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Aesthetics of Theory in the Modernist Era and Beyond

Antoine Cazé

1 “What is the productive tension between ‘poetics’ and ‘poetry’ as these terms are currently used?” asks critic Maria Damon. In much the same way, this issue of Transatlantica intends to focus on the tensions, frictions, and contradictions between poetic writing and aesthetic discourse, between practice and theory. In The Futurist Moment, Marjorie Perloff shows how “[t]he novelty of Italian Futurist manifestos [...] is their brash refusal to remain in the expository or critical corner, their understanding that the group pronouncement, sufficiently aestheticized, can, in the eyes of the mass audience, all but take the place of the promised art work.” Building upon this premise of early, pre-World-War-One Modernism—which crucially contributed to blurring the boundaries between artwork and critical/theoretical commentary—the five articles gathered here under the heading “Aesthetics of Theory” undertake to study how the aesthetic dimensions and determinants of Modernist “theoretical” writings may be characterized. In their overall strategy to emphasize formal innovation, American writers such as Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, Hilda Doolittle and T.S. Eliot tried to integrate the programmatic, prescriptive dimension of poetic theory within their poetic practice, thereby challenging what Perloff calls “the expository or critical” mode. Conversely, many of these writers’ creative pieces explore, and often reveal, theoretical/critical probes into poetic idioms—a feature which is even more obvious in the domain of other art forms such as music or architecture (one immediately thinks of Arnold Schoenberg or Mies van der Rohe), here illustrated by the poetic/theoretical practice of John Cage.

2 To analyze T.S. Eliot’s apparently clear-cut distinction between poetry and theory, manifested in what has been petrified into critical commonplaces, Amélie Ducroux starts from the poet’s mock authoritative declarations in his essays and shows how his poetry produces its own forms of theoretical and critical discourse, premised not so much on the conservative attempt to obey the lessons of the “quiet-voiced elders” as on debunking the very precepts it seems to support in the first place. If one takes into account the ironical relationship between his critical writings and his poems, Eliot’s aesthetics thus appears to
be much more dynamic and plastic than merely prescriptive. Ducroux first looks at Eliot’s allusive appropriation of past texts, seeing it as a literal putting into practice of the idea, famously formulated in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” according to which works of the past are altered by any new addition to them. The organic integration of aesthetic theory into poetry itself—here in the guise of more or less explicit quotations—serves to call into question the metaphorical nature of Eliot’s ideas, blurring the usual distinction between discursive modes: here, the poetry is literal, incarnating theoretical gestures in the poetic voice, while the theory remains metaphorical. Ducroux then shows how such incarnation of theory in Eliot’s poems goes beyond what she also calls an “expository mode” in order to permeate syntactic and grammatical strategies; she suggests that Eliot’s poetic practice allowed him to worry the distinction between expression and intention, and demonstrates how forms of theoretical thinking actually “take place” in the poems, allowing “the sensory experience of poetry and the experience of thought itself” to coalesce.

Although one can hardly imagine two more radically opposed writers than T.S. Eliot and Hilda Doolittle, Antoine Cazé’s contribution also makes of blurring discursive modes a crucial writing strategy in both the poetic and theoretical writings of the latter. As a matter of fact, Cazé argues that this blur is constitutive of H.D.’s poetic theorizing, as he retraces how H.D. gradually defines an alternative form of clarity which may be identified as “clarid” rather than clear, if one is to adopt the poet’s own unusual term. In this respect, H.D.’s contribution to the aesthetics of theory is to rematerialize theory, re-embodying it by grounding it in the senses rather than in the mind. Focusing on the early “para-theoretical” essay Notes on Thought and Vision (1919, published 1982), Cazé unpacks H.D.’s palimpsest uses of a theory—layered and erased—which she profoundly alters to fit her larger poetic agenda. Theory is no longer envisaged as an exercise in conceptualization or ideation, but rather as a form of heightened vision (the word “theory” itself deriving from a Greek root meaning “observe, contemplate”), one of whose models may be psychoanalysis, which played such an important role in H.D.’s exploration of the workings of the mind, alongside spirituality and the occult. What H.D. seeks to foreground, in her poems as well as in her essays, is “the perceptual dimension of her theorizing,” which implies working in a perpetually liminal space, a transitional state of mind and feelings which she calls “the over-mind” (Notes on Thought and Vision), or a “clarid sequence of ideas” (Borderline).

In “The Politics of Aesthetics: Ezra Pound’s ‘Jefferson’ is ‘Mussolini,’” Hélène Aji chooses another angle of approach from which to deal with the question of aestheticizing theory in the Modernist era, as she discusses the nexus of political, aesthetic and theoretical forces framing Pound’s two versions (English and Italian, respectively) of his propagandist text, Jefferson and/or Mussolini and Jefferson e Mussolini. There, Aji contends, “Pound puts into practice a theory whereby aesthetics informs the politics of an era, as much as it is informed by it.” In a characteristically Poundian emphasis on the materiality of language as having a direct impact on reality, the Italian version of this text—a sometimes approximate translation from the English original—acts as a focal point, a strange attractor of sorts which allows for Pound’s “radicalization of previous political and aesthetic strategies.” In her reading and deconstruction of Pound’s political pamphlet through a wide-ranging discussion of recent Pound criticism, Aji shows how Pound’s agenda consisted in “turn[ing] his aesthetics of politics into a politics of
aesthetics,” a move which reinforced the American poet’s attempt at actually changing
the world thanks to the poetic word.

