the existing order, against the background of political pretences, insurgencies and disappointment created by political figures considered capable and robust (Hayes 1992: 3).

On this panorama, the main themes of the modern novel develop closely to the then politics, and present disruptive elements when compared to realist novels. Such differences regard the character or the *hero*, who becomes an anti-hero compared to former types of social and political heroes. The hero is no longer an asset of the modern novel, precisely because he is not trustworthy, and even the narrator is not believable/reliable. They live “an illogical, fragmentary, incoherent life. There were [in them] all kinds of tendencies, the possibility of every opposite, and, between these opposites, an infinity of intermediary degrees, and, between these tendencies, an infinity of combinations...” (Murphet 2023:134). The hero as modern character is common, confused, often a disturbed and impossible adolescent, he is deranged, degenerate, rebellious, deformed, outcast, medieval in the contemporary, built according to an ancient picture, perishable, genius admired, but distrusted and apocalyptic, from the bourgeoisie, but anti-bourgeois, symbolist to the point of annihilation, etc.

Corresponding to this kind of hero, the modern prose technique emphasizes multiple and intertwined narrative planes, flash-backs, psychology, the stream of consciousness, using myth, history, symbols, irony, self-irony, assiduous field work – which however proves counterproductive in the presence of the existing or imminent illness (as many modern authors suffered from terrible physical illnesses while writing) – their own antisocial experience as emigrants borrowing ideas from Nietzsche’s philosophical pessimism, from sociology and the existential-absurd philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, from the modern anti-decadent musical technique of Theodor Adorno and Arnold Schoenberg, and from the Jewish members of the New Critical School in Frankfurt, namely Marx Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and Herbert Marcuse.

But then, what is it that the modern novel does not entail? Modern prose in general should not be confused with particular, isolated trends that emerged in the mid-20th century and claimed especially by architecture and technology, such as “high modernism” taken as deprecatory appellation. For this kind of modernism, art is austere and anti-humanist through hermeticism in order to save itself from vulgarity. Man, for his part, has lost his communitarian skills and ended up looking for the meaning of life enclosed both privately and socially in the climate of the new Bauhaus architecture, wherein individuals become “living machines” condensed in standardized boxes – the cubicles – which “secure” them). Also, the modern novel is not the problem novel, a literary subgenre derived from the Young Adult literature of the 1960s hippie subculture (like, for instance, J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* from 1951). Understood as a novel for troublesome teenagers belonging to low-class broken families, it associates a specific linguistic and behavioral style with specific features found in: street language, dialect, jargon, imprecations, gang life and

related issues (see S. E. Hinton's novel *The Outsiders* from 1967, or Paul Zindel's *The Pigman* from 1968). This subgenre falls under the category of psychology and social work, which studies the loss of childhood innocence in its convoluted stages.

Marcel Proust: The Intricacies of Memory and Reflexivity

Novelist, literary critic and essayist, Marcel Proust (1871-1922) was marked from early youth by the high intellectual pursuits of his immediate and extended family, his father being a renowned pathologist and epidemiologist with vast medical and geographical interests and author of numerous specialist studies. Proust's mother, on the other hand, was of Jewish descent, particularly well educated and with family roots in Alsace, showing great command of the latest European philological productions (Tadié 2001: 37ff) and English. The other thing that influenced Proust's youth was his asthma, a serious impediment to him developing social relations as a child, and probably the main reason for his formation as author of *In Search of Lost Time*. Apparently Proust inherited from his mother a passion for reading and an interest in English philosophy and literature seen in the ensuing passion for writers like Carlyle, Emerson and John Ruskin, from whom he translated extensively into French given their cultural affinities. Probably also from Ruskin, whom he claimed to have known inside out, Proust appropriated a fascination for naturalistic elements in literature, and a particular fondness for taboo and morbid topics in the realm of sexuality as well, elements which Ruskin confessed and defended several decades before Proust (Tadié 2001: 353, 360).

