

UNHINGING TIME: NARRATIVE DISRUPTION IN SALHAB'S THE MOUNTAIN

Muhannad Hariri

In his seminal piece *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur revealed a circular relationship between temporality and narration.¹ A comparable circularity between the everyday experience of time on the one hand and the craft of narration on the other is expressed (albeit pessimistically) in some of Ghassan Salhab's films; for example in *Ashbah Beirut* (1991). In this film—and in some of his others—the plot operates at a level that is conscious of its own possibilities. This is obvious even in the sense of restriction that so many of Salhab's characters live through. But not all his works are made this way. A close study of his later films uncovers another tendency, one that eludes the circular in favor of the non-circular, or what amounts to the same, and the narrative in favor of the non-narrative. The key to this fundamental change in Salhab's art has to do with his use of narrative disruption. In a word, some films employ disruptions that are clearly "narratable," even essential to narrative, while others do not; in these latter cases of narrative disruption we glimpse an alternative image of time, which can be said to transfigure the circularity located by an outlook such as Ricoeur's. Although this thesis calls for an expansive treatment of Salhab's oeuvre, as well as of his gradual shift in artistry, for purposes of this work I cut straight to its more mature form, which is to be found in *The Mountain* (2010).

Before beginning I must make a brief remark. My thesis has little to do with the quasi-Nietzschean (or broadly avant-garde) program of shattering aesthetic-narrative principles. The builders of coherent and

¹ *Time and Narrative*, University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 3. (TN)

formally excellent plots always were, still are, and perhaps will continue to be, a means through which mankind's historical specificity is enduringly encapsulated. Ghassan Salhab is one such skilled creator of Lebanese post-civil war plots; thus, what he accomplishes in *The Mountain* must be understood in light of this accumulated skill.

Ricœur's Circle of Time and Narrative

Ricœur's considerations on time emerge within the wider topic of mimesis, which he chose to understand in Aristotle's sense of an imitation of action, and *not* in Plato's for whom mimesis was an imitation of nature. To put it simply, Plato thought of artists as forgers of nature, and this implied that art was a luxury with little relevance to human betterment; by contrast, Aristotle's interpretation of mimesis—as imitation of action and not of nature—allows for an appreciation of the connection between mimesis and *mythos*, Aristotle's word for the imaginative act of constructing a *plot*. So while Plato thought art merely imitated nature, Aristotle held that art imitated action by means of plot. A plot, in this connection, is not just a *succession* of natural events (such a list, to use Forester's example, would be "the king died and then the queen died"), for what a plot is, is a *sequence* of dramatic actions exhibiting human traits of enculturation and symbolism (here Forester says, "the king died and then the queen died of grief").

Thus unlike Plato for whom mimesis was an inadequate attempt to grasp another, for Aristotle it is tantamount to a look at ourselves: narrative art becomes an expression *of* and *for* humans as cultural beings. But whereas for Aristotle Greek Tragedy was the ultimate proponent of this type of reflection, Ricœur applies it to the whole sphere of narrative, be it historical or fictional. The result is a project to understand the temporal acts of fictive and historical narration as two species of one type of self-comprehension.

Starting from the side of narrative, Ricœur links the imaginative act of narration to a practical grasp of time. For instance, we say, "I wasted a lot of time today," or "I still have a lot of time." In both cases an agent either expects or remembers an action *in terms of time*, and the action is thus thickened with temporal significance. This is why

we can talk about actions as happening before and after one another, or even *because* of one another. So when Ricœur thinks about narration, he argues that plot construction presupposes an acquaintance with lived time. For Ricœur, without this essentially human, pre-given, grasp of time that is exhibited in our ordinary talk, the literary act of narration could not arise.

