

Losing Track of Time

Jonathan Greenberg

Otessa Moshfegh's My Year of Rest and Relaxation tells a story of doing nothing; it is an antinovel whose heroine attempts to sleep for a year in order to lose track of time. This desire to lose track of time constitutes a refusal of plot, a satiric and passive-aggressive rejection of the kinds of narrative sequences that novels typically employ but that, Moshfegh implies, offer nothing but accommodation to an unhealthy late capitalist society. Yet the effort to stifle plot is revealed, paradoxically, as an ambition to be achieved through plot, and so in resisting what novels do, My Year of Rest and Relaxation ends up showing us what novels do. Being an antinovel turns out to be just another way of being a novel; in seeking to lose track of time, the novel attunes us to our being in time.

Whenever I woke up, night or day, I'd shuffle through the bright marble foyer of my building and go up the block and around the corner where there was a bodega that never closed.¹

For a long time I used to go to bed early.²

The first of these sentences begins Otessa Moshfegh's 2018 novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*; the second, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. More accurately, the second sentence begins C. K. Scott Moncrieff's translation of Proust, whose French reads, "Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure." D. J. Enright emends the translation to "I would go to bed"; Lydia Davis and Google Translate opt for "I went to bed." What the translators famously wrestle with is how to render Proust's ungrammatical combination of the completed action of the *passé composé* ("went to bed") with a modifier ("long time") that implies a repeated, habitual, or everyday action. Gerard Genette calls this a problem of "frequency," since it linguistically blends a *singulative* narrative event (something that happens once) with an *iterative* one (something that happens repeatedly).³ According to Genette, in fact, Proust does not merely employ the iterative; he displays an "intoxication" with it.⁴ You might even say that the iterative becomes, for Proust, the very substance of the novel.⁵

Moshfegh's sentence owes a considerable debt to Proust. It doesn't bend the rules of grammar, but it induces the same kind of temporal wobble. The opening conjunction *whenever* possesses the same built-in iterativity as Proust's adverb

longtemps, immediately placing us in the cyclical time of daily practices; Moshfegh underscores the habitual nature of the action with the contraction *I'd* and the qualifier *night or day*. As in the Proust, the layering of timeframes – a singular action takes place as part of a daily routine that is repeated over an unspecified duration of days, weeks, or months – disorients us. Proust's narrator repeatedly goes to bed; Moshfegh's repeatedly wakes up. Meanwhile, the bodega, the endpoint of the narrator's habitual excursions, is seemingly immune from time. Open twenty-four seven, it is a small miracle of capitalism, unaffected by the diurnal cycles of waking and sleeping, as is the marble foyer that appears to shine just as bright in the night as in the day. And like Proust's unnamed first-person narrator (who, after going to bed early, soon wakes again, roused by "the thought that it was time to go to sleep"),⁶ Moshfegh's narrator is herself disoriented. She passes in and out of sleep, scrutinizing the state of her own puzzled consciousness, losing and reconstituting her very relations to the physical world. On each trip to the bodega, she buys herself "two large coffees," as though she wants to wake herself up (no lime-blossom tea, alas); she then loads up on sedatives and antidepressants to hasten her slumbers. And so, she tells us, "I lost track of time in this way" (1).

Losing track of time is the goal of both narrator and author in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, making the novel a sort of *Recherche* in reverse. To be sure, the narrator does inform us that the year is 2000, that she is twenty-six years old, and that the world of history and politics continues to exist outside her apartment. She glimpses "Bush versus Gore" on the cover of a tabloid in the bodega. But calendar time and current events are, for the most part, shut out. "Things were happening in New York City – they always are – but none of them affected me," she says. "This was the beauty of sleep – reality detached itself and appeared in my mind as casually as a movie or a dream" (4).

It is a commonplace that not only Proust but many of the great modernists – Joyce, Woolf, Mann, Faulkner – made time their subject.⁷ As the medium in which consciousness unfolds, time assumes both thematic and structural importance for the novel's efforts to render human experience from the inside. Even H. G. Wells, one of the old-fashioned Edwardian materialists for whom Woolf had little use, saw the novel as a kind of time machine, or so he comes very close to saying in the first chapter of his book of that name:

You are wrong to say that we cannot move about in Time. For instance, if I am recalling an incident very vividly I go back to the instant of its occurrence: I become absent-minded, as you say. I jump back for a moment. Of course we have no means of staying back for any length of Time, any more than a savage or an animal has of staying six feet above the ground. But a civilised man is better off than the savage in this respect. He can go up against gravitation in a balloon, and why should he not hope that ultimately he may be able to stop or accelerate his drift along the Time-Dimension, or even turn about and travel the other way?⁸

That is Wells's unnamed "Time Traveler," a late-Victorian inventor possessed, however foolishly, of his age's confidence in science and optimism about the future. The Time Traveler, to be sure, is less interested in recapturing evanescent childhood experiences or fugitive epiphanies than in comprehending deep or cosmic time, the vast expanses over which civilizations and species, continents and planets, live and die. But whether on the grand scale of the cosmos, or the humbler scale of the individual life, it was the novelists of the era, not the scientists and engineers, who invented ways "to stop or accelerate" a person's "drift along the Time-Dimension."