Proust was born in Auteuil, in the midst of the turmoil that led to the fall of the Paris Commune (the citadel of the French working class and the first wave of socialism between March 28 and May 28, 1871, after the defeat of the French in the Franco-Prussian War). He therefore witnessed the beginning of a new social and political strata in modern France, which, however, did not affect him directly, since the writer never worked and did not integrate socially, always living in his parents' house and mostly isolated in his special room because of his asthma. Later on, the bourgeois salons were a treat that, as a dilettante, he visited constantly. Asthma, isolation in the village of Illiers, the high school years, the atmosphere of the *soirées*, the memory of his cork-padded apartment in his parents' house, homosexuality and, finally, the huge fortune he inherited when his mother died in 1905, all favored the unfolding of the series of seven novels *In Search of Lost Time*. His masterpiece was preceded by adolescent literary interests materialized in the work *Les Plaisirs et les Jours* from 1897, and the more extensive, though unfinished novel *Jean Santeuil*, in which he addresses for the first time, after days spent in bed reflecting on the past, problems such as the labyrinth of memory and reflection, which will be detailed later in the series (Tadié 2001: 279ff). These interests were subsidized by yet other inquiries, recounted in a

letter from 1908, where Proust confesses: "I am working on: a study of the nobility, a Parisian novel, an essay on Sainte-Beuve and Flaubert, an essay on women, an essay on pederasty (not easy to publish), a study on stained-glass windows, a study on tombstones, a study of the novel" (Proust 1989: xxvii).

Thus informed, Proust's work on the new cycle began in 1909, its seven novels amounting to a total of 3,200 pages in French and 2,000 characters, as they were published between 1913-1927 under the titles, *Swann's Way* (1913); *Within a Budding Grove* (1919); *The Guermantes Way*, in two volumes (1920-21); *Sodom and Gomorrah*, also in two volumes (1921-22); *The Captive* (1923); *The Fugitive* (1925), and *Time Regained* (1927). As in other novel series, Proust's series acquires unity on account of the uninterrupted presence of the narrator-author, who on all accounts is not omniscient, as his character changes with time both internally and externally. A second feature that secures the unity is precisely the return of some characters in the subsequent novels and the subjectivity with which they are treated by way of the narrator's involuntary memory. The cycle is built according to a procedure untried before Proust, hence the emergence of his subjective, personal character and innovation in art, which positions him as of the greatest novelist of the 20th century. In yet another letter, Proust shows that, for instance, he wrote the last chapter of *Swann's Way* immediately after the first, and composed the rest of the novel according to these poles in a seemingly round structure. Also in *Swann's Way*, most of the series' characters are introduced, and along the way they gain importance depending on the age (time) and dispositions (memory, reflection) of Proust the child, who notices the others and becomes aware of them in his parents' home. Also in relation to the narrator's age and memory is his innovative onomastics, which caused a great deal of excitement upon the release of the series' first novel. For instance, "in Britain, the Princess Royal actually said that the novel was 'the story of Leda seen from the swan's point of view'" (Tadié 2001: 715).

The centerpiece of Proust's narrative appears to be the social milieu, here divided between the aristocracy as represented by the Guermantes family, and the bourgeoisie shown in the Swann family, both disputing above all their impact on the salon life either in Paris or the small town of Combray, while their struggle for influence and display is fought by a coterie of nobles old and new, the gentry and the dukes respectively. If in the beginning this conflict is vaguely sensed, along the way it becomes undeniable that both classes have replaced the man/character with the social/salon, their life a resilient journey winnowing between expensive attire and meaningless relationships, superfluous and transient as "polished filth" (Călinescu 1982: 740).

Compared to the traditional or realistic novel, however, which deals with relatively the same problems, the Proustian series emphasizes psychology (or rather

the human unconscious) and the problem of time, against which the unconscious/involuntary memory unfolds. For him, involuntary memory starts from a simple sensation, like the contemplation of the form of a madeleine known from childhood, but not tried until adulthood, a method by which Proust made a career within this novel cycle spread over a period of fifty years. The method is not as simple as the sensation: the revelation of the madeleine taste is traced starting from the effect to the cause, not vice versa, as it usually is. The madeleine is seen after decades, and it is the narrator's psychological intuition of the pleasure that its taste would set off that produces the happiness of tasting it in the present; thus, it is not the actual taste that produces the effect.

