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Over the last three decades, contemporary theory has undergone rhizomatous permutations, in its attempt to cohesively metabolize the major epistemological transformations brought about by the post-Cold War world. Reconceived beyond ideological hegemony and national territory-bound geographies, the post-millennial lexicon of theory and criticism, by now conceptually saturated and richly derivative, has come to heavily rely on prepositional markers of posterity in its terminological make-up. Aiming to uncover the morphology of this ‘post-vocabulary’, the 2021 *Theory in the Post Era: A Vocabulary for the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Conceptual Commons*, edited by Christian Moraru, Andrei Terian, and Alexandru Matei, brings together a collective of Romanian researchers who laboriously engage in theorising “from the margins.” Coming three years after the 2018 *Romanian Literature as World Literature*, the 2021 volume inherits and enriches the scope of this earlier project, as it sets out to discern the transnational and transdisciplinary physiognomy of theory as world genre.

In light of this pursuit, the volume inserts itself into the cardinal debates of contemporary literary studies, despite (or perhaps because of) the overt eclecticism of its approaches, lexicon, and conjugate points. The administering of its epistemological position, within the discipline and, more relevantly, beyond it, is primarily conducted in the vividly conceptual *Introduction* (which spans thirty pages, thus being more extensive than any of the chapters it predates). In a manner which proves symptomatic for its entropic refashioning of theory, it lays the conceptual and terminological groundwork for the interventions it precedes, in a contextualising effort which showcases the subterranean drive which binds and animates them. Committed to exposing their latent premises (and implicit potential), it progressively lays bare the conceptual infrastructure which enabled their articulation, starting from a recognition

of theory “as world discourse formation or even world genre” (1), which has, since its emergence at the beginning of the twentieth century, grown into a “geosocial, loosely coordinated project incrementally carried out on and across the shifty planetary stage by way of exchanges, translations, frictions, venues, and routes that are transregional and frequently global in reach” (2).

To rethink theory this way, in terms of its worlding, is (at least) doubly consequential: firstly, it entails an acknowledgement of its epistemological double-bind, caught as it is between an internationalizing drive and the inevitable parochialism of its undertakings, between the multifariousness of its cross-cultural variations and the homogenous disciplinary retention of an intellectual lexicon which was primarily formulated and circulated among Western intellectual hubs. Thus, when arguing for the understanding of theory as “[a] subsystem of a cultural world-system roughly conceivable along the lines of Immanuel Wallerstein’s model” (3), one has to recognize the geopolitical lopsidedness of the world-system as such, which has historically consolidated around a hierarchical center-margins dyad. Addressing the intrinsic inequality of its hegemonic geographies engenders a refashioning of the standard history of Continental theory and its authoritative framing as a natively Western endeavor. Its Eastern and Central European roots have already been decisively outlined by Galin Tihanov in his 2019 *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory*; premised on his assertions, the present volume attempts the retroactive reformulation of theory’s origin narrative, highlighting its genetically peripheral, heteroglossic nature. This reclaiming gesture moves, however, beyond the confines of pastness, and outlines the future-oriented project of a “post” regime which can only be meaningfully charted from the margins of the world-system it inhabits, but aims to push against, stretch, alter. It can do so “because the discriminating yet non-apologetic recycling of local knowledges into broader dialogues where the former does not dissolve into the latter’s accredited and historically capitalized epistemologies, methodologies, and jargons is and has been endemic to East European theory all along” (6).

Secondly, to perceive “the world-systemic makeup of theory” (3), the cross-cultural salience of its lexicon, rhetorical logistics, and institutional mechanisms, is to recognize the presence of a *theory commons*, brought about by the hetero-domicile of a labor which can only come into its own by means of Saidian travelling. Expanding the

cosmopolitan component of early twentieth-century theory, the commonality envisioned here openly addresses the controversial legacy of cosmopolitanism, while also substantially enriching it through reformulations which engage the very constitution of the post-millennial world. That is not to say, however, that the transnational communality of theoretical practices is exclusively derivative of the global conjuncture of late capitalism, with its increasingly circulatory networks of (intellectual) production decisively exceeding the logic of territorial nationhood. Merely a stimulant of this “transnational and translational web of circulation and reception” (14), the increased permeability of national frontiers renders visible the territories of in-betweenness which have hosted theory production since its birth. Unearthed through ethno-linguistic transits, transfers, and interactions, the theory commons arise from the inherently affiliative vector of all theory-making, an axiomatically collective participation in “an ethic of nuance” (2). Looking to further distinguish the physiognomy of this network (and, by extension, to reflexively establish the identity of their research collective), the editors revisit Latourian laboratory culture, formulating the *conceptual laboratory*: a microcommunity of theorists “formally or informally organized, doing their job inside and outside and back and forth between various academic institutions as well as occasionally outside the academy altogether, variously connected to other similar groups across the world and constituting, together, our commons” (12). As such, the Romanian theory lab, the Critical Theory Institute (CTI), is “‘geo-situated,’ a site of intellectual ‘worldedness’ as much as a place-bound subsystem of an ethnopolitical system” (13). The symbiotic relationship between theory and community stretches beyond the confines of collaborative institutional enterprises, and into the territory of conceptual co-substantiality – not only does the theoretical exist only insofar as the communal hosts its articulation, but the communal is also predicated, the editors argue, on the theoretical:

