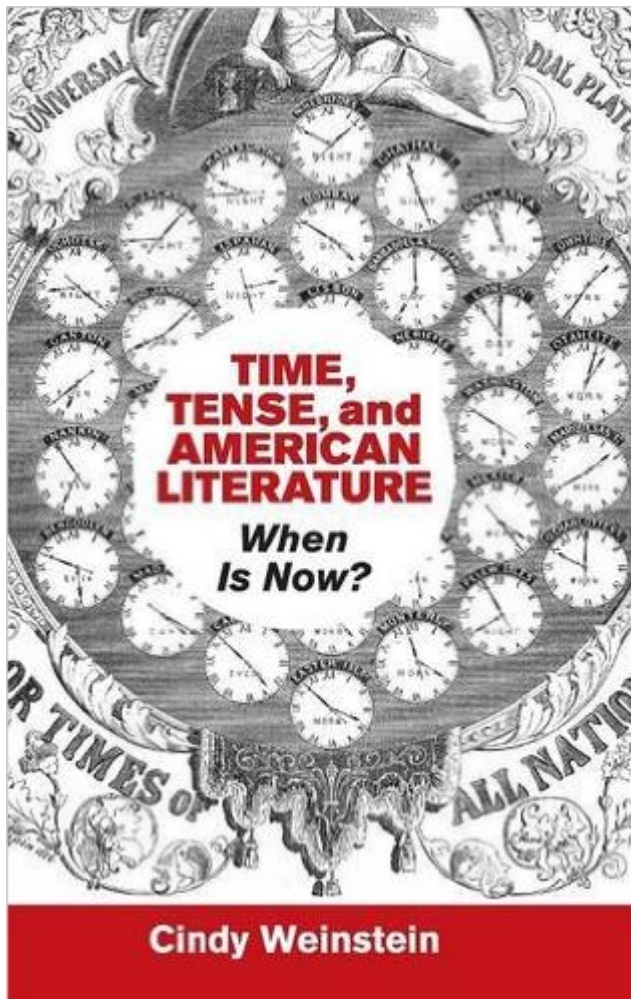
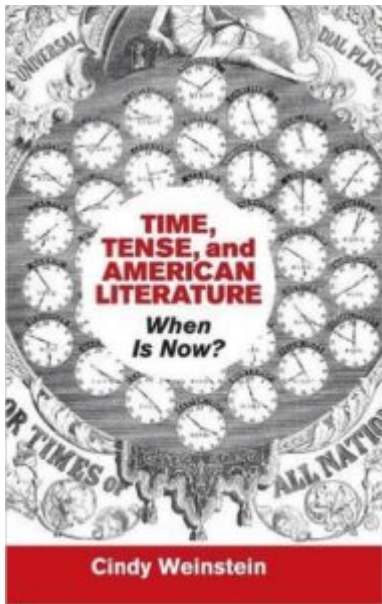


Reading Time



Ever since I first received my copy of Cindy Weinstein's inventive, invigorating new book, I have puzzled over its title. The book's appealing cover reproduces Samuel P. Avery's engraving of a "universal time plate," a circular block into which are embedded a few dozen clocks registering the "times of all nations." The title of the book appears in the center of this image: "Time, Tense, and American Literature" in a bold, red sans serif font against a white background; and beneath that, in slightly smaller but italicized black type "When is Now?" What puzzles me is this: Which is title and which is subtitle? Size and sequence—typically we read from top to bottom—would seem to nominate the former as the book's title (and this is indeed confirmed by both its copyright and its less ambiguous title page). Yet academic titling conventions, not to mention the italics, might suggest otherwise: those conventions typically call for crisp, evocative titles—like, say, "When is Now?"—followed by more flatly descriptive, enumerative subtitles. Curiously, Weinstein's book seems to place the subtitle *before* the title, and the title comes *after* the subtitle. Why?



Cindy Weinstein, *Time, Tense, and American Literature: When is Now?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 194 pp., \$89.99.

There is something apt about this little perplexity, I think: the book's title cleverly performs a version of the "temporal shenanigans" (6) that constitute its main interest in a handful of American novels from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries. Using Edgar Allan Poe's "temporally unhinged" *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* as a kind of fulcrum, Weinstein analyzes fictions by Charles Brockden Brown, Rebecca Harding Davis, Theodore Dreiser, and Edward P. Jones that foreground questions of time and "whose hold on sequence," as she puts it, "is wobbly" (4). Focusing attention on the various "temporal markers" in each text—verb tenses and adverbs, words that indicate time or tempo, the appearance of clocks and time-pieces, references to dates—Weinstein reveals the ways the novels in her archive unsettle straightforward chronology and leave time in disarray, confounding what comes before and what comes after, and the verbal formations that help us tell the difference.

