Edited by Karen Newman, Jay Clayton, and Marianne Hirsch

Time and the Literary

ESSAYS FROM THE ENGLISH INSTITUTE
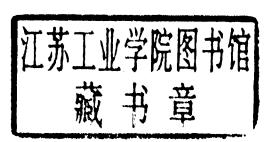
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RE-READING THE PRESENT

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Time and the literary. What, if anything, links these terms today? Information technology is said to have annihilated both. Time disappears in the supposed simultaneity of electronic communication, instant messaging, and information retrieval; the literary recedes behind multiple screens: film, television, computers, Palm organizers, and play stations. The essays in this volume argue the contrary, that the literary often structures our thinking about time now. The literary joins immediacy and the instantaneous with their opposite, duration and critique. It extends the present by marking time —marking tense, period, millennium, and apocalypse. It prolongs the moment for critical reflection, producing time for a re-reading of the present. The "now" of the papers in this volume may be as remote as eleventh-century France or as the future envisioned by science fiction, but it is a time that has been decisively marked by the literary.

The systematic grammatical contrasts that express time in language are perhaps the most fundamental way the literary continues to structure thinking about time. Traditional grammarians in the West recognize three such contrasts—past, present, and future—and those contrasts actively shape public discourse, thinking and writing about

time. Tense, as such contrasts are often termed, derives via Old French from the Latin *tempus*, a translation of the Greek word for time, *khrónos*. Tense relates the time of an action, event, or condition in language to the time of utterance. Such literary marking of time works against the tendency of information technology to call into question the "now" of utterance by blurring the dichotomy between now and not-now, present and non-present.

Periods mark disciplinary time and continue to structure our thinking, as our job ads, MLA divisions and sessions, journal titles and self-descriptions demonstrate. "Period" has a venerable history in rhetoric and literary study. From the Greek meaning a going-round, circuit, course or cycle of years, we commonly refer to periods of literary history even as we argue over their usefulness and value. We make periods so as to recognize the new coming into being, to recognize modernity. Re-reading the Renaissance as the early modern period gestures toward this impulse even as it, in Samuel R. Delany's resonant phrase, historifies modernity. In early modern, the modern is located, known, punctual. Period, like tense, has a precise grammatical and rhetorical meaning: it is a complete sentence, the basic unit of rhetorical measurement. It may be packed with members and cola, it raises the question of style, and its effect is said to hurl our interest forward, to create mild suspense. And yet period also, paradoxically, means the opposite: a pause or full stop, an ending—Shakespeare even uses it as a verb when the messenger from the imprisoned Ventidius in *Timon of Athens* desires Timon's letter promising to pay his debt "which failing periods his comfort." To end, to conclude, to dissolve. This kind of paradox is a mark of literary thinking, as no less than three of our contributors suggest. Stephen G. Nichols and L. O. Aranye Fradenburg each uses the turn of the millennium as the occasion for reexamining the paradoxes of historical periodization. Periods punctuated in the past; now, some believe period has been superseded by the dot—.edu, .org, .com.

The literary was traditionally defined as the qualities of style, form, or genre that set a work apart as literature, separate it from everyday writing, on the one hand, and from rival forms of specialized discourse— history, philosophy, science—on the other. It distinguished an important branch of high culture, and its fate has mirrored that of literature

itself. From the Romantic enshrining of the literary, to formalist and New Critical attempts to isolate the literary as a unique property of certain texts, to the more recent dismissal of the literary as irrelevant to popular modes of cultural expression, the idea has been associated with efforts to discriminate, preserve, and canonize. For many people over the last few decades, it has appeared outmoded, part of an elitist consensus that stifled emerging cultural practices and inhibited the recovery of neglected older texts by women, minorities, colonial writers, and others.

Our contributors put in play an intriguing set of alternative conceptions of the literary. Instead of hypostatizing the literary as a particular quality, which discriminates one kind of writing from others, several contributors locate it as a moment or activity inherent in all cultural forms. This alternative way of conceiving the literary has always existed as an undercurrent within modernity, surfacing in the discourse of avant-garde movements that see literature not as a privileged formal category but as a mode of action in the present. For a certain radical strain within modernity, the only writing that counted was that which annihilated the past in order to fashion a pure present, a turning point from which the world could be made anew. Today, when the dream of a language that can act in the present has been overwhelmed by the flood of digital information, the avant-garde potential of the literary seems to lie elsewhere. For Alan Liu, it lies in the ability to resist information. Faced with the prospect of an information economy dominated by "knowledge work," the literary becomes something like "hacking," the capacity to destroy "this eternal now or presence of information," the ability "to stand to one side of 'knowledge' in the age of knowledge work." (69) For Catherine Gallagher, there is a radical potential today in what she calls "plots of undoing." Pointing to the prevalence of cultural forms that undo the past in order to model alternative possibilities for the future, she argues that "this enlarged sense of temporal possibility correlates with a newly activist, even interventionist, relation to our collective past." (11–12). Jay Clayton points to the critical potential of the literary to challenge the impulse of much genetic research today to collapse all times into the "perpetual present" of the genome, which can then be read out as a digital program encoding the past and future of both the individual and the species. Hacking,

plots of undoing, and literary "sequencing" of the biotechnology industry act in the present by jamming the information channels and opening new ways for the present to know both the past and future.