However, as Proust himself argues, his childhood times are no longer, yet he is still able to feel/perceive them via various and involuntary memory spasms. These have traditionally been associated with Proust being infatuated with Henri Bergson's theory of time, where the "conception of memory as unconscious survival of the past is the way in which Proust... expresses the fundamental meaning of memory in the Western tradition". Of Proust's irreverence toward tradition in his novel series there is little doubt: even for the necessities of modernism *per se*, the narrator is deemed as unreliable precisely because what he once saw as a young man is in constant metamorphosis, simply opposite to an "eternal", idealistic return in time. Deeply embedded in the modern writer's consciousness is this variability or relativity of the truth in relation to one's experiences or past, which secures the possibility to further the artistic creation. Thus, if the narrator's memories would mean accurately reviving and reliving past emotions and experiences time and time again, his work would simply function as a biographical literary journal, which in Proust's case it is not: "for Proust, the past continues to exist independently of memory, which simply experiences it in a manner similar to that in which perception experiences the present... One occurrence alone is sufficient for a past event to exist eternally", and this is the "four dimensionalism" of time (see Ferraris and Terrone 2019: 92-106).

The writer's new psychological experience was also testified by those close to him, such as the painter and ex-lover Reynaldo Hahn (in *Jean Santeuil* portrayed as Henri de Réveillon, see Tadié 2001: 188), who once witnessed a peculiar synesthetic scene while strolling in the park, with Proust standing still for a long time while admiring what for others was a mere rose bush, see Proust, vol. 7: *Time Regained*, 1927: chapter I (on the significance of roses and plants in general for Proust, see MacKenzie, *The human landscape in Proust: a study in flower symbolism*). The "memory" of the rose can be traced back not only to the theme of memory supported by the narrator's

character in the novel series, but also by the writer himself in his autobiographical work *Jean Santeuil* (1952, vol. I: 136, 203), where we find that Proust was “attracted to the lilacs and the hawthorn”, as “the significance of these flowers is sketched out in this work of... young Proust” (Gerstel 1965: 31).

In the Introduction to *In Search of Lost Time*, Richard Howard delineates what a modern, escapist protagonist means for Proust:

What is narrated is not the narrator's life, but his *desire to write*. Time twarts his desire, tends it toward a conventional chronology (which must be continually subverted, for what is merely successive is surely lost: only the circle can be retrouve, a word that means not only regained, but rediscovered, recognized, repossessed) - and how many challenges, discouragements and rivalries must be endured before the *desire to write* achieves an ultimate Triumph. (Proust 1913: xiv)

Proust's method, scientifically known as synaesthesia (the combination of various sensations, such as a specific taste associated to and brought by the hearing of a certain sound; seeing a certain color when a name is uttered in words, etc.), *i.e.* revisiting memories through intuition and sensation, thus separately from logic, is closely related to the central theme of his narrative cycle, *i.e.* time, present from the very title: “Our memory is like one of those shops in the window of which is exposed now one, now another photograph of the same person” (Proust 1919: 642).

To be sure, Proust maintained that for him, the novel does not imply flat psychology, but psychology in space and time, because our everyday time is indeed elastic: our passions widen it, those that we ourselves inspire narrow it, and habit fills it (see Proust 1919: 242). In Proust, synaesthesia is directly related to time as chronology, which is the same for everyone: however, he infers, living in the duration of time changes from one individual to another, so that the time of the story sometimes exceeds the time narrated. Proust does not insist on the action of the novel, but on discussions, on spiritual turmoil, and like Dostoevsky he sees himself lost on hundreds of pages with lengthy accounts of some salon excursus, so that the subsidiary story-time is elongated beyond the actual time spent in the salon. Thus, sensations, feelings, their echo in the mind claim a much more complex temporal sequence than action proper, no matter how complicated. Applying the method of involuntary/unconscious memory in relation to time, Proust distinguishes between *chronos* (time as sequentiality) and *kairos* (elastic, indeterminate, meaningful time). Time as meaning is subjective, which is why Proustian characters are being passed through the sieve of memory and emerge as non-static. Unlike traditional, ready-made characters, Proust characters are therefore instantaneous and surprising.