No doubt there are many explanations for the modernist novel's interest in time, but any account specific to modernism would by definition accept that our understanding and experience of temporality is itself subject to history and hence time. The critic Fredric Jameson – here in a digression on Georg Lukács, Walter Scott, the historical novel, and the historicity of literary forms – identifies the culprit, unsurprisingly, as the socioeconomic transformations of the West in the nineteenth century:

The definitive establishment of a properly capitalist mode of production as it were re-programs and utterly restructures the values, life rhythms, cultural habits, and temporal sense of its subjects. Capitalism demands in this sense a different experience of temporality from what was appropriate to a feudal or tribal system.⁹

Historian Stephen Kern, meanwhile, reminds us that the implementation of a global standard of time in the years between the Prime Meridian Conference of 1884 and the global broadcast of a time signal from the Eiffel Tower in 1913 – roughly the lifespan of Proust (1871 – 1922) – led to a "collapse" of "local times." The push to standardization was prompted by the speed of the railroad, Kern notes, and enabled by the even greater speed of the telegraph: "The world was fated to wake up to buzzers and bells triggered by impulses that traveled around the world with the speed of light."¹⁰ It is in response to this standardization of time, and its impact on human "life rhythms" and "cultural habits" (Genette's iterative), that modernism intensifies its exploration of time as an interior psychic phenomenon out of sync with the external standards of modernity, what Jameson elsewhere calls "the semi-autonomous and henceforth compartmentalized spaces of lived time over clock time."¹¹ This "lived time," indeed, becomes a repository of the individual human being's unique value.

The desire of Moshfegh's narrator to lose track of time can thus provisionally be seen as a variation on Proust's project and that of the modernist novel. If Jameson is right that the value of "lived time" emerges in reaction to the triumph of "clock time," it would stand to reason that a novel that seeks to lose track of time should announce the persistence of clock time or calendar time in its very title. Neither as boldly expansive as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* nor as meticulous-

ly compressed as *The Hours*, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* identifies a timespan in the middle ranges. A year is a period over which interest or excitement in a topic or a story can be sustained. The author, I suspect, had in the back of her mind the popular food memoir *Julie and Julia: My Year of Cooking Dangerously* (2009), a title that itself riffs on the Peter Weir film *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982). Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) may be lurking there too, and perhaps another memoir of travel and lifestyle, Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* (1989). Of course, none of these titles, other than Moshfegh's, actually belongs to a *novel*, yet they still suggest that a year is a timespan fit for a book-length plot. Like a gap year or a junior year abroad, a yearlong novel occupies a duration ample yet finite, one over which you can accomplish something substantial, distinctive, or even dangerous: a vacation, a project, an undertaking, an adventure. We even have the critic Phyllis Rose's *The Year of Reading Proust: A Memoir in Real Time* (1999).

On the other hand, to devote a year to nothing but sleep, especially by doping yourself up on prescription and over-the-counter drugs as Moshfegh's narrator does, is less a project than an antiproject. In fact, it may be significant that the "year of" formula originates with the memoir, not the novel; the novel, in contrast, would then aim to satirize the memoir and its implicit agenda (*Accomplish something! Do something exciting with your life!*) by appropriating this pernicious formula. Moshfegh indeed more or less directs us to take the title of her novel with a double dose of irony and a drink of water. At least that is one way to read this exchange between the narrator and her psychiatrist:

"Do you know what mirth means? M-I-R-T-H?"

"Yeah. Like *The House of Mirth*," I said.

"A sad story," said Dr. Tuttle.

"I haven't read it."

"Better you don't." (22 – 23)

The author, needless to say, has read it, and even lists it on *Goodreads* as one of her five favorite novels "set in the city that never sleeps."¹² Moshfegh, in other words, signals to us that she is no more writing about "rest and relaxation" than Edith Wharton is writing about mirth.

Moshfegh's title in fact deliberately and comically obscures the weighty psychic and existential stakes of her character's daily, yearlong effort to lose track of time. This effort, which the narrator describes as her "hibernation," consists of drug-induced sleep, regular visits to the bodega, and somewhat less regular trips to the drug store and to Dr. Tuttle for the purpose of restocking the Nembutol, trazodone, Ambien, Ativan, Xanax, Zyprexa, lithium, Solofton, Benadryl, Ny-Quil, Robitussin, and other drugs that will constitute what she calls, with a telling metaphor, her "library of psychopharmaceuticals" (26). Her waking hours she spends watching popular movies from the nineties, ideally starring Harrison Ford

or Whoopi Goldberg. An annoyingly devoted best friend, Reva, visits sporadically. Memories of childhood, college, and an ex-boyfriend surface. And so the year slips by: “The speed of time varied, fast or slow, depending on the depth of my sleep. . . . My favorite days were the ones that barely registered” (71).

