

X Times Theory

Observations on Implied Temporalities and the Autopoiesis of Theory

RAREȘ MOLDOVAN

*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.*

T. S. ELIOT, “Burnt Norton”

Find X

THE PRESENT text attempts a reflection on the spatialization of literary theory as observational content. It draws its beginning from a question asked recently as the overarching theme of a conference in the field: “When is theory?” The preliminary assumption is that the current operations of literary theory are geographic and geopolitical: they connect theoretical observations (past and present) with literary/cultural phenomena, working by demarcations to produce complex cartographies and economies of cultural content. Their logic is systemic, in the sense of autopoietic systems.

To return for the time being to the initial question, it appears timely—although, in its muted counterpoint, a proposition liable to provoke “untimely meditations”—to ask this meta-question, which has a healthy dose of naughty nonsense, of the limerick sort or of the *Alice in Wonderland* kind, about it: When is theory? Whenever, I’m tempted to reply, only half in jest, with a moment’s split attention towards the two beats of that word: when-ever.

But the question is serious and therefore invites inquiry of the sound and the serious kind. To us today, theory, it seems, has never been at a loss in relation to time; not only

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has it “moved with the times,” or been a “sign of the times,” nor has it merely ceaselessly thematized time, time past, and time future, but it has been a tenacious multiplier of temporality, the x /times in its own operation.

Let me complicate the observation above with a brief diachronic diagnostic description, an abridged vita, partial and preliminary, tenuous and tentative. Born as one of a series of modern teleologies, literary theory, nowadays known colloquially as “theory,” had its gaze fixed firmly on its future, the foundational features of its futurity inscribed in its form. In Kantian terms, it was “prolegomena to a future science” and therefore fashioned its own province, flirting with isolationisms and moments of willful a-temporalism, refusing time for the (when)ever of formalisms and then accepting it as already produced newness, a mark of its modernist mannerisms. It obviously became the science it was laying the groundwork for, as it happens.

A second mode of temporality (today *the* prevalent mode of temporality) always shadowed it and caught up with it, was later revealed as having always been a part of it, so that any ulterior reference that ignores it appears, well, ignorant. This second mode of temporality is usually translated/transcribed as historicity or historicality, e.g. Galin Tihanov’s priorly American, priorly French, priorly German, “radical historicity of literary theory” in a recent work.¹ It should be noted that in this form, historicity operates with reifications of temporality, or cultural contingencies constellated as contexts, or as Tihanov dubs them, “regimes of relevance.”² The exposition of historicity reduces the complex temporality of theory. By reduction I mean that temporality is remanded to a rhetoric of change and social inscription (Tihanov’s term is “appropriation”). Or, otherwise formulated, historicity as observational (and observed) effect of the being historical is available as cultural content. The accolade figure of this is, naturally, the observable archive, whereas the operational mode is usually engaging the historical conjugated with the temporality of the present observations. This isn’t a one-way street: the contrary operation—observing cultural constellations for their historicity with the intent to de-reify—is also available, and can function as a positive feedback loop for redescriptions of historicity.

Theory became (note, for the sake of exemplifying, the historical mode of exposition here, but the very simple, common-sense temporality) the constellated history of itself; or say that its history became crystallized as theory. It historically was given—by association—under the guise of a Romantic Idealist teleology, a Marxist teleology, a positivist science, an evolutive Darwinian taxonomy, a revolutionary singularity, more revolutionary singularities etc.

It was variously described in the language of philosophical roadworks: paths, turns and twists. We’re living in a “century of turns,” as Claire Colebrook says, “and the embodiment turn, materialist turn, ethical turn, aesthetic turn, political turn and affective turn, the ‘turn turn’: a practice of recognizing a theoretical dominant that is delimited and consigned to the past.”³ The effect of this is partially *passéist*, but in the operational rhetoric of turns the implied temporality also looks to the future from an “infolded” present. One finds eminent examples of this in epochal descriptions: of modernity/modernism, postmodernity/postmodernism, and in all manner of temporal *but* cultural prefixes.

Theory was also described, thus, by means of analogies of epochal anxiety (post-theory, after theory, the end of theory), or by contamination with the metaphors of easy organicism (the birth and death of literary theory, dead theory), or a conflation of the two (life after theory).