Weinstein's playful term for this intricate, often disorienting "temporal grammar" is "tempo(e)rality." Tempo(e)rality represents "a breakdown in temporal logic" (5); it is "what happens when 'the narrative goes into a temporal rabbit hole'" (4). Drawing on the insights of narratology, especially the narrative theory of Roland Barthes and Gerard Genette, Weinstein develops a method of reading that attends rigorously to "verbal minutiae" and exerts unusual pressure on temporal terms and phrases like "while," "first," "at length," "now and then," or "would." The result is a series of dazzling readings that identify, with a remarkable level of precision, what it is that makes the experience of reading a novel like *Edgar Huntly* or *An American Tragedy* so very strange and frequently disorienting. Weinstein reveals, for instance, the "condition of delay" (31) that characterizes the narrative movement (or lack thereof) in *Edgar Huntly*, a novel in which "the perpetual postponement of action becomes the action" (31). In her reading of *An American Tragedy*, she concentrates on Dreiser's odd stylistic penchant for avoiding past

tense verbs in favor of present participles and gerunds in an attempt to capture the presentness of the present moment, despite the fact that the novel is a past tense narrative. And her concluding chapter on *The Known World* proceeds by way of a detailed, sustained analysis of the “tricky word” *would*, which helps Jones to “harness the power of prolepsis” (110).

On this, the micro-level, the book is a *tour de force* of close reading and a reminder, if one needs reminding, of the pleasures and rewards of intense, prolonged scrutiny of the verbal complexities of literary texts. An exquisite reader, Weinstein models a method of analysis that has a great deal to teach about “how to read time” (8). Yet *Time, Tense, and American Literature* is not solely concerned with the strictly aesthetic dimensions of literary fiction. Weinstein also seeks to account for her chosen texts’ temporal intricacies by situating them “in the time of their production” (8). Which is to say that the book also tells a “macro-story that reads temporal patterns in dialectical relation to particular historical contexts” (5). So however much the narratives she treats might themselves seem to be “temporally at sea,” they are always nevertheless “anchored by a historical moment” (12). For example, *Edgar Huntly*’s preoccupation with hesitation and paralyzing deliberation mirrors the temporal conditions of debates over ratification of the Constitution: the Federalists’ insistence that “the time is now” versus the anti-Federalists seemingly endless deferrals. Or in *Pym*, the text’s unsettling of a temporal zero degree—a “now” point against which to measure before and after—is at odds with its commitment to the stabilizing force of conventional racial hierarchies. The novel’s “aesthetic power has the alarming effect of obstructing [its] ideological perspective” (42). And in her chapter on Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Gates Ajar*, Weinstein argues that “the temporal disorderliness reflects the experience of rupture and trauma that was the Civil War” (74).

As startling as Weinstein’s analyses typically are, however, her commitment to historicism turns out to be, for me at least, the book’s more surprising claim. Weinstein aligns *Time, Tense, and American Literature* with the recent “temporal turn” in American literary studies, exemplified in recent books by Wai Chee Dimock, Lloyd Pratt, and Dana Luciano, for example. Yet Weinstein resists the temporal turn when its investments in alternative temporalities lead scholars to question practices of periodization (one thinks here of Cody Marrs’s recent *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War*) or to disrupt what I would describe as *conventional* historicist practices. Following Valerie Traub, Weinstein maintains that temporal studies “need not and should not be divorced from historical inquiry” (14). With this I agree and, to be sure, the connections Weinstein makes between texts and contexts—the temporal dimension of the ratification debates, for instance, or the links between Dreiser’s stylistic idiosyncrasies and William James’s work on time consciousness—are fascinating. Yet Weinstein’s particular form of historicist practice also leaves unexamined some questions about what constitutes historical inquiry and what it means to historicize.

Those questions arise from Weinstein's tacit distinction between the time of (textual) narrative and the time of (perhaps extra-textual) history, the former, as Weinstein's readings so vividly demonstrate, wayward and variable, and the latter seemingly stable and secure. Yet Weinstein's final chapter itself collapses this dichotomy and ultimately unsettles, rather than adheres to, the Jamesonian imperative to "always historicize!" (14). That is, the historical context Weinstein chooses for her reading of *The Known World* is U.S. slavery. The chapter's historical archive includes, for example, antebellum slave narratives as well as periodical articles, court decisions, and treatises that debate the legal status of slaves. Weinstein's handling of these materials and their relation to Jones's novel is characteristically perceptive and absorbing. Yet her treatment might also be seen as methodologically tenuous. After all, antebellum slavery is the context of the novel's *setting*, not of its time of production. (In the same way, 1787, the year of the ratification debates, is the year the action of *Edgar Huntly* takes place; the novel was published in 1799). According to the logic of historicist contextualization, then, Weinstein's reading is itself unhistoricist. Which, I want to say, I point out less as a criticism than as a condition of inevitability—since contexts, too, are temporal narrative devices.

These misgivings about Weinstein's implicit theory of history aside, *Time, Tense, and American Literature* is a tremendously engaging book, a major contribution both to the temporal turn and, in its method of reading time, to the renewed interest in aesthetics and new formalisms. It also delivers on its promise to establish a new and surprising American novelistic tradition—one that places Poe, of all American novelists!—at its center.

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