The year of rest and relaxation thus turns out to be a chronicle of days that barely register. That is to say, in rejecting time, the novel also spurns the very action that the novel would seem to require to sustain itself. This too is, broadly speaking, a modernist ambition. The narrative theorist Dorrit Cohn notes that with Molly Bloom’s monologue in the final chapter of *Ulysses*, James Joyce achieves an unparalleled representation of the real-time unspooling of consciousness. He accomplishes this through a curtailment of the character’s movement in space: “Doubtless the most artful stratagem Joyce employed . . . is to set Molly’s mind into its turbulent motion while setting her body into a state of nearly absolute tranquility.” While her husband has spent the day out and about, his mind stimulated by the buzz and hum of Dublin’s streets and pubs, Molly’s monologue is the thought-stream of “a body at rest,” placed in “calm surroundings,” doing virtually nothing but thinking.¹³ Joyce’s almost perfectly stationary thinker is not even granted a coffee run to the all-night bodega. (She does get up to use the chamber pot.) The conclusion of *Ulysses* allows the inner world to come to the fore precisely because the outer world is allowed to recede.

For the similarly housebound and stationary narrator of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, such a curtailment of action means a disavowal of plot. A plot, literary scholar Peter Brooks tells us, is a temporal and teleological sequence, “a structuring operation elicited by, and made necessary by, those meanings that develop through succession and time.” A plot makes mere events into a story, creating “suspense and uncertainty” and thereby orienting the reader toward a resolution, a “revelation of meaning” reached “when the narrative sentence achieves full predication.”¹⁴ This is consistent too with Georg Lukács’s understanding of the novel’s paradigmatic plot as “the story of the soul that goes to find itself, that seeks adventures in order to be proved and tested by them, and, by proving itself, to find its own essence.”¹⁵ But in Moshfegh’s book, any forward propulsion of events, driven by the promise of meaning, is rigorously halted. Most obviously, the traditional marriage plot, with its “predicate” of happily ever after, is jettisoned. The ex-boyfriend Trevor is unthinkable as a husband, a parody of emotional and sexual selfishness. Indeed, marriage itself seems preposterous: “Reva often spoke about ‘settling down.’ That sounded like death to me” (28). (In her *Goodreads* post, Moshfegh praises the “hilariously radical” premise of *The House of Mirth*, whose “protagonist’s search for a husband is utterly unromantic: She’s going broke.”)¹⁶

If this novel has no interest in finding Mr. Darcy, neither does it take up the plot of the *Künstlerroman*, in which the main character progresses, however fitfully, to-

ward the creation of a work of art. A brief prehibernation job in a Soho gallery, taken on for no other purpose than “to pass the time,” exposes the contemporary art world as shallow, voyeuristic, and gimmicky:

On a low pedestal in the corner, a small sculpture by the Brahams Brothers – a pair of toy monkeys made using human pubic hair. Each monkey had a little erection poking out of its fur. The penises were made of white titanium and had cameras in them positioned to take crotch shots of the viewer. The images were downloaded to a Web site. A specific password to log in to see the crotch shots cost a hundred dollars. The monkeys themselves cost a quarter million for the pair. (39)

Moshfegh’s narrator is no Lily Briscoe, and this book seems unlikely to end with an affirmation that she has had her vision.

And what about social ambition, the “dominant dynamic of plot,” the “force that drives the protagonist forward” in so many nineteenth-century novels?¹⁷ It is reduced to the contemporary discourse of self-care and self-help, which feebly disguises a consumerist agenda. Reva, a viewer of *Sex and the City* and reader of *Cosmo*, speaks like “a Hallmark card” (165) and offers pop-psychology slogans that urge accommodation to a worthless society: “Take some time off and think about your next move. Oprah says we women rush into decisions because we don’t have faith that something better will come along. And that’s how we get stuck in dissatisfying careers and marriages.” To which the narrator responds, “I’m not making a career move” (55). For her, it’s not the move but the whole game that’s the problem. Reva, bound by the norms and narratives of her gender and class, can only counsel a restorative break in the action – rest and relaxation – but cannot envision an end to action itself. At one point Reva leaves a note that reads, “Today is the first day of the rest of your life! xoxo.” The narrator wants none of it:

I had no idea what I’d said to inspire Reva to leave me such a patronizing note of encouragement. Maybe I’d made a pact with her in my blackout: “Let’s be happy! Let’s live every day like it’s our last!” Barf. (240)

The slogans of self-care – and, with them, any larger, memoir-ish plotline of self-realization that they suggest – are dismissed as hollow and commercial. This novel has no more interest in advancing a career than in arranging a marriage.