These essays are but three of a number of pieces in this volume that evince a renewed interest in the role of the literary in contemporary life. This effort to think about the literary in relation to the present was one of the factors that induced us to choose Paul de Man's essay "Literary History and Literary Modernity" as the basis for a discussion forum at the 1999 English Institute. The program for that year initiated a new feature, a roundtable based on a single text, accessible through the Institute website, which the entire audience could read in advance and come prepared to discuss. We invited Barbara Johnson and Jonathan Arac to deliver position papers to stimulate discussion, and their remarks now serve to introduce and to respond to de Man's essay, which is here returned to print for the first time in recent years. For both of these critics, as indeed for the majority of the participants in the forum, the return to de Man with "suspicion rather than reverence" (Arac 122) did not prevent them from seeing him in a productive new light—not merely as the theorist of deconstruction, the revisionary reader of the Romantics, and the successor to American New Criticism, nor merely as the figure of collaboration he has become in so many eyes, but as a thinker connected as much as Benjamin, Jameson, Trilling, and others, to a set of literary historical projects with which de Man is rarely associated. In this new light, his ideas become relevant to debates not only about modernity and literary history but also to cultural criticism and the emergence of cultural studies.

De Man argues that the literary always possesses an ambivalent or paradoxical relation to the present. "On the one hand, literature has a constitutive affinity with action, with the unmediated, free act that knows no past." (154) Hence, for Rimbaud, Artaud, and the other avant-garde writers de Man considers, the literary is an expression of modernity's desire for a "true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure." (150) But, on the other hand, "the ambivalence of writing is such that it can be considered both an act and an interpretative process that follows after an act with which it cannot coincide." (154) Baudelaire captures this paradox for de Man when the poet uses figures such as "*représentation du présent*" and "*mémoire du présent*," which "combine a repetitive with an instantaneous pattern," thus

"opening perspectives of distance and difference within the apparent uniqueness of the instant." (159) In echoing Baudelaire's phrases in the title to our introduction, "Re-reading the Present," we have tried to underline the continuing force of this paradox today, the perspectives of distance and difference opened with the simultaneity of an information order by the literary.

If the literary is the information that resists its status as information, that which escapes the progression, ossification, and erasure of temporal progress, then it necessitates a re-reading of the present. In relation to the literary, the present extends beyond the fleetingness of the instantaneous to create a critical distance within itself. The literary stops time to expand the present and in so doing it complicates all traditional conceptions of temporal marking, such as periodization and contextualization. Which present? When is now? In the essays that follow different presents confront each other in the act of revision and re-reading. Calling into question the by now predictable and ubiquitous move toward contextualization in literary study, they reveal the contingency of that move which situates itself between the present of production and the present of consumption. At best, contextualization introduces a space of critique into the present. At worst, it reifies a moment, setting if off from others in a move that rests on an unquestioning belief in the explanatory power of history, of marking time.

In the act of reading and re-reading, the present becomes thick, layered not only in its contingency and its implicit relation to other presents, but also in its paradoxical resistance to history. Re-reading, as Samuel R. Delany so elegantly shows, thus reveals what could not be seen and what could not be said in previous presents, inflecting the instantaneity of the present with ambivalence, complexity, repression, and re-vision. Sir Philip Sidney in his *Defense of Poesy* claimed that poetry, that is, literature, dealt not in "what is, hath been, or shall be," that is, with tense—past, present and future—but with "what may be or should be," that is, with modals: wish, desire, necessity, obligation. The present tense, inflected by the modalities of desire and necessity, opens the present time to infinite possibilities of re-reading. Thus Jane Gallop interrogates the temporality and the structures of address characterizing both the new genre of e-mail and the more traditional context of the academic lecture, calling for a feminist rhetoric that might

encompass multiple times and audiences in a single speech act. "Econstructing" sisterhood, or writing and (re)reading in the extended present of e-mail, is a "model for communicating across difference" that allows for better "listening" than the presence of conversation.

