

ESSAYS FROM THE ENGLISH INSTITUTE 2016: TIME

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Time was on our mind at the English Institute in 2016. It was the institution's 75th anniversary and that long axis of continuity came into focus against the fact of our new spatial mobility (what had been an annual trek to Harvard was now a rotating series among Yale, Chicago, and Irvine). That we were interested in time, however, was neither entirely new nor surprising. Topics addressed at English Institute meetings over the last two decades had included Periodization, Repetition, and Tense—each generating its own conversation on literary form and temporality. Reading these conversations carefully, one is left with a sense that nearly every category of literary analysis (historicity, epoch, plot, narration, seriality, meter, linearity, and so on) could be framed as a question of temporal experience. The term postmodernism may have described, in Fredric Jameson's terms, a transition from a modernist obsession with time to a globalist obsession with space, but the term itself (and its accompanying periodization of late capitalism) was already overdetermined by categories of temporal progression. And when high theory was at its highest, it was its attention to the temporality of writing that complicated the philosophical privileging of speech and its various mythologies of presence. Even in what came to be known as the transnational turn in English literary studies—reimagining all kinds of spatial boundaries in more comparative literary forms like the anglophone, the postcolonial, the subaltern, and minority literatures—we have been carefully tuned to questions of time and literary form (demystifying, for instance, colonial fantasies in which certain cultures were declared more “modern” than others). The discipline, it would seem, has always been on time.

And yet it could be said that in recent years, time has become a prism through which many material, ontological, and even institutional categories are turned anew. Put simply, the clocks we are watching seem to be getting bigger. Consider, for example, how literature's ability to explore deep time has become a means for the discipline to understand the ecological, cultural, and political dilemmas of the Anthropocene. (Science fiction is certainly no longer a non-academic genre.) Or notice how literature as analyzed by computational algorithms has become an object of inquiry so vast that we are suddenly able to “read” whole

libraries of data—and in a time period no human being could ever hope to replicate. It is a time of big clocks, and these were some of the Institute’s considerations as we met in 2016—as well as in the following year, when our topic was Scale. The goal was not so much to replace the discipline’s attention to traditional categories of literary temporality as to explore what some of these newer questions respecting time had to teach us about the topics we care so much about.

The text assigned for the meeting, E. P. Thompson’s “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” anticipates both the political dimension and scalable qualities that work on time can take.¹ In this 1967 essay, Thompson famously charts the contrast between the task-orientated practices (of pre-modern societies; of women; of students) and the time-orientated disciplines that came by the late 1700s to characterise modern industrial life. The control of bodies and minds depends in this scenario on the regulation and self-regulation of thought and action in time. Working to the clock, lining up protestant and capitalist logics through the equation of time to money, the modern laborer becomes deprived of a whole set of relations to the world that might open up again if we were to see time differently—as something to be slowed down, for instance, rather than used, spent well, or counted. The piece itself is invested in the big picture because it suggests that we might radically historicize how we occupy and count our days. In Thompson’s narrative, literature counts as one of the resources for approaching time otherwise.

The optimism of this argument springs, to be sure, firmly from the logic of the 1960s—from a rejection of office routines, of the norms of industrial economic productivity, and of instrumental education. Thompson’s argument belongs alongside others made in this spirit by Siegfried Kracauer, Jacques Rancière, and John Berger. But for many of those involved in the discussion of Thompson’s essay at the EI meeting, these possibilities of living other than in competition with time felt remote. What point in revisiting the promise of an escape from the temporality of organised labour, when the problems of time today are so different? Aren’t our problems of living with and in time today more media- and less class-centered than Thompson’s argument suggests? From the perspective of what Jonathan Crary has described as a twenty-first century, 24/7 existence, haven’t those partitioned working lives and childhoods that Thompson critiqued themselves begun to feel more ideal than problematic?

On the other hand, the ambition of Thompson’s perspective-shifting speaks to the potential of our new sense of radical, temporal

scalability. To see things and selves radically otherwise, as work on the Anthropocene and digital humanities now suggests, may simply be a matter of thinking them differently in time. Thus, as the talks presented at the 2017 English Institute suggest in their different ways, the new politics of time may only just be getting started. In this respect Donna Jones's essay offers a remarkable correction to the tradition of phenomenological thinking that takes for granted the endpoint in human existence. For Jones, this calculation, which is what orientates us in time according to Martin Heidegger, has as its premise an aristocratic form of life—one that has never been automatically granted to or desired by minority and subaltern groups. If immortality routinely appears as a problem when writers represent it, perhaps this is only because our focus on bourgeois characters has led us to think of livingness as automatically having a finite horizon. Jones's example, Karel Čapek's "The Makropulos Case," is a play that stages its central character's bid for immortality as a failure while showing how the endlessness of life can become a routine, individuality-obliterating condition: "[A] normal stupid man lives for ever," states one of Čapek's characters, because he is endlessly replaced by others.² In Jones's account this invites, through a reworking of Georg Simmel, an understanding of black life as having often been threatened by an imagined evasion of temporality. The alternative to this bleak vision of species immortality, Jones argues, is the recognition of individual life in all its finitude.