The critic Robert Douglas-Fairhurst tells us that “a question at the heart of all picaresque fiction” is the one asked by Dickens’s Mr. Pickwick: “Where shall we go to next?”¹⁸ Henry Fielding, in his own picaresque, *Joseph Andrews*, makes explicit the analogy between reading and the adventure of travel, praising the gaps between chapters in his book as a source of cognitive restoration. Chapter breaks are, in his conceit, sites for rest and relaxation: “those little Spaces between our Chapters may be looked upon as an Inn or Resting-Place,

where [the reader] may stop and take a Glass or any other Refreshment as it pleases him.”¹⁹ But a handful of chapter breaks notwithstanding, *My Year* takes no such pleasure in either forward motion or refreshment. It is the very opposite of the Pickwickian picaresque. Shortly before the narrator’s hibernation begins, some interns at the Soho gallery ask her Pickwick’s very question: what to do next. “What next?” she thinks. “I couldn’t imagine” (42). There is in this book no next move, no next episode. The story never gets up from the space between life chapters, never moves on from its comfortable Resting-Place. The gallery job is worthwhile solely because it allows the narrator to take furtive naps in a supply closet, where she experiences the very best kind of sleep, a “black emptiness, an infinite space of nothingness” (39). This is a cognitive obliteration akin to what Proust’s speaker describes in his opening pages as the “abyss of not-being,” the *néant* that Roger Shattuck grandly describes as a state of being “abandoned to the point of elimination from the universe.”²⁰ And like Proust’s narrator emerging from his *néant*, Moshfegh’s finds coming to consciousness to be an agonizing reconstruction of the cosmos. She, however, makes clear that she’d be just as happy not to see the universe restored: “My entire life flashed before my eyes in the worst way possible, my mind refilling itself with all my lame memories, every little thing that had brought me to where I was” (40).

The future appears foreclosed, then, but Moshfegh’s character is still burdened with a past: those lame but deeply rooted memories that, upon waking, spontaneously regenerate to fill her mind. She wants to lose track of these past experiences every bit as much as she wants to fend off the necessity of any action that will bring on the future. Yet much of the novel consists of her recitation of the very memories she scorns. In fact, in the unfolding of these prehibernation memories, the alert reader might notice a slippage or authorial sleight of hand: this narrative is not a present-tense diary or, like Molly Bloom’s interior monologue, a real-time unspooling of thought, and so (if we give the matter much thought) we must conclude that both the prehibernation memories and the actual hibernation time itself are narrated from a temporal point *after* the year of rest and relaxation has concluded. The empty year, as it were, imports these lame memories from the past and their recitation from the future, and in this way both the pages of the novel and the days of the year acquire substance, stealthily piling up the building blocks of backstory, family history, and plot.

Through this recitation, moreover, the narrator provides us enough in the way of a life history for us to discern, on a psychological level, the sources of her desire to lose track of time. The death of both parents seven years ago is the apparent cause of her current malaise, and her seemingly pathological response to these losses surely has something to do with the psychic costs of having been raised in a cold, unloving family. (“None of us had much warmth in our hearts” [49].) She recalls, for example, that as a girl she was not allowed to have a puppy. Notably, this

is a memory first recalled *not* at the time of the novel's composition or utterance, but during the actual narrated events (such as they are) of the year 2000. Just before the hibernation project, while contemplating some pretentious artwork, the narrator experiences an involuntary memory, one whose unprompted surfacing invests it with special meaning and power:

"Pets just make messes. I don't want to have to go around picking dog hairs out of my teeth," I remembered my mother saying.

"Not even a goldfish?"

"Why? Just to watch it swim around and die?" (50)

The modest request for a pet fish becomes a lesson in philosophical nihilism, the confined life of the fish serving as a metaphor for the pointlessness of human existence and plotlessness of this novel. Some hundred and fifty pages later, the narrator thinks again of her mother, whom she watched as a child putting on make-up, "wondering if one day I'd be like her, a beautiful fish in a man-made pool, circling and circling" (212 – 213).

