

**‘Poetry and Time:  
temporalities of the moment in Antigone Kefala’s *Fragments*.’**

We humans, as individuals and as social beings, live in several overlapping worlds, as described in Table 1, below, in the right-hand column.

time	causation	world
sociotemporality	collective intentionality / historical causation	social world /society
nootemporality	individual long-term intentionality	mental world of individual human
biotemporality	short-term intentionality	physical world of living organism

**Table 1: Temporality and causation in different worlds**

From our experience of living on this earth, an individual understands her/himself as living in both a physical world and a mental world, and at the same time, as a social being, in a social world, a society. In the English language, the prototypical processes, that is, meanings of verbs, have developed for talk about these three worlds: as in *she ran across the street* - an action process in the physical world; *he thought about the meeting* - a mental process in the world of consciousness; *they are Olympic champions* - a relational process attributing a social role.

I’m referring here to the transitivity choices as described in systemic functional linguistics, particularly associated with the linguist M.A.K. Halliday (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004; 2014). The table of time, causation and world is derived from the work of J.T. Fraser (2007), more fully described in Table 2, following.

	nested integrative levels of nature	time	causation	world
5.	'human minding'	sociotemporal	collective intentionality / historical causation	social world / society
		nootemporal	individual long-term intentionality	mental world of individual human
4.	living matter ( <i>organic being</i> )	biotemporal	short-term intentionality	physical world of living organism
3.	matter ( <i>material being</i> )	eotemporal	deterministic lawfulness	inorganic physical world
2.	particles + mass ( <i>stochastic being</i> )	prototemporal	probabilistic lawfulness	wave-particle world
1.	photons no mass ( <i>becoming</i> )	atemporal	none – chaos	electro-magnetic radiation

**Table 2: J. T. Fraser’s model of the ‘integrative levels’ of nature**

As in the grey area of this expanded table, contemporary science has expanded human knowledge beyond that understood from our experience on this earth,. The arrow represents the emergence of these natural levels, which are ‘nested’ as earlier ones persist as later ones develop and evolve. In J.T. Fraser’s polyvalent model of time, the individual lives simultaneously within the experience of different temporalities. Talk about time is talk about sequence, but the different temporalities differ in their sequential organisation. English literary narratives of different historical periods differently weave these temporal sequences together (Huisman 2013) - for example, the temporalities of levels 1 , 2 and 3 in Table 2 are relevant to modernist and postmodernist writing (Huisman 2015). In this paper however I focus on the temporalities of levels 4 and 5.

In the following Table 3, I’ve deleted the causation column and inserted a column headed ‘temporal sequence’.

	nested integrative levels of nature	time	temporal sequence	world
↑	5.	sociotemporal	equative	social world / society
	‘human minding’	nootemporal	associative	mental world of individual human
	4.	biotemporal	chronological	physical world of living organism

**Table 3: Narrative temporalities and temporal sequence**

Fraser’s level 4 is the level of the individual organism; humans share its characteristics with other organic beings. The biotemporal sequence of the body is a chronological advance from birth to death, with an awareness of individual moments of ‘now’ - the concept of the ‘present’ first comes into being at this temporality, as the time when the organism feels or satisfies its needs. In monovalent discussions of time, this biotemporal meaning of chronological progression is often *the* assumed meaning. Level 5, the most complex level of evolution, which Fraser calls ‘human minding’, the level of human brain development, encompasses the interpenetrating worlds of human individual mind and human society. The nootemporal sequence of the individual mind is associative, as thoughts brought through memory, or projected through imagination, can co-exist with the biotemporal ‘now’. And the sociotemporal sequence of society is equative, bringing together what is alike or contrasting what is not alike, in rituals, social roles, historical periods and so on (Huisman 2017). In this paper, I discuss only the biotemporality of the body, in the sequence of individual chronology, and the nootemporality of the mind, in the sequence of individual association.

Poetry is that art for which the medium of expression is language. One of the characteristics frequently attributed to poetry is that of concentration, of intensification of the affordance, the possibilities afforded by language. Traditional rhetoric listed many figures and tropes for patterns of sound, word or grammar, or transfers of meaning.

Here I’m using the terminology of systemic functional linguistics, with particular reference to its dimension of stratification, the levels of language in context, in order

to explore the question: how can a poetic text concentrate, intensify, the meanings of temporality?

extra-linguistic	social context
linguistic text	semantics (meaning)
	lexicogrammar (words and grammar)
	expression: phonology & graphology



**Table 4: The dimension of stratification**

The upwards arrow beside Table 4 indicates the direction of interpretation as the reader/listener ‘makes sense’ of the marks seen or sounds heard, that is, when the expression of the poem is experienced and construed (Huisman 2016).

