Chapter 1

Introduction: About About Time

My title both chastises me for the tardiness and congratulates me for the timeliness of my book. In 1989, David Wood predicted that 'our century-long "linguistic turn" will be followed by a spiralling return to time as the focus and horizon of all our thought and experience' (David Wood 2001: xxxv), and it is about time that this prediction about time came true. The need as I see it is partly as Wood described it: the need for a 'programme for the analysis of temporal structures and representations of time' (xxxvi). Alongside such a programme, there is also a need for a theoretical account of time which might rescue the analysis of temporal structures from some of the vagueness of new historicism, cultural history, Derridean hauntology, the uncanny and the cultural theory of postmodernism. It is particularly in relation to fiction, to the strange temporal structures that have developed in the novel in recent decades, that a clear framework for the analysis of time seems necessary. But there is also a need to revisit the relation of fiction and philosophy because of these strange temporal structures, to ask what domain of understanding or knowledge might be occupied by the contemporary novel on the subject of time, or what effects these structures might exert in the world.

The word *about* has turned out to have a resonance for my topic that I didn't fully anticipate. If primarily it means 'on the subject of', it carries within it a set of general problems about the content of language and, for my purposes, a specific question about fiction: what does it mean to say that a fictional narrative is 'on the subject of' time? Many who have written on this topic have chosen to focus on novels which are manifestly, perhaps intentionally, about time. Commonly this involves detailed readings of novels which are addressed unmistakably to the question of time at the level of theme and content. It is also reasonably common to find a less content-based, more formalist sense of 'about', according to which experimental narrative forms and techniques are seen to place time at the forefront of a novel's thematic concerns. Such novels are about time in

the sense that they explore the theme of time, perhaps even the nature of time, through the temporal logic of storytelling.

Paul Ricoeur is one of those who believe that some fictional narratives are about time and others are not. He proposes, in Part 3 of *Time and Narrative*, that it is possible to distinguish between *tales of time* and *tales about time*. All fictional narratives, he claims, are tales of time 'inasmuch as the structural transformations that affect the situations and characters take time'. Tales about time, on the other hand, are those in which 'it is the very experience of time that is at stake in these structural transformations' (101). Time is a universal feature of narrative, but it is the topic of only a few.

This boundary between the 'of' and the 'about' will be difficult to establish.[1] For Ricoeur, the distinction is fundamental for the so-called *Zeitroman*, but his attempts to establish it are riddled with tautology and contradiction. First he selects the most cooperative and incontrovertible examples of the *Zeitroman* – Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* – and takes as his analytical project the staggeringly circular goal of demonstrating that these are indeed tales about time. The interest in this section of *Time and Narrative* lies in the difficulty Ricoeur encounters in this apparently self-affirming project. 'That *The Magic Mountain* is a novel about time is too obvious for me to have to insist upon the fact' but it is 'more difficult to say in what sense it is one' (1985: 112). Three pages later, *The Magic Mountain* is 'therefore not simply a tale about time' but one which presents a 'problem': 'how the same novel can be both a novel about time *and* a novel about a deadly sickness' (115). This worsens as the 'destiny of European culture becomes what is principally at stake' (116) and the *Zeitroman* becomes subordinated within the framework of a *Bildungsroman*. This problem of what is 'principally at stake' in a novel becomes something of a refrain in Ricoeur's discussion, proving the 'aboutness' of the premise with the 'at stakeness' of the discovery. *Mrs Dalloway* is about time because the conflict between internal duration and the exteriority of clock time is 'ultimately at stake', just as Proust's novel is a quest in which 'what is at stake is, precisely, the dimension of time'. As in *The Magic Mountain*, *In Search of Lost Time* can only be about time if time is what is at stake, so that it cannot be claimed, as Deleuze has done that 'what is principally at stake . . . is not time but truth' (1985: 131).

The problem of *aboutness* will never be far away in the discussion that follows, and for the moment I would like to make two observations about it. The first is that in Ricoeur's account of the 'tale about time', it is not necessary that time be the only topic, but rather that it predominates. It