Despite its satire of Dr. Tuttle and Big Pharma, then, the novel invites us to read it as a psychiatric case history of sorts, and it takes no special expertise or insight to diagnose the narrator with depression. Indeed her emotional state seems a textbook case of Freud's melancholia,²¹ which differs from a normal condition of mourning in that for the melancholic, not merely the world but the ego itself "has become poor and empty."²² (One might say that mourning stands to melancholia as rest and relaxation stand to whatever kind of cognitive obliteration or nothingness the narrator seeks.) The narrator tells us quite plainly that she "wanted a mother" because her own mother "was usually passed out in her bed with the door locked" (147), sedated by alcohol and Valium. Freud's melancholic has internalized the lost love object; in this case, although both parents have died, that object is the alcoholic mother, who expressed love to her daughter only in sleep, when they shared the king-sized bed vacated by the unfaithful father. Having internalized the somnolent mother, the narrator has also internalized the mother's unloving cruelty, which she then reproduces, often directing it at Reva and all of the conventional gendered expectations for plot that Reva represents. This internalized cruelty is the source of a lively satiric wit and yields a Swiftian misanthropy that rejects the social world entirely: "I hated talking to people" (1). Among the loopier theories of the incompetent Dr. Tuttle is the belief that "the death gene is passed from mother to child in the birth canal" through "micro-dermabrasions" (80), and for all her unscientific zaniness, the crackpot shrink glances on a truth: the narrator's mother has indeed passed on something akin to Freud's death drive.²³ But of course, in giving life, *all* mothers also bequeath (eventual) death. She not busy being born is busy dying.

The punitive and sadistic mother figure resurfaces in another involuntary memory of humiliation, this one suffered at the hands of a college art history teacher. In the memory, the narrator arrives to class late, having broken the heel of an expensive pair of “black suede stiletto boots.” The instructor punishes her – ostensibly for her tardiness but actually for her beauty – by having her “stand at the front of the classroom” with her “left foot arched like a Barbie’s” to be critiqued by her classmates as “a performance piece.” The well-trained Columbia undergrads determine that the narrator has been “broken by the male gaze” as the narrator passes the time by contemplating time, listening to the clock ticking and observing the cycle of the seasons through the window as yellow leaves fall to the sidewalk (189).

If the feminist art teacher reembodies the unloving mother, Whoopi Goldberg, the narrator’s favorite movie star, provides the nurturing maternal presence that the birth mother failed to offer. Goldberg is a benevolent if uncomfortably racialized mammy figure who, the narrator says, “took care of me after my mother died” (233). Indeed, she tells us, “I spent a lot of time staring at her on screen and picturing her vagina. Solid, honest, magenta” (72). Goldberg’s honest, solid (and Black) way of giving life stands in contrast to the death-bearing birth canal of the narrator’s biological mother. Her movies serve as a lullaby, playing on the VCR as the narrator drifts off to sleep, and her mere presence provides protection against the outside world:

Whenever she appeared on-screen, I sensed she was laughing at the whole production. Her presence made the show completely absurd. . . . Wherever she went, everything about her became a parody of itself, gauche and ridiculous. That was a comfort to see. Thank God for Whoopi. Nothing was sacred. Whoopi was proof. (196)

Goldberg’s parody of the conventions of (White) Hollywood cinema illustrates the value of an artistic self-consciousness that can rip apart illusions, suggesting an analogy to the work of the novel itself. To laugh at “the whole production” is surely a satiric response, but instead of the Swiftian misanthropy of the opening page, it indicates a quasi-Olympian detachment, what Joel Relihan calls, rescuing a term from the ancients, *catascopia*, or looking down.²⁴ The anger and scorn of the punitive mother gives way to the less heated satiric stance of amused detachment.

The importance of the “good mother” Whoopi Goldberg thus also suggests that to interpret the hibernation project as *merely* a manifestation of a neurosis may diminish its larger significance. Moshfegh does not negate the sense of psychological depth that the rehearsal of her narrator’s “lame memories” creates, but she does warn us again explaining away the idiosyncrasy of the novel’s premise by reducing it to a medical symptom. Hibernation may indeed be a symptom of melancholia, but what is melancholia a symptom of? “The modern age has forced us to live unnatural lives” (22), says Dr. Tuttle in another one of her utterances that

hover between wisdom and platitude; this novel certainly gives us grounds to believe that life in the “modern age,” exposed as “gauche and ridiculous” by Whoopi Goldberg and Ottessa Moshfegh alike, is unnatural and unhealthy. What cultural theorist Siane Ngai writes of Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener* applies almost to the letter to Moshfegh’s sleeper: “Should we read his inertness as part of a volitional strategy that anticipates styles of nonviolent political activism to come, or merely as a sign of what we now call depression?”²⁵ Like *Bartleby*’s “I would prefer not to,” the narrator’s refusal of consciousness, time, action, and plot might constitute a “powerful powerlessness” that can be understood as a trait of “literature or art itself, as a relatively autonomous, more or less cordoned-off domain in an increasingly specialized and differentiated society.” Ngai reads *Bartleby*’s “situation of restricted agency” dialectically (she is basically following Adorno), claiming that the very restriction of agency enables the artwork “to theoriz[e] social powerlessness in a manner unrivaled by other forms of cultural praxis.”²⁶ The inertness of Moshfegh’s narrator similarly asks to be understood through the oxymoronic logic of the passive aggressive.²⁷