The aesthetic and political effects of extending experience, so to speak, are similarly at the core of Mark Goble's essay "How the West Slows Down." Insofar as a sense of speeding up (and its endlessly productive instantiations, including mechanization, acceleration, velocity, just-in-time production) has been the condition through which modern life becomes visible, Goble points to a contrasting sense of slow motion as the framework for both aesthetic defamiliarization and therapeutic alterity. In a dazzling tour of twentieth-century criticism and cinema, Goble reveals an increasingly overdetermined aesthetics of slowness: from Walter Benjamin's meditation on idleness to contemporary instances of so-called slow cinema we are introduced again and again to forms that "announce themselves as practices of resistance at least in part by virtue of their pace."³ However, rather than accepting these forms as the necessarily dichotomous tempos of the modern/non-modern, Goble reads the curiously compatible genres of earthwork (Robert Smithson) and the cinematic western (Sergio Leone) as offering another possibility: that we have always been slow. Or, if not always that, at least that the expanded temporalities of "deep

time” offer a mode of reading these slower-motion works as compatible with the epochs-long evolution of modern technologies, rather than as their aesthetic antidote. If so, perhaps we can catch—covertly hiding in Goble’s title—a reference to the larger realms of orientalized otherness, and an argument about its fetishization: that perhaps the denial of coevalness that the exotic “East” seems to offer the “West” forms not so much an alternative to the production of modern life as a revelation about the very question of the modern itself.

Goble’s concern with the slow gels in many ways with Ted Underwood’s emphasis on the long, the sprawling, the gradual. Following a lead from Catherine Gallagher, Underwood observes that scholars have for some time been convinced that what literature represents best are condensed, crystalline moments of experience. Tableaus and scenes have been loaded up by fiction ever since the modernist novel took the short view—and these are the shots where modern readers’ attention most eagerly rests. But Underwood interrogates this assumption in two different ways. First, his research team samples a set of canonical novels spanning the last 300 years for the speed with which their action passes; second, his team’s findings reveal that the reduction of temporal timeframes in literature has been a gradual process, best visible in its occurrence to those taking the long view. Stated in reverse: Underwood is arguing that the reason we associate novels with a zooming in on small passages of time is because we ourselves are focused on literary historical change as something best understood at this rate. If literary studies of a different scale—those now associated with digital humanities and distant reading—find their place in our discipline, Underwood concludes, we will be better placed to situate literary change differently, and thus to understand something like our changing ways of viewing and representing time in a new perspective.

The manner in which we have traditionally framed the literary is even more directly at the heart of Paul K. Saint-Amour’s essay on “The Literary Present.” Having set out, he says, to investigate critical futurities, Saint-Amour found himself suddenly, “jar[ringly],” attentive to the frequency with which we use the grammatical present tense in literary critical discourse.⁴ Recapping, explaining, annotating, summarizing, interpreting, you name it—we overwhelmingly use the present tense. Indeed, we have been using it here in this introduction without it feeling strange at all, despite the fact that these essays were all delivered as talks on a specific September day in 2016 in Chicago: “Thompson anticipates,” “Jones offers,” “Goble reveals,” “Underwood

interrogates.” Is this tendency, Saint-Amour asks, simply “too basic a convention to address head on?”⁵ The lack of any sustained critical attention addressing this practice would certainly suggest as much, and yet, if such is the case, are we not weirdly guilty of a kind of ideological blindness to our own critical practice? It’s a tense question, and a vexed one. What to make of the introductory composition texts that insist we utilize the literary present because what the “great writers” have handed down to us is necessarily “timeless”?⁶ Saint-Amour’s argument, in the end, is less an indictment of critical discourse for having failed to reflect on its own grammatical operations than it is an opportunity to observe that there may be other times encoded in our aesthetic present. José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* enters Saint-Amour’s essay as an example of the queerable critical practice that a deeper attention to tense might generate. There may be a kind of future, he suggests, a “queerness to come,” in the literary present—one that Muñoz was hoping to illuminate, and one that might still emerge through more sustained attention to the most basic forms we use to talk about literature.⁷

In concert, the four essays gathered here suggest in very different ways that time is not just something we are lacking or running out of, but a resource we can work with at the level of language. Not only is there a long history of representations and descriptions of the world being creatively arranged and rearranged in time, there is, these authors all suggest, a timing attached to critical practice itself. As the world we’re living in becomes faster and more crowded temporally, the rates, times, and tenses in which we do our work become ever more visible as resources.

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NOTES

¹ See E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past & Present* 38 (1967): 56–97.

² Karel Čapek, “The Makropulos Case,” in *Four Plays: R.U.R., The Insect Play, The Makropulos Case, and The White Plague*, trans. Peter Majer and Catherine Porter (Reading: Methuen Dramas, 1999), 251.

³ Mark Goble, “How the West Slows Down,” *ELH* 85.2 (2018): 315.

⁴ Paul K. Saint-Amour, “The Literary Present,” *ELH* 85.2 (2018): 368.

⁵ Saint-Amour, 370.

⁶ Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd, quoted in Saint-Amour, 370; Saint-Amour, 371.

⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2009), 25.