Now, starting from the other side of the circle with time, Ricœur defines temporality by the structure of Care found in Heidegger's account of Dasein's worldly comportment. Accordingly, *lived* time is understood as a "busyness" with things acted on and suffered from; as a result, time gets built around the intentional acts and projects of human life. We have an example in Hassan Daoud's recent novella, *As She Once Was*. A man's entire life is spent pursuing an impossible goal: reencountering his first and only love, Dalal; and in this life-long preoccupation, each waking moment is lived as a slow climb back to her, she of whom he endlessly sifts through streams of recollection, as though time itself was what kept them apart, was itself to be overcome by being passed over. There is something of Socrates in this, but it is enough for us to note how each moment of this man's life fits into the grand story of the journey toward finally reaching Dalal. (Parenthetically, there is also something of this faithful usage of memory to be found in the ideological nostalgia for old, pre-civil war Beirut—a force that would be equally opposed by Walid Sadek's notion of "the labor of forgetting," which itself is aimed at overcoming the nostalgia for specificities.)

Indeed, all of this is to say that we live storied lives. Ricœur summarizes this insight with the following formula: "time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence".²

It should be obvious that action itself is what is encircled, because all action, as temporal, is plotted. A corollary to this necessary "emplotment" is that every action is ethically significant. Indeed, Ricœur says that, "poetics does not stop borrowing from ethics ...".³ One must agree with Ricœur, and the wealth of gossip adorning man is ample

² TN, 52.

³ TN, 59.

testament. But, and here I raise my question, when it comes to *time*—which we have linked so closely to narrative in order to bring out the ethical character of action—this time, have we not thus *hinged it too tightly*?

To clarify my point I return to Daoud's story: we saw that in his quest for Dalal, the protagonist views time as an endlessly lengthening and chaotic trail leading eventually to the beloved. Everything he does is encompassed by this ceaseless maze in which dead ends are littered with souvenirs that push him further. Yet, paradoxically, at the end of the story, Dalal is abruptly forgotten and the protagonist exits the maze by finally bathing in the sea succumbing to a passionate desire for three migrant workers that have beckoned to him throughout the story. —What accounts for this sudden shift? Walid Sadek might say that Dalal's image is no longer summonable by the end, that she has finally been digested and not only repressed. While I am convinced that this is correct, there is another way to put it in relation to our problem of time: if the time of action is always narratable, need time *itself* always be narratable?

The Straight Line of Time

The Mountain begins with a fantasy: escaping the city. Except for a telltale stack of blank papers (as opposed to say, a passport) in his suitcase, our man seems to be on his way out of the country. As such, the story begins with a Homeric feeling: Ulysses is about to embark on his journey from which no one knows for sure when he will return. Indeed, he promises his doubtful friend who takes him to the airport that it will only be a month. Thus the film begins, thus the action is plotted, and thus time is hinged to the moments of departure and possible return.

But the fantasy of *absence* evaporates. At the airport our man rents a car and, under the cover of night, heads for the mountains. We gradually learn of his intention to isolate himself in a hotel room for a month—in order to write. What is surprising is *not* that he secludes himself; rather, it is that he does not get on the airplane and leave at the start of the film. *This* transgression, this faithless turning from a norm, this active forgetting, brings forth a caesura. In this way, the

sober fantasy of absence (departure) is eclipsed by the incomprehensible fantasy to be *traceless*.

In particular the caesura begins from the moment our man pauses at the airport and lasts until he witnesses an automobile accident on the side of a mountain road. In a comparable context, Holderlin uses the term caesura for the moment when Teiresias informs Oedipus that he is the real cause behind the pollution of Thebes; in other words, when the extent of the great transgression (patricide and incest) has been revealed. No one in Thebes will be the same once this revelation is made. Similarly, our man cannot return once *his* decision is made. Perhaps we see here a quasi-Oedipal transgression: though our man's act is a definite slashing away of the signifying father ("migrate" or "remain") it is also a union with the cold and brutal mountain-mother. This willed enslavement to her brutality is what disfigures time since our man is henceforth suspended at her mercy, unable to return. Gilles Deleuze diagnoses this state perspicuously:

In Oedipus time has become a straight line, which will be the long line on which Oedipus wanders. There will no longer be any atonement, even if only in the form of a brutal death. Oedipus is in perpetual suspension; he will travel his straight line of time. In other words, he is traversed by a straight line, which drags him along, toward what? Nothing.⁴

I think this passage can be clearly related to what occurs in the second half the film in which the narrative collapses and the viewer becomes privy to an irritating spectacle. We encounter a man pushed to a state that is beyond pity. In one scene the camera is set on his upper half while he attempts to negotiate with his ceaseless erection; this potentially humorous scene is hollowed out and we are left with a portrait of a man that makes no contact with discursive reality: we realize that this negotiation is deeper than sexual discipline. Indeed, he later masturbates, but even then the straight line of time on which our man has embarked has changed the rules of satisfaction. He never climaxes, the discharge is infinitely delayed by the straight line of time. This can be grasped in three ways: the first is metaphysical, the second ethical and the last aesthetic.