Thus, what looked like the humanism of the modernists’ experiments with narrative and temporality – resisting standardization through the valorization of the Proustian iterative and other forms of “lived time” – begins to look, one hundred years later, more like an antihumanist project. (That modernist humanism, in fact, with its bid for the redemption of ordinary experience, may now appear to have always been a bit factitious, strained, or desperate.) Moshfegh posits that human life is not an interior trove of precious memories or heightened intensities but rather is just as aimless, just as “poor in world” as goldfish life. In this way, as we noted, Moshfegh seems to reverse Proust’s quest for lost time rather than to recapitulate it. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that her most immediate stylistic influence, at least to my ear, is not any of the great modernists but a more recent postmodernist, Don DeLillo, whose 1985 *White Noise* echoes through the text. The “white noise” in DeLillo’s novel takes the form of a steady stream of verbal fragments, sometimes emanating from the TV, sometimes spoken by blankly ironic teenagers and academics. More generally, the term describes a broader stream: not a stream of consciousness but a stream of data, waves, molecules, and impulses (below the threshold of consciousness) associated with the onset of death. This white noise finds its correlate in *My Year* in the background noise of the ever-active VCR showing bland nineties movies and the cable feed that tosses out meaningless snippets and images of news, weather, and porn. (“Expect road closures, hurricane force gale winds, coastal flooding,” the weatherman was saying” [182].) DeLillo’s mock-prophet, a sportswriter-turned-Elvis studies professor, is reborn as Dr. Tuttle, with her screwball pronouncements on death and brain chemistry, while *Infermiterol*, the sleep aid that the narrator begins taking midnovel, is a repackaging of DeLillo’s *Dylar*, the black market synthetic drug that promises to

rid its users of the fear of death. *White Noise*, finally, memorably suggests (echoing Walter Benjamin) that “all plots tend to move deathward.”²⁸ (The marriage plot, recall, sounds to the narrator “like death.”) Plots move us deathward, to the end of plot; but the attempt to stifle plot, to lose track of time, is also like a death: death’s second self, you might say, “which seals up all in rest.”

Yet the effort to avoid plot proves hard to sustain. I touched on this problem earlier, in noting the way that a more-or-less traditional novelistic backstory creeps into the text in the form of unwanted memories to provide a psychologically credible grounding for character. In fact, it becomes clear that in establishing the narrator’s desire to lose track of time, Moshfegh has also set a trap for her, concealing from her the paradox that annihilating time can from a certain angle look like an ambition to be achieved in time. A reader might admire – even take a rooting interest in – the struggles of a character to succeed in her goal of losing track of time, and might eagerly turn the pages to discover the inventions by which a novelist constructs a story about dispensing with plot. Watching Moshfegh’s narrator traverse a space of nothingness on this high wire holds the reader, like the tightrope walker herself, in suspense.²⁹

This problem – what we might call plot’s inevitability – is one of which the narrator becomes conscious. While chapter two appears to make significant progress toward the erasure of experience – “Sleeping, waking, it all collided into one gray, monotonous plane ride through the clouds” (84) – the following chapter opens bluntly with a reminder of calendar time: “In November, however, an unfortunate shift occurred” (85). The narrator confronts “a subliminal rebellion” (85) in which, under the influence of Infermiterol, she becomes active during her sleep, rearranging furniture and buying colorful ice pops from the bodega. Such activity, she realizes, is “antithetical to [her] hibernation project” (86). Her unconscious is insisting on plot. Plot, born of desire, asserts itself in the form of libido. The unconscious initiates a return to sexual courtship, even if the narrator’s racy online flirtations are a far cry from Jane Austen: “Then one day I woke up to discover that I had dug out my digital camera and sent a bunch of strangers snapshots of my asshole, my nipple, the inside of my mouth” (88). A kind of intrapsychic war erupts between the forces of action and those of inaction: asleep, she orders designer jeans and lingerie; awake, she cancels her credit cards; asleep, she orders new ones; awake, she cuts them up again.

From this flicker of sexual desire, the unconscious plot-making progresses to ethical engagement. We noted that in the early sections of the novel, the rejection of the outside world, especially of Reva, finds expression in a cruel satiric humor that the reader can enjoy: “Reva came and went, blathering about her latest dates and heartaches over her mother” (99). As Reva’s mother’s cancer progresses, however, this coldness becomes ethically troublesome. Yet in her drugged-out

sleep, the narrator manages to travel to Long Island for Reva's mother's funeral and even musters a few weak gestures of concern. After the funeral, she gradually comes to miss her friend, her "whiny, moronic analgesic" (205) who, she realizes, is at least as effective as a pill for muting pain. Satire, whether it takes the stance of misanthropy ("I hated talking to people") or the catascopia of Whoopi Goldberg (laughing at "the whole production"), typically responds to the world with judgment and critique, leaving antagonisms unresolved and concluding with a retreat from the social itself (Swift's Gulliver to his stables, Austen's Mr. Bennet to his library). The broader, more encompassing perspectives of the novel, in contrast, have typically been seen to produce a "comedy of forgiveness," generating plots that reconcile antagonisms and illustrate a character's growth.³⁰ For this reason, the beginnings of the narrator's ethical engagement with Reva also suggests the beginnings of her own psychological healing. During the trip to Long Island, she tries to encounter her grief even as she characterizes it through the (satirized) discourse of pop psychology: "I couldn't cry. None of that penetrated deep enough to press whatever button controlled my 'outpouring of sorrow'" (145).