It was subsequently torn and scattered (or diversified, if you prefer less brutal metaphors), contended on battlegrounds, died by a thousand cuts and was revived, gathered and scattered again, and pacified in plural defining attributes, for some, posthumously. The tensions that once shook the contentious hotspots have now fallen prey to entropy, observably. People hardly quarrel about theory *qua* theory anymore, except in the subsided articulations of a dead language, for the purposes of intellectual exercise. To echo an observation by Frank Kermode from nearly two decades ago, “there is, I think, now no animus against theory, mind you, it doesn’t very often get discussed.”⁴ *La querrelle* has moved elsewhere, new hotspots have flared up, new stakes have been brought in play (“new” is here not necessarily a temporal word, but a symptom of temporality composed into cultural content). Theory remains the useful constellated space for this or that application. We ask questions of/about theory and we *answer in applications*. In a way, its prolegomena status is thus ever actualised. Incidentally, this also points toward the built complexity of the system.

What point then, for the *temporality* of theory, besides the vanishing point, the vanishing act? I have prefaced this text with the beginning of Eliot’s “Burnt Norton,” and while one could consider it an eminently theoretical poem, Eliot was certainly not thinking about theory. But he *was* thinking very seriously about temporality in relation to experiences, about its potential, speculative aporias, and the way in which mere temporality can be redeemed. All of these, save perhaps the redemptive leap, but the rest, the “infolded” (to use Eliot’s word from another *Quartet*) temporalities, the cadences of the dictums, with their Pre-Socratic, Aristotelian, Augustinian resonances, easily transmute the idea of implied temporalities in the activity in which Eliot—as well as we today—are engaged in: “the actualization of knowledge,” that is at least one of the senses of the old $\theta\epsilon\omega\rho\iota\acute{\alpha}$ (e.g. *De anima*, 2.1).

Yet how categorically *separate* the folds of time are in Eliot’s pseudo-aporia, how perfectly dissected in modernist pretense and apodictic metaphysics, with insinuated announcement of a redemption that dares not speak its name. The good work of theory marred by good old modernist allusiveness.

Still, as for Eliot, the implied temporalities of theory are a tangle, while its historical arrangement tends towards the straightforwardness of a few types of relation. Temporalities imbricate but do not superimpose with the constellations of historicity, although in their turn they can be explicated historically, or historicized, as mentioned above. In every theoretical actualization, the implied temporalities reside and produce effects beyond the temporal intentionality or the historical or cultural explanation/interpretation. Their disentanglement from the historical-cultural dominant is contingent, it can be done and provides work (not of the dominant kind) for theory. In that line of thought, I will offer a couple of excised examples and then, to finish with, trace a couple of theoretical models of description.

Now's not the Time

IN 1836, there was no theory to speak of, although some maintain it began with Hegel reworking the medieval dialectic (so Andrew Cole, in *The Birth of Theory*⁵). But in 1836, a driven Emerson rakes up not one, not two, not three, but four hits in three sentences, which must be some kind of record, not only of accuracy, but also of accurate concision:

*Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.*⁶

Emerson's symptomatology—temporal through and through, historical, critically, here and there—sounds almost oracular to *our* ears. Our present sense and tense. The most striking thing in this pitch-perfect passage is not that the shape of Emerson's age is—by and large—the shape of things to come, the shape of our age, for this is so, unmistakably, but that all four traits (*retrospective* as basic temporal intentionality, *biographies, histories, criticism* as then present and then futural forms, and since then *ever-present*) have settled—even in historical conglomeration—as the preponderant strains of theory. If ever there was a picture of a future theory snapped in a present moment with a view of time past—there it is. Was. It endures, it exists, it is ours, with its successive historical articulations de-temporalized, that is, present and available for pick-up and recirculated use. Unfortunately, Emerson seems blissfully unaware that his prophecy will incarnate in that which he discards. That what he tosses aside with his gaze rapt by a future newness, will recirculate as *new-cum-old* for the next nearly two centuries.

The temporal infolding of Emerson's implied temporalities is complex. Let us tease it out briefly, in its cultural-historical overlapping (one realizes that temporality and history—there was no historicity at the time, although Emerson seems to be dimly, prophetically aware of its “essence”).

The age is now. Pure temporality, or temporality pure. And simple. You'd think. Except Emerson chooses to mark temporality by possession. Our. Impure, then, but all the more true. Yet, for us, that is expected: there is no purer expression of *modern* temporality than “*our* age.” I use “modern” here as a cultural and historical modifier of temporality.