⁴ From his Kant lectures to be found at webdeleuze.com.

First metaphysical way – With Ricœur we spoke of a sequence of events that is arranged by logical, causal and symbolic systems of order; but we must distinguish sequence from succession, which lacks this type of order. On the one hand sequence is easy to grasp since you start with a manifold of unordered elements such as events, characters, symbols, etc., then these are ordered into a plot. For that we use concepts and discursive procedure. What's missing, however, is an account of succession. As time is narrated in the city below and also beyond the nation's boundaries, time for our man as he is locked away in his hotel room has been irreversibly disfigured. The majority of the film is characterized by silence and agitation brought about by wayward self-sabotage; as a result, our man's tie to the universe gets undone. Thus the film plays out in "no time at all"—that is to say, after the caesura, the film snaps shut, or rather shoots off on a trajectory we are unable to interpret. These metaphors exhibit an important truth: *time in itself is independent of the stories men share. One might say that here we glimpse a naturalist time, a time cut loose from the comings and goings of beings like us.* This is the sense of succession I have in mind.

Second ethical way – This one stems from Kracauer's Introduction to his posthumous work.⁵ There the renowned film theorist offers as his second reason for studying history so late in his career the mysterious notion of "the nascent state of great ideological movements".⁶ The birth pangs of grand ideas like Christianity and Communism is what he has in mind. Kracauer wished to access critical points in history—*caesuras*—where ideas are at their purest, that is to say, not yet bolstered by "the firmness of a widely sanctioned belief".⁷ You see Kracauer thinks that belief entails misunderstanding; so he wanted to articulate the chaotic ferment that came before belief. To illustrate his point he raises the figure of Erasmus who famously sided neither with the Catholics nor with the reformers of the Church; instead, Erasmus maintained an unthinkable impartiality. Of course from the perspective of the vying church powers—the *believers* in the faith, Erasmus appeared to be frustratingly undecided, but from another perspective, he seemed to be committed to some vision of Earthly peace beyond

⁵ *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, Clarendon Press, 1969; *preface*. (H)

⁶ *ibid.* 6.

⁷ *ibid.* 7.

any ideological constraint. You see, *The Mountain* is not within the space of beliefs; rather, it is liminal-creative, an essay on emptiness. The film is not merely agnostic towards the war; nor does it take sides with or against remembering it in any way. It succeeds at maintaining a limit point that is neither here nor there, but from which both sides emerge, an absolute.

Third aesthetic way – I want to draw your attention to an image that appears repeatedly throughout *The Mountain*, that of a footstep in the snow. Filming a footstep. What a cliché! And Salhab is filled with clichés, but you have to know how to look at them. First, it is itself an interruption. It comes a number of times, serving different disruptive functions, but at the end of the film, the footprint serves its crucial role: it is an anticipation of something that the film merely announces, and it can only anticipate because it cannot show. This is like the moment between hearing a knock and waiting for the door to open. The footprint is the limit traversing the line of inactivity that goes from the knock to the door's slow swing. This is to say that at the end of the film the footprint in the snow resists narration: it's a gap.

Yet another way is to put it in term so Salhab's forthcoming films: we are accustomed to think of footprints as pressed into the Earth, when in fact, at the end of *The Mountain*, the footprint is no longer a clue or a document of some past action, but is now seen as a natural formation, something like a *Valley* or a *River*.

Muhannad Hariri (b. 1988) is an instructor of Philosophy at AUB where he earned his graduate and bachelor degrees in that subject. He is currently enrolled at University College Dublin where he plans to write a dissertation on Wilfrid Sellars. In addition to these philosophical concerns Muhannad frequently conducts research on cinema and television. He is also a committed writer of fiction; samples of his stories can be found at the following web address: www.idiomsearch.wordpress.com.