Kafka and The Abnormal

Franz Kafka (1883-1924) was born in Prague to a wealthy Jewish family, his father being a great industrialist evoking Thomas Mann's. As in the case of Mann, Kafka did not follow in the footsteps of his parents, although until early retirement he worked a mundane job at an insurance company holding a very important position, which also saved him from being drafted for war. The family also had three daughters, who died in the Nazi concentration camps.

In Kafka one can notice two central aspects that marked him from childhood to death and also shaped his work. First of all, the memory of quarrels with his father, a tyrannical personality, hence the father-son conflict in Kafka's literature, which he directly credits his father with in *Letters to the Father* (1919), admitting that he only wrote the letters so he could confess what he could never have told him openly. A second aspect is Kafka's fragile health reminiscent of Proust's, because of which he lived in constant fear of imminent physical and mental collapse. Kafka would eventually die after a grueling illness of tuberculosis and suffering from thirst in a sanatorium near Vienna.

Kafka wrote exclusively in German, beginning with letters to family and other confidants (1900-1924), and continuing with a diary (1910-1923) and short stories from 1904, at the age of 20, encouraged by his friend and literary critic Max Brod. It was Brod that published his work posthumously, despite Kafka's insistence on his deathbed that all his manuscripts be burned. Thus, stories such as *The Judgment* (*Das Urteil*, 1913), the short stories *Metamorphosis* (*Die Verwandlung*, 1915) and *The Penal Colony* (*In der Strafkolonie*, 1919), the novel *The Trial* (*Der Prozess*, begun in 1914 and published in 1925), and the unfinished novels *The Castle* (*Das Schloss*, 1926) and *America* (*Amerika*, 1927). Through his work, Kafka enters the sphere of absurd existentialism, and several characteristics of his short stories and novels can be identified to shape both the action and the situation of his characters in a continuous non-sense-resignation dilemma. To start with, there is an uninterrupted presence of the traveler in his short stories (*Metamorphosis*, *The Penal Colony*) or the stranger in his novels (*The Castle*, *America*), taken in either autobiographical sense (as a sales agent) or as external, foreign observer, with a decisive role in changing the work's outcome. Whenever the character surfaces in the story, he is almost exclusively on the verge of leaving everything behind, due to an unpleasant awakening to reality (Houwer 2010: 12). There is a sense of idiocy attributed to the early riser, as a preamble to the awareness of the physical disguise in *Metamorphosis*. There is, on the other hand, a perplexity induced by the processing of the torture harrow in *The Penal Colony*, and much to the reader's astonishment, there is a sense of modernity in the way prisons work, with the unexpected arrest of Joseph K. in *The Trial*, over against the procrastination with-

in the legal system and the postponement of rational case ruling (Gray 2005: xliii). Another modern dimension of Kafka's perspective on his characters conveys the burden, more specifically the burden of bosses and their intransigent orders in all short stories and novels, with an emphasis on the absurdity and abnormality of their situation. There is a stigma of debt in the family line, for instance in *Metamorphosis* Samsa is subject to his bosses whims because of the peculiar idea of an older debt of his parents. In *The Trial*, the arrest of Joseph K. seems to his uncle necessarily related to some illegality he had committed, regardless of him being aware or unaware of the whole situation. In *The Penal Colony*, duty turns man into an order obeying machine, thus inhibiting his personality under the pressure of punishment. On top of that, the absence of a fair trial and the punishment on command is almost tactile in Kafka's work, which announces twenty years in advance the emergence of Nazism and other European tyrannical regimes. The proximity of these types of tyranny supports the noisy atmosphere in the story. In *Metamorphosis*, the clock chimes setting the furniture in motion, while in *The Penal Colony*, the convict's torment attracts attention only when the harrowing mechanism squeaks in the effort to fold on the shape of the body for twelve consecutive hours. Above all, the chief/dictator/executive commander's power of persuasion exceeds the will of their subjects for generations, and Kafka offers sufficient detail and meticulous observation of the transformation phenomenon, which desirably should be mystical, ecstatic in *The Penal Colony*, yet physical, degrading, incredible and horrible in the *Metamorphosis*: "There is a never-ending dialectic going on in Kafka's work between guilt and innocence" (Houwer 2010: 20). The mental and physical suffering, although unnatural, requires compliance, every so often coupled with the irony of failure, an aspect which severs the possibility of consequentiality between two conflicting characters. Time is not the same for bosses and subordinates (see Corngold 2009: 1-18, "Kafka and the Ministry of Writing"), in spite of the continuous awareness of their surroundings, of the past and present with all its modern elements within the social and private life (the hospital across the street, the military photos, the uniform, the rain, the gray, the company, etc.). On the other hand, the intervention of race is described as burdensome, which is why the characters' eagerness to comply to their superiors is interpreted in the context of Kafka's Jewish ancestry. In *Metamorphosis*, the family and the company manager believe that Samsa "has nothing else on mind but business." In fact, throughout Kafka's work the word "business" is probably the most constant occurrence reflecting his characters' existence as "small businessmen" (Kafka 2009). Their bosses' indolence and intransigence, their feeling of omnipotence, their ceaseless imposing on and conquering of the world through cruelty and steadfastness are features identified