In its focus on temporality, this volume qualifies the recent concentration on space in literary and cultural studies, and its concomitant displacement of time. In his landmark 1991 study of postmodernism, Fredric Jameson sees the very mark of the postmodern in "the waning of the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality, the elegiac mysteries of durée and memory. . . . I think it is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experiences, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time."[1] Postmodern discussions of temporality have invariably focused on the present: "The present is all there is," says David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity*.[2] In her discussion of time, narrative, and postmodernism, Ursula Heise finds that most contemporary theorists "coincide in emphasizing the overwhelming importance of the present in the contemporary time sense, and in pointing out the difficulties of describing more long-term temporal patterns."[3] The total present of postmodernity is associated with the questioning of progress, and the ambivalence about the future as an organizing category, and, also, with the "end of history," the separation of temporality from memory, history, and narrative coherence—with the dissolution of the subject. The subject has become the consumer, the surfer on the Net, the sender and receiver of instant messages. Thus the instantaneity and immediacy of time, and the virtual present it creates, tend to be described in entirely technological and economic terms, and associated uniquely with information and consumption, with the impatient demand for immediate access and the desire for ever greater temporal compression.

In the act of re-reading, the present is the space of contradiction, of multiplicity and non-coincidence. The present of reading is, in fact, not the present of consumption but of resistance to consumption, to historicity. The present of reading is an encounter with other presents which reveals the contingency and impermanence of each, the coexistence of many mutually exclusive possible presents. The subject of reading is not the consumer, or the surfer, or the knowledge worker, but the one who travels in myriad time loops to encounter other writers and readers in their own contingent spaces.

NOTES

1. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p.16.
2. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 240.
3. Ursula Heise, *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 29.

PART 1

1

UNDOING

Catherine Gallagher

When Michael J. Fox went back to the future in 1985, Steven Spielberg produced America's most popular version of a new time-travel plot, that in which someone travels into the past to make (or try to make) an alteration there that changes the shape of the present. Fox transforms his parents, for example, and thereby raises his class and status; a year earlier, Arnold Schwarzenegger, as the terminator from the future, traveled to his past, the film's present, to destroy the destined mother of a rebel leader. The *Star Trek* producers were also quick to seize on the possibilities of the new plot; in one of its back-to-the-future movies, produced in 1992, just in time for the quincentennial of the first contact between Europeans and Americans, the crew of the *Enterprise* discovers and foils a plot by the evil Borg to interrupt the first contact between earth and an extraterrestrial civilization. These are among the most conspicuous and familiar instances of the plot I'm calling "undoing," the kernel of which is an attempt to change the present by subtracting a crucial past event and thereby sending history off in an alternative direction.

These movies would seem to have little connection to the world in which we actually live or the grave social issues that confront us. However, I'm going to suggest that they indicate a significant expansion of our sense of plausible chronologies, and that this enlarged sense

of temporal possibility correlates with a newly activist, even interventionist, relation to our collective past. The undoing plot, I'll try to demonstrate, lives not only in our explicit fantasies but also in our historical and political imaginations.

It would, indeed, be surprising if the sense of our relation to history had remained unaffected by our contemporary preoccupation with the subject of time. For the last half of the century, speculation about the nature of time has been spreading, with increasing velocity, across disciplines, altering some of our most fundamental assumptions about causation and narrative. What literary critic, for example, is now unfamiliar with the phenomena of backward causation, multiple time tracks, and parallel universes? Are any of us surprised when a novel goes into reverse, revives a dead character, makes a sudden leap into an alternate world, or lets a future event determine the past? A generation for whom Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths" and Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot Forty-Nine* are classics has almost come to expect serious fiction to provide chronological reverses and time loops. Far from relegating works to the "fantasy" or "science fiction" categories, these techniques are among the identifying features of the weightiest postmodern narratives. *Back to the Future* and *The Terminator* might easily be seen as belated and derivative exploitations of the chronologies more thoughtfully developed in literary postmodernism and specialist science-fiction genres, but it might also be argued that the mass appeal of these films in the mid-nineteen-eighties indicated a submerged awareness that we, as a nation, had set out on some undoing missions of our own, missions to which I'll return. I'm going to use Spielberg's movie to illustrate certain features of the prototypical undoing plot as well as to indicate the nature of at least one of our attempts to realign our national past and future.

My first task, though, is to describe these undoing films in terms of the temporal and ontological puzzles their plots raise. By plot I mean the sequential logic of the movies' events, which is quite different from the historical or calendric chronology that each implies. Many of the movies' distinctive traits are best discerned through the prism of the popular-science books about time that began gaining a general readership in the mid-eighties.[1] Although the best-selling books on this topic were yet to appear, ideal viewers of *Back to the Future* and *The*