Antigone Kefala’s collection of poetry, published in Australia in 2016, is called *Fragments*. A fragment is a piece broken off or detached; an incomplete piece; a portion; a scrap, a morsel, a bit. The word entered English in the fifteenth century from Latin *fragmentum*, from the verb *frangere* ‘to break’. So, from this lexical choice we construe a meaning and from that meaning we construe a context: that this collection makes modest claims for its texts - they will always imply an absent larger whole, from which these small pieces have been broken off. This contextual modesty is realised even at the material level of graphic expression: it is no surprise that the poems are often very short. Consider ‘The Voice’ (2016, 3):

**The Voice**

At the sound  
I turned  
my veins full of ice  
that travelled  
at high speed  
releasing fire.

This return  
the past attacking  
unexpectedly  
in the familiar streets.

Again, at the lexical and semantic levels there is reduction: the title gives just the fragment of another human presence, 'the voice'; in the text of the poem, even the human quality implicit in the word 'voice' is lost - it is just 'the sound'. But this fragment of a human presence, the poem tells us, activates an intense physiological response in the hearer 'I'. The first stanza tells of a moment of stimulus and response, a fragment of time in the sequence of biotemporality.

Yet in the chronological sequence of biotemporality, which for an individual advances sequentially from birth to death, this moment is not in the 'now' of the poem. The English tense system gives us some choices for ordering a chronological sequence and the poet uses the simple past tense 'I turned' to mean the action is completed before the biotemporal time of speaking. ('The now' of the poem is the moment of feigned dialogue in the biotemporal time of the reader, construing meaning in the physical act of reading the linear text.)

So in the first stanza, the poet gives a narrative report on an event experienced in the poet's biotemporal past, and the physical/physiological sensations which accompanied that experience.

However - the second stanza begins with 'this return', the deictic 'this' of proximity immediately locating the experience of the first stanza in the nootemporal 'now' of the poet, that is, what the speaker is thinking about. Biotemporal and nootemporal time are now sequentially different: in the phenomenon we call memory, in the act of remembering, the first stanza event in the biotemporal past is brought into the nootemporal present. On the biotemporal time-line, using the English tense system to order the chronology of events, it is possible to refer to an event earlier than a past event by the use of the so-called pluperfect tense, the past in past meaning choice. But in the second stanza the poet is not ordering events chronologically by using the tense forms of verbs. Rather, the past which was past, which preceded the events of the first stanza, is what returns to memory, and grammatically that event is brought into the nootemporal 'now' as a participant, realised by the noun group 'the past'. In the nootemporal moment of the remembered event, this past, as a participant, is able to take up a semantic role available to participants, that of agency, in relation to the process 'attack'.

Similarly, the experiences of the physical and mental worlds have been conflated through language. 'Attack' is a material or action process; in non-metaphoric use such processes construe the physical world. Yet the action here is in the mental world of the 'I'. The biotemporal past in past is now a nootemporal thing which attacks. The participant which suffers that attack is not explicit; implicitly it is the 'I' of the first stanza, whose extreme bodily response has been described. Finally, the adverb 'unexpectedly' describes a relation of biotemporal future to nootemporal present: expectation, like imagination, is a noetic projection. Before the past biotemporal time of the event in stanza 1, the 'I' had not projected a future with this event. Overall in this little poem, we have a concentration of biotemporal past, past in past, nootemporal future in past in past, all packed into one nootemporal moment, a fragment of individual human experience.

A little more on J.T. Fraser and temporalities. Fraser relates different temporal dimensions to the different stages of development of the human brain: the first stage, the so-called reptilian brain; the second, the mammalian brain; the third the cortex. Fraser calls the temporal experience of the earliest level 'time felt'; this is the biotemporal succession which humans share with all organic beings. Fraser writes: 'We can write volumes about pain, love making or the experience of time's passage, but the experiences themselves remain of the character of personal knowledge' (2007, 262).

This may remind you of Augustine of Hippo's much quoted comment (2016):

*Quid ergo est tempus? Si nemo ex me quaerat, scio; si quaerente explicare velim, nescio.*

What then is time? If no one inquires of me, I know; if I should like to explain to one inquiring, I do not know.

In contrast to 'felt time' of the older levels of the brain, Fraser refers to 'time understood' as the temporal dimensions perceived by the newer levels. He writes: 'The tasks of the new regions of the brain are those of speech and associative functions. ...[time understood] includes our awareness of our aging and eventual death, as well as an appreciation of societies and cultures' (2007, 262). And again: 'Only for the uniquely human level of the brain does time possess open horizons of past and future, populated by long-term individual intentions and memories' (2007, 261). Clearly, 'time understood' includes the nootemporal time of the individual, in

whose mind remembered events biotemporally past, and imagined or predicted events biotemporally future, can be brought together.

As Augustine acknowledged, time felt and time understood cannot be simply reconciled. In Fraser's words: 'the human experience of time, in its everyday sense, is a balancing act between these two extremes.... It is a permanent call for watchfulness to protect our integrity as individuals, such as by maintaining the conflict between time felt and time understood, without becoming unthinking zombies or abstract heads unfit to survive' (2007, 264).