Such a materialism, by which thought and ideas are projected into linguistic shapes, or
language objects, also lies at the core Gertrude Stein’s writing practice, although in very
different ways than in Pound’s case, obviously. In “The Tune of Thinking,” Abigail Lang
discusses Stein’s four 1935 lectures gathered under the title Narration in order to show
how thought may unfold simultaneously in writing and in speech, thus transforming the
ways in which the mind processes it. For Stein, writing practice always precedes any
theory of writing, so that thought is exposed to writing even before it can be exposed in
writing. That is why looking at her rather hastily written lectures on Narration—in which
she tries to work through what she sees as the “problem” of narrative—may give us a
first-hand glimpse into the thought processes Stein was so intent in probing throughout
her texts. The “problem” of narration is that it forbids immediacy because it must create
retrospective distance in order to be perceived as producing a narrative at all; narration
does not allow for presentation, only for representation, and therefore cannot account
for processes of thought and knowledge. As Lang argues, Stein’s Narration is a key text in
understanding how Stein relates thought/knowledge to writing, since “[e]nacting what
they say, the lectures seek to bridge the discrepancy between the immediate nature of
knowledge and the gradual nature of narrative.” In a sense, this brings us back to what
was central in T.S. Eliot, too—i.e., the difficulty which confronts any theory seeking to
shun the expository mode by attempting, on the contrary, to “write itself,” in the
immediacy of thinking (rather than thought), without writing itself off, so to speak.

The potential immediacy of a theory that would embrace a sense of its own aesthetics,
and the consequences this specific theoretical stance may have upon textual practice,
also lie at the core of Vincent Broqua’s reading of John Cage’s experimental book
provocatively entitled Silence. “How is one to rediscover the link binding aesthetics and
experience?” Broqua asks, implying the broader question of what remains of perception
and sensation in aesthetics. For, as he suggests, Silence is both a book of aesthetic theory
and a book in which a peculiar, and peculiarly Cagean, aesthetics is put into practice, more
than reflected upon, thus defeating both the domain of experience (practice) and the
domain of thinking about this experience (theory), or at the very least worrying the limit
between the two. The very structure of Cage’s book—for which Cage himself says he is not
responsible—stages this productive defeat twice: firstly, through Cage’s claim of its non-
intentionality; and secondly, by shifting the burden of theory away from the more
obviously expository pieces (such as the famous “Lecture on Nothing”), and onto those
texts in the book which appear to be less theoretical, little anecdotes or stories which
allow “an experimental aesthetics of criticism to be truly experienced.”

In her essay “A Common Sense,” the American poet and critic Lyn Hejinian, admittedly a
postmodern successor of Gertrude Stein, gives the following definition of theory: “Theory
‘consists in seeing connections.’ And this is, indeed, different from what practice does—
which is to make connections, to forge links. Theory asks what practice does and in
asking, it sees the connections that practice makes. Poetic language, then, insofar as it is a
language of linkage, is a practice. It is practical. But poetry, insofar as it comments on
itself (and poetic form is, among other things, always a poem’s self-commentary) is also
theoretical.” By creating this hybrid category of “practical theory” for poetic language,
Hejinian points at what all the essayists featured in this issue have tried to assess—i.e.,
the ways in which writers, when thinking about their art from within the aesthetic limits
framing this art, set out to propose alternative ways of actually (re)constructing common sense, or rather a common sense as Lyn Hejinian puts it in the title of her essay. A sense that would not be based on unquestioned consensus but which would use inquisitive thinking as a way to construct the space of what may be shared among several people, a space which would then be made up of all the traces of what has been questioned in common. The substantive shift from general category (“common sense,” with no article) to particular experience (“a common sense,” with the indefinite article extracting from the unquestioned generality of the category one class, which in this instance points to a truly experienced commonality) is crucial: such is the kind of linkage which theory may effect when it is concerned with processes and acts rather than mere elucidation and discourse. In another of her essays, entitled “Reason,” Hejinian specifies what is meant by theory along the same lines:

The term theory appears twice in the essay as a synonym for thought, but I mean thought of a particular kind—thought that is rigorously speculative, ongoing, and, by virtue of looking out toward the world as well as self-critically inward, it resists adherence to first principles, immutable truths, authoritarian formulations. Theory, as I understand it, is always everywhere mutable. It is the interminable process by which we are engaged with the changing world around us and made ready for the changes it requires in and from us. A theory, then, is not a theorem [...]. Theorizing is, in fact, the very opposite of theorem-stating. It is a manner of vulnerable, inquisitive, worldly living, and it is one very closely bound to the poetic process.⁸

“Ongoing,” “mutable,” “interminable process,” “inquisitive”: according to Hejinian, theory—if it remains at the limit between inward-looking and outward-looking, between seeing and making—is essentially another name for poetry. Such a definition was made possible by the various ways in which the American Modernists allowed aesthetic theory to shift and very progressively merge with poetic practice, giving birth to an aesthetics of theory that more recent poets such as Hejinian were able to turn into a practice of living.

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NOTES

3. About Eliot’s conversion to Anglicanism, H.D. comments in a 1935 letter to Bryher: “T.S. Eliot is so, so terribly wrong—yet is saving his skin, I suppose simply. . . . H.D. tries to remain in the balance between these two vibrations.” Bryher Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, GEN MSS97, Box #14, Folder 568.
5. Ibid., p. 338.
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