Thus, the restoration of libido enlivens the plot, the ethical recognition of Reva warms the heart, the effort to confront loss cracks the satirical veneer of the prose. But at the same time, these signs of progress threaten to make this quirky anti-novel into something decidedly more conventional, to resolve a situation we have come to value for being unresolvable. In the paradoxical logic of the novel's premise, the unconscious restarting of the plot also constitutes a reentry into time and an accommodation to "the whole production" of late capitalist social life. It is as though we were seeing *Bartleby* take up his pen and resume his work as a scrivener. The narrator's gestures of compassion and self-reflection, however feeble, undercut her rejection of narratives of healing and the insipid culture from which they spring.

For this reason, the concluding movements of the novel generate a measure of friction, a sense that the reader must suddenly shift gears and accede not simply to a plot but to a comic rather than a tragic or satiric one, accepting a narrative of rebirth, regeneration, and reconciliation. This final phase begins with the narrator's effort to double down on the abolition of plot, to undertake a new, more intensive stage of hibernation that will be exactly one hundred and twenty days long: a "solution to my problems," she says, that "landed in my mind like a hawk on a cliff" (254). The VCR broken, her possessions given away, her cell phone thrown into the East River, the narrator enlists a conceptual artist from the SoHo gallery as a "jailkeeper" (254) to prevent her from interrupting her slumbers by venturing out into the world. Yet this suppression of plot is intended to serve its rebirth: "I could sleep myself into a new life" (260). The doubling down on hibernation only intensifies the paradox of the plotless novel, generating a will-she-or-won't-she suspense worthy of the third act of a Hollywood film. Symptomatically, the nov-

el begins to mark its sections with a rigorous tracking of time, down to dates on the calendar: February 19, February 25, May 28. And the hibernation proves truly therapeutic. The narrator realizes “that this was the end of something” (274), wakes up “on June 1, 2001,” and understands that she is “alive” (276). She even picks up DeLillo’s *Mao II* and reads it “cover to cover” (278).

The intrapsychic resolution enables an existential insight about the nature of time. During a visit to the Met in September, staring at a still life, the narrator grasps that she is now able to contemplate her own future:

The notion of my future suddenly snapped into focus: it didn’t exist yet. I was making it, standing there, breathing, fixing the air around my body with stillness, trying to capture something – a thought, I guess – as though such a thing were possible, as though I believed in the delusion described in those paintings – that time could be contained, held captive. (286)

She reaches out and touches the painting, “simply to prove to myself that there was no God stalking my soul. Time was not immemorial. Things were just *things*” (286 – 287). I read this insight – a revelation of meaning, to use Brooks’s phrase – as an acceptance of her own limited existence in time, an understanding that “still life” is possible only in art. (Even the paintings themselves are “just things, objects, withering toward their own inevitable demise” [285].) The recognition of temporal limitation is also an affirmation of the openness of the future.

Whether this insight resolves or dodges the crisis that launched the year of rest and relaxation is hard to say. It appears that in *resisting* what novels do, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* shows us what novels do. Being an antinovel turns out to be another way of being a novel. In seeking to lose track of time, the novel attunes us to our being in time; in depriving character of action, it reveals each person’s being as continuous with (yet not identical to) her lame memories and her not-yet-existent future.

In any case, no definitive judgment can be rendered without consideration of the final brief chapter, which re-immerses narrator and reader in the larger world of historical time. On September 11, the narrator watches, records, and re-watches the horrifying scene during which she believes she sees Reva leap from the North Tower: “There she is, a human being, diving into the unknown, and she wide awake” (289). An individual act of courage in facing death returns us to the idea from the novel’s opening that “things were always happening in New York.” World events, having crept into the novel only through the white noise of decontextualized news snippets, finally come to the fore. Here Moshfegh seems to borrow not from Proust or Joyce but from Mann, whose *Magic Mountain* ends abruptly when Hans Castorp, after seven years of rest and relaxation, is awakened by the start of World War I: “That historical thunder-peal, of which we speak with bated

breath, made the foundations of the earth to shake; but for us it was the shock that fired the mine beneath the magic mountain and set our sleeper ungently outside the gates.”³¹ The war for Mann is a moment of historical rupture, Genette’s “singular” writ large. It decisively cleaves the past from the present, sealing Castorp’s story hermetically in the past while leaving his future poignantly uncertain.