in Samsa's manager, who forces the parents to obey his vehement orders and remove their son from his room's seclusion right after his transformation into vermin.

Kafka's character fails to sense time and space as the father, who is always a crushing presence in his life, and here is a clue to yet another way of understanding time metaphysically in Kafka's work. The processing of myths in a modern setting unveils the Freudian complex of Oedipus in *Metamorphosis* and *The Judgment*. Gregor Samsa dies because of his father's carelessness and Georg Bendemann suffers the "verdict" of his senile father, who sentences him to death by drowning, although attempts have been made nowadays at "deconstructing" such images projected on Kafka's real life, and there are critical attempts to move attention from the absurdism of Kafka's prose by describing the author's own historical persona as outgoing and "popular" (see Hawes 2008). There is nothing to support this portrait of Kafka in his seemingly autobiographical fictional works or in his letters, but instead an overarching sense of unrealism given by the imminence of penance, like in Samsa's transformation from man into a millipede or the mismatch of the medieval torture device coupled with the exotic landscape in *The Penal Colony*. Nevertheless, the author's real-life tortures are traceable within his fiction, for instance his asthma similar to Proust's, which leads to a special kind of metamorphosis in solitude and isolation. For Kafka, however, memory is voluntary and involves conscious sensations experienced in the past and the unpleasantness of comparing them to the post-metamorphosis transition into another realm.

Another instance where Kafka's male characters' time differs from the others' is in the presence of women. In Kafka's work (little) women are perceived as elements of inequality, and at times as confidants of the strong male figure in a Freudian sense (see Houwer 2010: 16). For instance, Grete, Samsa's sister, allies with the father in order to eliminate the son, while in *The Penal Colony* the commander's wives, who like true spartans allow their children to witness executions account for Kafka's fraternity with writers like Proust and Thomas Mann, who both employ same types of women as mothers or lovers. The sense of indifference is here reserved to the male protagonists, and so is the dilation of time and space within the metamorphosis process. Therein, the story calls for scores of pages to undergo an hour of explanations about the torture machine in *The Penal Colony*. In *The Judgment*, there is a never-ending account of Georg Bendemann's inability to explain his father's indifference toward his sacrifice, love and respect. There is, on the other hand, no alteration of the woman persona in Kafka, and indeed Grete's final "change of heart" towards her brother in *Metamorphosis* is incumbent to her character, as from the start she shows glimpses of voluntarism. This is why, on the male counterpart, it takes a day and a night to accommodate Gregor Samsa's miraculous metamorphosis, an experience seen as

process (*Urteil*) in every sense of the word. Kafka's strong characters' oblivion, their will to preserve the family, the relatives' care not to interfere in matters of conscience lead to uncompassionate acts such as the hasted sweeping of Gregor's dead body, the joy of being rid of hidden burdens, unconfessed to the bosses, which is glimpse into the Jews' later fate, shooed away and left to perish.