Consider the conflict of time felt and time understood in this poem by Kefala (2016, 4):

#### **Letter II**

The light today  
clean as if made of bones  
dried by a desert wind  
fell in the distance on the roofs  
and I remembered you.

Nothing will bring you back  
only this light  
falling so innocently  
yet so self-contained  
in an unbearable indifference.

In the biotemporality of the body, the poem tells the time (today, but in the past tense 'fell', chronologically earlier than the time of 'now'), tells what event it saw 'the light fell'. and where the event took place 'in the distance on the roofs'.

In the nootemporality of the mind, the poem judges the quality of the light ('clean'), which is then associated with the comparison ('as if...'), and in the associative sequence for this individual (bones -> skeleton-> death?), nootemporality is dominant ('I remembered you').

The second stanza confirms the reader's assumption of loss, perhaps of death - 'nothing will bring you back' - and of conflict which cannot be reconciled. That conflict is between the nootemporal memory of the world understood, in which 'you' is brought back in the world of the mind, and the biotemporal experience of a 'self-contained' and 'indifferent' felt world which cannot bring 'you' back to the world of the body - a situation which is, nootemporally, unbearable.

A critic of Kefala's earlier work wrote, 'Kefala can render the music of the moment so perfectly, she leaves one almost singing with the pleasure of it' (2007, blurb). Both the poems I've quoted seem to offer no more than 'a moment' - a biotemporal moment of time felt, which is none the less augmented, intensified in significance, with the meaning of time understood.

The work of Marc Wittmann, based on insights from psychology and neuroscience, may help to explain how, paradoxically, the apparent linearity of language - heard or read - can be construed with such complexity, such concentration, in the temporal moment. In Chapter 2 of his book, *Felt Time, The Psychology of How We Perceive Time* (2016), Wittmann discusses the concept of *temporal order threshold of perception*. Research demonstrates that, even though we take our conscious experience to be continuous, it actually occurs in small discrete steps. The temporal order is that of two stimuli (for any sense); the threshold describes the basic interval required for an individual to correctly identify their sequence. The more precise a person's temporal perception, the smaller the interval between the stimuli can be, and so the lower the *temporal order threshold*. All that is processed within a duration less than the threshold will be experienced as simultaneous.

Again, in Chapter 3, Wittmann elaborates: 'what I am aware of right now is a dynamic image of the world; all that occurs in the moment has a duration' (45). It appears that 'individual events' result from 'a mechanism of temporal integration in perception and motor operations that lasts from two to three seconds' (48), as in the behaviour of handshakes and the rhythm of verbal communication (50), or the period of a single relaxed breath (58). The successive 'now's of this 'feeling of presence' are linked together by short-term or working memory; it is this duration which 'gives rise to the feeling that one's own ego exists continuously in the world' (51).

So the research described by Wittmann undermines our intuitive confidence in the present moment, the 'now' as instantaneous, a single step in a sequence of steps. Rather we live in a sequence of integrated durations. In such a context of integrated duration, the poetic moment can be filled more fully; the poet can concentrate the ordinary affordance of language.



## References

- Augustine. (2016) Book 11, Chapter 14 in C. J.-B. Hammond (ed.) *Confessions, Volume II: Books 9–13*, Loeb Classical Library 27. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Kefala, A. (2016) *Fragments*. Sydney: Giramondo Publishing.
- Fraser, J.T. (2007) *Time and Time Again, Reports from a Boundary of the Universe*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Halliday, M.A.K. and Matthiessen, M.I.M. (2004) *Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 3rd edn. London: Arnold.
- Halliday, M.A.K. and Matthiessen, M.I.M. (2014) *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 4th edn. London and New York: Routledge.
- Huisman, R. (2013) 'The origins of language and narrative temporalities', in R. C. Steineck and C. Clausius (eds) *Origins and Futures: Time Inflected and Reflected*, 49-76. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Huisman, R. (2015) 'How do you write about what is not there? How do you record what is absent? Scraping the Temporal Palimpsest in Auster's Fiction', in A. Misztal (ed.) *Time, Narrative, and Imagination: essays on Paul Auster*, 271-91. Gdansk: Gdansk University Press.
- Huisman, R. (2016) 'Talking about Poetry - using the model of language in Systemic Functional Linguistics to talk about poetic texts', *English in Australia* 51(2): 7-19.
- Huisman, R. (2017) 'Facing the Eternal Desert: Sociotemporal Values in Old English Poetry', *Kronoscope* 17(2):231-253.
- Wittmann, M. (2016) *Felt Time, The Psychology of How We Perceive Time. (Gefühlte Zeit*. Munich: C.H. Beck, 2014.) Trans. Erik Butler. Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press.

**Rosemary Huisman**  
**The University of Sydney**  
**rosemary.huisman@sydney.edu.au**