The age is retrospective. Temporality here is at least a double act. At least, because retrospection is not mere gaze into the past, but gaze formed by the present that gazes at and into the past (especially by the choice of what the gaze is directed at), and in-formed

by the observable past made present into the gaze. At least. But there's more. Retrospection *spatializes* time. Time becomes the observable domain. Retrospection doesn't look back to look back, but it looks back teleologically to retrieve, to "write," as Emerson says. Archaeologies of submerged temporality, written retrospectively from present sepulchral concerns.

Biographies, histories, criticism. As forms of retrospective writing that effectively formed the theoretical "age" these were, are dominants. They have aged well. Emerson's beef with this project of the age is not with them, but with their sepulchrality. The crux of a kind of funereal-monumental temporality (i. e. "tradition"), which becomes the translucent lens through which we see.

Lenses are bad for Emerson, as for most subsequent Transcendentalists. The hyperbolic actualization of the self as "transparent eyeball"—conjured up a couple of pages later—is the purpose of seeing, feeling, belonging, the acceleration towards total transparency, outside of time ("moment"), within Nature. This leaves, apparently, no time for theory.

A couple of pages later Emerson's other double temporality makes an appearance: the non-present of the moment (moments aren't time, they're ecstasy) and the non-future of "an original relation to the universe" yet to be actualized. Those are essentially the a-theoretical, unpresentable nuclei around which Emerson will construct his theory.

Vistas of Future Past

IN 1994 there was theory aplenty, myriad theories. The Sokal affair was a couple of years away and Harold Bloom was publishing *The Western Canon*. A relatively unknown driven British philosopher (but we can call him a theorist) was writing this:

[[]] The story goes like this: Earth is captured by a technocapital singularity as renaissance rationalization and oceanic navigation lock into commoditization take-off. Logistically accelerating techno-economic interactivity crumbles social order in auto-sophisticating machine runaway. As markets learn to manufacture intelligence, politics modernizes, upgrades paranoia, and tries to get a grip. . . .

By the time soft-engineering slithers out of its box into yours, human security is lurching into crisis. Cloning, lateral genodata transfer, transversal replication, and cyberotics, flood in amongst a relapse onto bacterial sex.

Neo-China arrives from the future.

Hypersynthetic drugs click into digital voodoo.

Retro-disease.

Nanospasm.⁷

It's easy to observe the implied temporality here as the catastrophic theoretical imagination projected as simple story (subject). It's just as easy to observe its stylistic present tense, futural as movie script, is a "perpetual possibility" yet to come into its actuality (this is not to say that some of the things in this 1994 thriller script have not passably

come to pass in “our age,” in fact a lot of it can read like a script for last year). It’s fairly easy to decrypt, nicely enjoyable as apocalyptic short theory fiction, with reversed redemptive *arrivals* and a no-pass quarantine (“Nothing human makes it out of the near future,” Land announces as denouement).

But what I am really concerned with are the more opaque, hyper-compressed micro-temporalities implied in the symptomatic tableau, the description of the future. They are temporally dense but only *slanted* culturally, which makes them ambiguous: “renaissance rationalization,” “politics modernizes,” “Neo-China arrives from the future,” nanospasm etc. They are similar to Eliot’s temporal segments, but synecdochal, not symbolic. They are the negative image of Emerson’s future brought into the sunshine of today: super-heavy past nuggets of theory thrown zany into the darkness of the future to mess with the present. It’s where theoretical work of a different kind is effected, and once again it’s marginal, mostly discarded work. Theoretical refuse.

One witnesses an extrication from a system of communication (the published academic text) and a turning toward another game, another language and another political and theoretical position. A vanishing act of theory into extreme conceptual plasticity, of meaning into nonsense, of strings of ideas into accretions of lexemes, of biting insight into babbling input, a general collapse at all levels of the philosophical archi-tectonics into an “anarchitecture” (Land appropriated the term) of perplexing ruins. Edified and edificial Theory, then, crumbles into detritus, or what Land will later call, in his novel/theory-fiction *Phyl Undhu*, “und Hu,” the “residue, the remains,” a female “Glyph” or “Cypher” who is “broken”: “Her answers don’t hang together.”⁸

Temporality is here, as elsewhere in Land’s writings, condensed in *shocks*—in the Benjaminian sense—administered to the observable flow of the historical, ever jolting the contentment of its systemic dynamic by short-circuiting it with the babble of a prophetic *tremendum* or the disengaged irresponsible freedom of “fiction.”