must be what is principally, but not exclusively at stake. As a critical stance, this is strikingly similar to the question of form and structure in narrative as it was approached in Russian formalism and structuralism in the mid-twentieth century. There, the proposition in question was not that all fictional narratives are about time, but that they were, variously, about form, about structure, about language or about narrative itself. Fredric Jameson describes structuralism, for example, as 'a kind of transformation of form into content, in which the form of structruralist research . . . turns into a proposition about content: literary works are about language' (1972: 198–9). If we look at Jakobson's method of dealing with this problem, we see that it resembles Ricoeur's resort to the idea of predominance. For Jakobson (1960) there were six functions of language which co-existed in any given utterance, but only when one of the functions predominated could the utterance be said to be 'about' that function. The second observation I would like to make about the question of the tale about time follows from the first – from the familiarity of the problem to the structuralist. Jakobson is perhaps not typical of structuralism in the sense that he is happy to view the form of an utterance itself as the topic of some discourses. Many would claim that the content of every discourse was its form. For the structuralist, there was a danger in saying that some works were about form and others were not. We might, for example, adopt the classical position that poetry somehow orientated its message towards form more than prose did, in the sense that it highlighted the formal structure of its medium. Prose on the other hand aimed at a kind of transparency – it aimed exactly to disguise the formal aspects of its communication in the dream of transparent reference to the world. The characteristic response to this in structuralism was that the highlighting of formal properties in poetry and the disguise of these properties in prose does nothing to suggest that form is somehow more centrally a feature of the former than the latter. In fact the danger is that we will fail to notice the formal properties of the most transparent discourses, confusing linguistic with phenomenal reality. It is therefore more important to consider the most transparent discourses to be about form than those that openly declare themselves to be so, because the role of unmasking is necessary in the former case and unnecessary for the latter. It is this sort of argument that underlies Barthes's position on the 'unhealthy signifier' which effaces its own status as a linguistic sign, or on the realistic novel which aims to hide the structurality of its structure.

This argument can be quickly illustrated in relation to the novel. We might reason that Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is a novel about the form of fictional narrative because it comically highlights formal conventions in the novel. The corollary of this sense of 'aboutness' is that we might view

a novel such as Jane Austen's *Emma* as a transparent depiction of the world. In *Tristram Shandy*, the form of the novel itself could be said to be what is principally at stake in the narrative, whereas in *Emma*, what is principally at stake is matrimony and social mobility. For the structuralist, such a claim was bogus precisely because the novel which disguises its textuality is no less textual than the one which declares it. More generally, language which denies that it is language is no less linguistic for it, just as the denial that one is bourgeois does not make someone less bourgeois, and may even make them more so. In this situation, the critic must focus efforts on the unmasking of those tales normally considered not to be about form, about structure or about language, since it is those discourses which are wearing masks, or involved in any kind of deceit. To say that language is a universal feature of all discourses but the topic of only a few is to allow the deceit to stand. If we translate the terms of this discussion into the question of time, of the tale about time, we find a basis for the claim that all novels should be viewed as tales about time. If time experiment in the novel is an exploration of the theme of time, or the nature of time, through the temporal logic of storytelling, it is only so because the temporal logic is unconventional. If we say that a narrative which obeys a more conventional temporal logic is not about time, we are merely succumbing to its naturalisation. When we think that narratives are not about time, we are accepting the way that conventional narrative temporality has embedded a certain view of time in our universe.

This is one of the positions that this book aims to explore – that it is important to see all novels as novels about time, and perhaps most important in the case of novels for which time does not seem to be what is principally at stake. Ricoeur's stance on this issue seems unnecessarily bossy, and depends on the authority of the interpreter in the act of identifying what is principally at stake. This kind of authority is in evidence in the everyday interpretation of semiotic objects as much as in the academic study of art and literature, and particularly when the true subject of an artwork is a matter for debate, but in academic contexts, no more than in cinemas or art galleries, these are debates conducted without a rational foundation of the kind that can only be provided by a theoretical account of the concept of 'about'.

The second major area of resonance of the word 'about' for my study is derived from its long career in crossword clues, and carries the hidden sense of 'backwards', of turning about and running in the opposite direction. 'About time' is backwards time, and the idea of a backwards temporality at work in narrative is the major emphasis that this project brings to the study of narrative temporality. Narratives are often not only

about time, but they are *about about time*, that is, on the subject of the backwards motion of time.

Imagine reading a novel with a bookmark. Suppose the novel is read from the beginning to the end, in the right order and for the first time. The bookmark will move over time from the beginning to the end of the novel and as it does, it will represent the reader's present in the narrative. Everything to the left of it is in the past, already known, and everything to the right of it is in the future, and not yet known. The past of the narrative is fixed in a way that the future of the narrative is not. Anything could happen. At first glance, this reflects the way that time works in life. We inhabit the present, which is sandwiched between a fixed past and an open future. But there are some obvious differences. The present for a reader in a fictional narrative is not really the present at all but the past. It is somebody else's present related to us in the past tense. Though it seems like the present, because it is new to us, it is tensed as the past, in what the French call the preterite, a tense otherwise known as the past perfect or the past historic. We are narrated to in the preterite, but we experience the past tense in the present. But because it is the past tense we know that there is a future present, in relation to which the present of the narrative is past. Peter Brooks points out that there is a tradition of narrative criticism, including Vladimir Propp, Jean-Paul Sartre and Frank Kermode, which views the act of telling a story as fundamentally different from life because 'in telling everything is transformed by the structuring presence of the end to come, and another, opposite tradition, including Claude Bremond and Jean Pouillon, for whom the action of a novel takes place before the eyes as a 'kind of present' (1984: 22). The relation of this quasi-present of reading to the structural retrospect of tense in the novel is an issue to which this book returns in each of the chapters that follow. A fictional narrative encourages us to think of the past as present no more than it encourages us to think of the present as a future past. But whereas narrative theory has explored the first implication, of what Ricoeur calls the presentifying[2] of the past, exhaustively, through the themes of memory, the reliability of the narrator and other aspects of retrospect, it has paid far less attention to the correlative issue in which the present is experienced in a mode of anticipation.