September 11, 2001, a date on the calendar remembered for its uniquely confused temporality of events watched and rewatched, has come to represent in the popular imagination a similar rupture, the restarting of history after the supposed “end of history” achieved by the Western triumph in the Cold War. This popular narrative – 9/11 as the end of the end of history – took on, as we know, a moralistic and politically reactionary coloring as the attacks became a “wake-up call” to a sleeping and complacent nation. But this novel’s insistence, perhaps in spite of itself, on the inevitability of plot and the continuing antagonisms of world-historical conflict is not itself a reactionary gesture. In fact, as a product of the Trump years, the novel’s recognition of the persistence of historical change might instead be seen as a comment on our current moment’s surge of populist authoritarianisms and the stressing of democratic society, as though it is reminding us that we cannot take liberal progress for granted. Likewise, its almost quaint recall of the early, low-tech years of the Internet creates a temporal double vision in which the absence of now-ubiquitous smartphones, streaming video, and social media remind us that our narrator’s story has now happened. The “now” of the novel is past. A novel about rejecting plot somehow found a plot. But while novels end, history continues. Things were happening in New York City; they always are. In the words of the whiny, moronic, analgesic Reva, “Things are moving forward. I guess time is like that – it just keeps going.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Greenberg is Chair of the English Department at Montclair State University. He is the author of *Modernism, Satire, and The Novel* (2011), *The Cambridge Introduction to Satire* (2019), and *Mobituaries: Great Lives Worth Reliving* (with Mo Rocca, 2019).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ottessa Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 1. Future references given parenthetically.
- ² Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past, Volume I: Swann's Way; Within a Budding Grove*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terrence Kilmartin (New York: Vintage, 1982), 3.
- ³ Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), 114, 116.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.
- ⁵ “No novelistic work, apparently, has ever put the iterative to a use comparable—in textual scope, in thematic importance, in degree of technical elaboration—to Proust’s use of it in the *Recherche du temps perdu*.” Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 117.
- ⁶ Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, 3.
- ⁷ For recent efforts to reopen the subject, see Jesse Matz, *Modernist Time Ecology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019); and Martin Hägglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).
- ⁸ H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (New York: Penguin, 2005 [1895]), 6.
- ⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007), 284.
- ¹⁰ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880 – 1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 14.
- ¹¹ Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 14.
- ¹² “Ottessa Moshfegh’s Top Books Set in the City that Never Sleeps,” *Goodreads*, July 2, 2018, https://www.goodreads.com/interviews/show/1374.Ottessa_Moshfegh.
- ¹³ Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Modes for Rendering Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), 222.
- ¹⁴ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Vintage, 1985), 12, 18.
- ¹⁵ Georg Lukács, “From *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*,” in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 2004.
- ¹⁶ “Ottessa Moshfegh’s Top Books.”
- ¹⁷ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 39.
- ¹⁸ Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 2013), 187.
- ¹⁹ Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews and Shamela* (New York: Penguin, 1999 [1742]), 119.
- ²⁰ Roger Shattuck, “Lost and Found: The Structure of Proust’s Novel,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Proust*, ed. Richard Bales (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 76.
- ²¹ Joyce Carol Oates, “Sleeping Beauty,” *The New York Review of Books*, October 11, 2018.

- ²² Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works, Volume 14*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute for Psycho-Analysis, 1957), 246.
- ²³ Freud quotes Schopenhauer in saying that "death is the 'true result and to that extent the purpose of life.'" Elsewhere: "The organism wishes to die only in its own fashion." Endorsing the post-Darwinian biology of August Weismann, Freud speculates on the need for death and its origin in the development of life. Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works, Volume 18*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute for Psycho-Analysis, 1955), 39, 50.
- ²⁴ "Observation from an unusual point of view, typically from on high." Joel Relihan, *Ancient Menippean Satire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 7.
- ²⁵ Siane Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ²⁷ One might also consider here Lee Edelman's critical analysis of the ideology of "reproductive futurism," to which he opposes queerness, which occupies "the place of the social order's death drive" in offering a stubborn "resistance to the viability of the social." Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 3.
- ²⁸ Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Viking, 1985), 26.
- ²⁹ "A narrative without at least a minimal plot would be incomprehensible." Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 5. This might be the place to note that the novel is special among literary genres in the temporal demands it makes on the reader: because even a medium-sized book such as this one engages the reader over an extensive duration of time, the problem of "what's next" is uniquely foregrounded in the novel.
- ³⁰ On a satiric "comedy of correction" versus a novelistic "comedy of forgiveness," see James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2004), 3–19; on satire's refusal to resolve antagonisms, Frank Palmeri, *Satire in Narrative: Petronius, Swift, Gibbon, Melville, and Pynchon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 13; on the distinctions between satire and comedy, and the relations of satire and the novel, Jonathan Greenberg, ed., *Cambridge Introduction to Satire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 27–30, 159–163.
- ³¹ Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Vintage, 1969 [1927]), 709.