The Multiverse Model for Theory: A View from Everywhere

POPULAR CULTURE devised the multiverse out of abhorrence for definitive deaths. It is inconceivable that super-heroes should die forever; so they don’t, they’re replicated *ad infinitum*, brought back, revived, retconned, mutated, doppelganged and so forth in the greatest cultural recycler the world has ever seen. The destinal tension of “gone forever” is gone forever, and so are the real amplitude of death-fictions, and most of the stakes of engagement.

I suggest—as a thought yet to be developed—that something analogous has happened to theory, which may account for its present doldrums. Theory is now not so much a plurality of theories as a multiverse of “studies,” all with multiple instant portal accesses to all pacified pasts (past concepts, past struggles, past arrangements), and a multi-pass to making all present. Demarcations are porous or tenuous because observations move through a malleable within. Crossovers are all the rage. The all-encompass-

ing Theory (as Kermode notes “literary theory became Theory, it involved everything”) is the *ever-where*, the maximal extension of “perpetual possibility,” to use Eliot’s syntagm, potentialities collapsing into sets of observed content. This is the sense in which I understand the de-temporalization and spatialization of theory by means of its overwhelming historicization. Theory, I’d argue, has been largely de-temporalized while it has been largely historicized.

In order to perpetuate themselves in their communicative system, “studies” do not require theory to be temporally radical; they merely require access to the historical everywhere for the purposes of the *present* concern. Temporality re-enters the theoretical arena in the ever Emersonian “modern” sense of the “now” to be effected.

The Sense of Observing: Theory As Autopoiesis

I WOULD like to take a detour from the reflection on the temporality/historicity distinction, in order to come to a sense of temporality from a different place. We can ask what determines the operational processes we have observed above in relation to the distinction. In that sense, it is relevant to observe the way we *do* theory, even if only in a generic way. The “use” of theory in “studies” can be located in its operational mechanics. The processes described above are caught up in “doing theory” as an actualization (i. e. turning possibility into actuality) of knowledge. In this line of thought, it has been normalized and formalized into an M.O. of sorts in your average literature paper; or, one could say, absorbed and invisibilized so that it doesn’t really stand out anymore. The question can and should be reframed as to what this M.O. *does* within the larger discourse of the text. I’d like to sketch three gestures that one can customarily identify.

The most obvious answer and the least interesting is that the theoretical anchors the particular piece of writing or research in the field of previous knowledge. This is done to ensure appropriateness and relevance. The procedure mimics the way research is elaborated in the hard sciences and, for the study of literature, and by extension of cultural ideas, it works best when the theories invoked and the object of study are closer to the field of harder sciences: historical enquiry, the sociology of literature, statistical or quantitative studies in digital humanities etc. The further a discourse moves away from this register (note that I call it a register not a field of objectively ascertainable units), the weirder this function gets as an effect of theoretical language, until it ceases to work at all and flips into being an involuntary, sometimes, but always amusing pastiche of “scientific” discourse. Not only is the field virtually borderless here, so that it needs to be constellated, but there is hardly a consensus as to what particular constellations of names or ideas are appropriate. This enables the frightening freedom of contingent constellation, that many recoil from as unprofessional. In other words, it’s a free for all. The tether of theoretical authority is dissolved, although the discourse often keeps going through the motions, talking the talk without walking the walk, and isn’t that just what “in theory” means? For a long time, my favourite vulgarised example to illustrate this function in its

weirder, inappropriate guise was “As Derrida shows...,” but that example is now all but extinct so the name may be supplanted as needed.

A second gesture is that theory pre-orient (colors, influences etc.) interests, readings, avenues of research and finally outcomes. In this sense, the use of theory places it as a *propaedeutics* but it is also a teleological control: it ensures you’re going to find what you’re looking for. It is followed, and in a sense verified, canonically, by the application, the *Anwendung*, the proper content. The copulation of theory and body text is done by conjunction, and normally the conjunction is “in” (i. e. “Interstitial transcendence in the novels of Michel Houellebecq,” X in Y), a formulation that separates the theoretical from its latent but unveiled dissemination in the work, in a model inherited from early modern philosophy.