Narrative is understood as retrospection more readily than it is understood as anticipation, but it cannot really be one without also being the other. If, in order to look back at what has happened, we tell a story, we must also know that the present is a story yet to be told. The present is the object of a future memory, and we live it as such, in anticipation of the story we will tell later, envisaging the present as past. The present

might be lived in anticipation of some future present from which it is narrated, but this may also entail the anticipation of events between the present present and the future present from which it is narrated which will also be part of that story. For many years, the study of narrative has been attending to the notion of the present as a place from which we continuously revise stories about the past, and much less attentive to the relationship between storytelling and the mode of continuous anticipation in which we attach significance to present moments. There are some excellent studies of fiction in relation to the philosophy of time, but the approach is usually orientated around the search for lost time, around the remembrance of things past and the way they inhabit the present. The concern of this book is with the relationship between storytelling, future time, and the nature of being. It begins from two propositions. The first is that the reading of fictional narratives is a kind of preparation for and repetition of the continuous anticipation that takes place in non-fictional life. The second is that the place of fictional narrative in the world has altered since the beginning of the twentieth century, and that fiction has been one of the places in which a new experience of time has been rehearsed, developed and expressed. These propositions give fiction, and the study of fiction, a critical role in the understanding of what lies outside of fiction.

This question of anticipation, or of a mode of being which experiences the present as the object of a future memory, has one of its fictional correlatives in the structural retrospect of the novel, but it can also be related to the question of prolepsis, or the kind of fictional flashforward that conjoins a 'present' moment to a future one. The idea that this anticipatory mode of being might be a characteristic of contemporary culture, the contemporary novel, and even of human being in general is one that informs the discussion of the first three chapters of this book. Chapter 2 looks at the concept of the present from Augustine's puzzle about the non-existence of the present to Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence. The aim of this chapter is to consider the contemporary novel in the context of social theories of time and philosophical accounts of time. It takes three concepts of time in contemporary cultural theory, which it names as time–space compression, accelerated recontextualisation and archive fever, and three philosophical approaches to time which have some relevance for a future-orientated theory of narrative and which are derived from Husserl, Heidegger and Derrida. In the context of these ideas, the chapter argues against the predominance of 'retrospective' models of narrative, such as Linda Hutcheon's 'historiographical metafiction', as a basis for characterising the contemporary novel. Chapter 3 offers an analytical framework for the concept of

prolepsis designed to take the term forward from Genette's influential account in such a way that it is capable of accounting for effects formerly considered as metafictional. Chapter 4 turns back to philosophy in order to establish a set of connections between temporality and self-consciousness. Like the idea of retrospect in narrative theory, the idea of self-consciousness has played a significant part in critical characterisation of the contemporary novel, and this chapter aims to show the inseparability of a problematic of self-consciousness from the philosophy of time. Chapter 5 follows these issues into the question of inner and outer time, and turns attention on the Augustinian foundations of modern philosophies of time, and an analysis of the narrative aspects of Augustine's *Confessions*. Chapters 6 and 7 pose a question about the nature of knowledge in fiction, and the difference between what a novel knows about time and what a philosopher knows. These chapters involve readings of Graham Swift's *Waterland*, Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*, Ali Smith's *The Accidental*, and Ian McEwan's *Saturday*. Finally, Chapter 8 explores the potential impact of tense philosophy on narratology and asks the question of whether it is possible to infer a metaphysics of time from the linguistic form of narrative. In each section of this discussion there is an attempt to bring about a useful conversation between the temporality of narrative and the philosophy of time.

Notes

1. The potential confusion of 'tales of time' and 'tales about time' is illustrated by Genevieve Lloyd, who begins her otherwise very accurate exposition of Ricoeur by getting this the wrong way around: 'But not all novels are "tales of time" ' (Lloyd 1993: 12).
2. Ricoeur is following both Schiller and Gunther Muller here. See *Time and Narrative*, Part 3, p. 66 for the former and p. 78 for the latter. But the terms are also used in Heidegger and Husserl in various forms.