Kafka's prose is a metaphor at core, the parable of a world always divided between those who adjudicate without justification and those who obey without understanding, without defence and without rebelling. For them, time itself has a metaphorical, better still, a metaphysical touch. As everything else seems to elude Kafka's characters, they have their own time different from the chronology of the busy, industrial, commercial every day life of their fellow tradesmen: "Analyzing the discourse of timekeeping and lateness in Kafka's *The Trial*, the author demonstrates that the novel [is] puncturing the... liniarity of time with metaphysical time. Joseph K.'s inability to keep time or to stay attentive when it really matters makes him a protagonist who has lost the capacity to acknowledge the possibility of a different temporality" (Fuchs in Hammer 2018: 173). Even at the authorship level, Kafka would have to inquire as to how one is supposed to understand the meaning and content of his own creation, since the undertones of his metaphors are not easy to grasp.

In one of his now well-known letters to Felice Bauer, Kafka is as inquisitive like the rest of his readers regarding the interpretation of his work: "Can you discover any meaning in *The Judgment*?—some straightforward, coherent meaning that one could follow? I can't find any, nor can I explain anything in it" (letter of 2 June 1913 in Kafka 1992: 265). Neither can we assert that time is a reality in any of Kafka's works, though there are clocks and watches and pains associated with it; however, for the main character, time is but a flaw in his existence, just like his own life is a flaw for the others. Even his *Letters to his Father*, although "his difficult relationship with his domineering father has a bearing especially on his early fiction [...], should be seen as a literary document rather than a factual record" (Kafka 2009: viii), which again speaks for the "puncturing" of chronology mentioned earlier. Consequently, the illusory nature of time in Kafka's works suggests that, in spite of the character's suffering and final death, there is no fatality in Kafka whatsoever, since there is no meaning to the character's life due to the absurd involved, thus the very duration of his efforts, struggles and remorse, *i.e.* his feelings, is illusory (see McTaggart's theory of the "appearance of a temporal order", 1908: 457-474). The short-time memory that could be attached to Kafka characters' life does not imply fatality, since fatalism is something that even in modern literature is explainable and revelatory.

Conclusions

The problem of time in Modernism is specifically linked with the problem of memory understood both as *chronos*/space time, *i.e.* quantitative, and *kairos*/critical moment, a sequential time of opportunity, *i.e.* qualitative. In a grand study on these ideas, White (1983: esp. 3-11) alludes to the problem of time in metaphors and compares critical time (*kairos*) to the archer's arrow, which needs not only be "fired accurately", but fired "with enough power for [the arrow] to penetrate." And if this image is not illustrative enough, a second meaning is revealed through yet another comparison, namely "the art of weaving", the interspersed movements of the loom, that bring the fabric off masterfully. *Kairos* is "a succession of discontinuous occasions than as duration or historical continuity" (White 1983: 3, 4), since its origins can be traced back to *Caerus*, the Greek god of luck. *Kairos* has a beautiful particularity, described as "decentering of attention" which falls in line with Gertrude Stein's "continuous present" and "prolonged present", basically the same concept shaped right after WWI and sensibly related to the reality of "shifting conscience" peculiar to the men turmoiled by the harrowing war they experienced. This concept is encumbant of Stein's idea of time as non-linear sequences that break up with the "traditional past, present, and future tenses": "Everything is the same except composition and as composition is different and always going to be different everything is not the same... Composition is not there, it is going to be there and we are here. This is some time ago for us naturally... The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything... There is almost not an interval" (Stein 1926: 5). This is time resonant with the extension of one's being, when although two people are the same, they are in fact different as they select their own moment in time when this identity is revealed and carried on (same metaphor in Leick 2010: 121-133).

In line with Stein's present continuous, Proust contemplates time as calling upon memory or evoking the past with its almost ritualistic propensities, however different from the Western mystical tradition perceived as divination. Time for Proust is a growing experience that surpasses in quality its historical duration, which ensures its four-dimensional continuum. For Kafka, on the other hand, time is abnormal due to the characters' non-relational stance and the impossibility to grasp the sense of chronology. Time is not commensurate with the disappearance of the body, but instead carries on in its daily routine beyond the dissolution of being.

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