Finally, a third gesture I’d like to mention, this in a reading akin to one particular theory—the theory of second order observations and autopoietic social systems—is that within the system of academic communication “theory” functions as second order observations (observations of observations, on the same level with and indistinct from observations about literature), in a constant enticing of others to observe, enhancing the complexity of the system and continuously verifying the (un)familiarity of observers with other observers. This is a re-description of the first gesture from the perspective of second order observations, taking away the distinction between the theoretical and the applied, which was tenuous at best. The system works to irritate other systems, for instance, sometimes, social systems of financing, and this is how one (luckily, deservedly) gets funding.

What I would like to also mention in passing is that all these 3 (perhaps 2, perhaps just 1) gesture(s) are part of the *legitimizing strategy* played in academic communication, and that is the name of the game. The game is inscribed in the economy of knowledge as re-use and production and is safeguarded by economic stringencies. Also, by and large the game is formal and formulaic, and the rules of the game are asymmetric distinctions within the system which can be translated into practical imperatives: that we make sense, that we stick to the topic (more or less), that we practice a modicum of theoretical discernment, but mostly that we have observed others who have observed the same things as us.

The tableau up to this point fits the model of autopoietic systems. As Luhmann describes them synthetically:

Autopoietic systems are the products of their own operations. They have properties such as dynamic stability and operational closure. They are not goal-oriented systems. They maintain their autopoietic organization of reproduction as long as it is possible to do so. Their problem is to find operations that can be connected to the present state of the system. In this sense, they are what Hans von Foerster would call nontrivial machines or historical machines. They use self-referential operations to refer to their present state to decide what to do next.¹⁰

There is a temporality of the system operations that has to do with the “present state of the system,” with perpetuation and with “what to do next.” We stop short here from assigning to it the role of control, since, after all, the whys and wherefores of self-obs-

vation, what Luhmann calls *reentry* (of the difference between the system and complex environments “*within the system*”¹¹) are now disseminated between the vagaries of *interest*, and the reentries of *political engagement* and *priorities of research*. No detailed description exists of the dynamics of theory as autopoietic system (not as historical exposition), and therefore of the operational temporalities of the historical machine, because theory, by and large, keeps to the entrenched belief of the continuum between its observations and the world it pretends to observe. In other words, it tends to believe it produces observations *about* the world. To bolster this tenet, cultural content has to be understood as “the world” which can be observed.

The sense of observing, then, is participation in the system enhancing its complexity. Like other systems, what we call theory has become “hypercomplex,” and therefore, as Luhmann wryly observes

*the unity of complexity becomes unobservable. Intellectuals occupy themselves and others with describing description, philosophers become experts on philosophical texts—and literary criticism takes over, nicknaming ‘theory’ something that we suppose has been done elsewhere.*¹²



Notes

1. Galin Tihanov, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 25.
2. Tihanov, 20.
3. Claire Colebrook, “Cartesian Affect,” in *Affect and Literature*, edited by Alex Houen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 425.
4. Frank Kermode, “Value After Theory,” in *Life After Theory*, edited by Michael Payne and John Schad (London–New York: Continuum, 2003), 66.
5. Andrew Cole, *The Birth of Theory* (Chicago–London: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 24.
6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Essays and Other Writings*, edited, with a Biographical Introduction by Brooks Atkinson, Foreword by Tremaine McDowell (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 3.
7. Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007*, edited by Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier, 2nd edition (n.p.: Urbanomic/Sequence Press, 2012), 441–442.
8. Nick Land, *Phyl-Undhu: Abstract Horror Exterminator* (n.p.: Time Spiral Press, 2014), 46.
9. Kermode, 58.
10. Niklas Luhmann, *Theories of Distinction: Redescribing the Descriptions of Modernity*, edited and introduced by William Rasch, translated by Joseph O’Neill, Elliot Schreiber, Kerstin Behnke, and William Whobrey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 103.
11. Luhmann, 104.
12. Luhmann, 109.

Abstract

X Times Theory:

Observations on Implied Temporalities and the Autopoiesis of Theory

The essay considers the distinction between temporality and historicity in relation to the operations of (literary) theory as an autopoietic system. It contends that theory operates by spatializing temporality into cultural content. It offers examples of the way in which infolded temporalities within theoretical texts are transformed into historical demarcations. It also provides two possible models for describing the state of theory, the latter of which envisages it as an autopoietic system.

Keywords

theory, temporality, historicity, autopoietic systems