Today more than ever, that need is ontological, for, we propose, the theoretical is the existential ‘prerequisite’ of the communal in communities big and small, “worlded” and less so, in the United States, Romania, and elsewhere in a world threatened by all kinds of anti-communal actions and reactions, from runaway globalization to exacerbated tribalism and tunnel-vision politics. (...) Community will be theorized – more to the point, community will be if it will be responsibly theorized. (X)

Produced within this frame of reference, the conceptual labor of the CTI is labeled as “reluctantly epochalist” (19), hence suggesting that the variety of recent ends and demises its “posts” are predicated on (of metaphysics, aesthetics, structure, canonicity, and critique, among others) are of provisional irrevocability. Or, rather, that the terminological permutations furnished by prepositional markers of posteriority should not be read under the periodizing impulses of the historiographical lens, as indexes of definitive conceptual rupture, for they “may also be symptoms and even vehicles of continuity, nostalgia, epigonism, and even replenishment of seemingly or effectively ‘exhausted’ cultural and critical-theoretical forms” (20). Moreover (and, in a sense, subsequently), the theorizing of the CTI is “experimental and self-reflexive,” “nationally, transnationally, and ecologically affiliative” (20), as well as transdisciplinary; this range of attributes encapsulates its laboriously networked position, illustrating what ultimately qualifies it as programmatic within contemporary discursive spaces, namely “an agenda that goes beyond criticism, theory, and our lab itself into the ethical, the political, and the communal” (22).

That the theory of the “post” regime can be nothing but decentralized, networked, and permutative is glaringly obvious in the formula the main segment of the volume adheres to. Its tripartite structure is engendered by the thematic clusters assembled around its cardinal concepts (or, perhaps more specifically, methodological operators): aesthetics, temporalities, and critical modes. Consecutively centering each of them, the three parts encapsulate a heterogeneous assortment of individual interventions, which, even when partly mutually cohesive – in terms of themes, critical paradigms, and terminology – nevertheless maintain a noticeable, albeit weak, isomorphism. As their titles discernibly point out, all of the chapters single out a concept from the vast repertoire of the “mushrooming ‘posts’” (2), proceeding to explicate its lineage and emergence, and to depict the prospects of its usage in either transnational, or more narrowly Romanian, contexts. As Mihai Iovănel justifiably notes, their theorizing strategy most often unfolds obliquely, from inside out, through the inductive mutation of densely literary exposés into discernible conjectures on the state of contemporary knowledge-production, both within the discipline and beyond it.

The first “knowledge force field” the volume traverses, aesthetics, is mapped out through successive attempts to embed its discursive practices in the ethical stratum of

social reality. Partly predicated on the end of aesthetics (as announced, for example, by Armen Avanessian), or, in any case, on the emergence of a post-aesthetic regime, the six chapters assemble permutative formulas of conceptual coherence and ethical (re)engagement of (literary) art. In the first section, Teodora Dumitru exhibits the transdisciplinary ethos of the “post” regime by proposing a new scientific model for literary studies, namely *constructalism*, which aims to overcome the unproductive isolationism the discipline has suffered from, due to its reduction of knowledge to “the incommensurable and infinitely subjective parameters of the sociohuman” (37). Devised by Romanian-American physicist Adrian Bejan, the constructal law affirms the need “for a heightened and steady efficiency of flow, movement, and transmission of matter and information across the terrestrial ecosystem” (37), thus refashioning Darwinian evolutionism through a fresh emphasis on how the strive for maximal efficiency primarily shapes development (of the non-living as much as that of life itself, the arts and culture included). When channeled within literary studies, constructalism enables the revision of disciplinary tropes (proving particularly effective in the case of network theory and its applications, as the analysis of Franco Moretti’s theoretical scenarios illustrates), while being “well positioned to contribute to the post-anthropocentric turn affecting contemporary epistemology” (38). Also taking issue with the refashioning of humanism, the second chapter interrogates the ways in which modernity has failed to sustain the project of traditionally formulated Kantian aesthetics. This failure lays the grounds for what Alexandru Matei calls *post-aesthetics*, a regime which

on one side, can reformulate the largely discredited, humanist, and heroic discourse of a Kantian aesthetics reclaimed by national-humanism and always narcissistically self-centered, and, on the other side, can be understood not as a gratuitous form of theoretical voluntarism but as a practice or field work deeply ‘diplomatic’ in a Latourian sense. (57)

Further engaging the theoretical apparatus of Graham Harman’s *Object-Oriented Ontology*, Matei ultimately constructs a framework within which aesthetics “becomes a theory of action” (61), anticipating the overtly ethical concerns put forward by the following three chapters. Equally concerned with the moral and political impetus of the

literary arts, the contributions of Alex Goldiș and Ioana Macrea-Toma, respectively, restrain their scope to the case of postcommunist literatures, examining their scenarios of political (re)commitment. Interested in uncovering the camouflaged ideological drive of Cold War East European novelistic form, Goldiș theorizes *eastethics*, “a particular literary formalism, one derived from literature’s deliberate retreat into the aesthetic through an ‘over-the-top’ cultivation of forms” (75), which “sponsored the crafting of literary devices and techniques susceptible of serving as sui generis conduits of a political message” (75). Likewise concerned with the interaction between literature and political culture, Macrea-Toma traces the profile of *metapolitics*, “a literary, primarily fictional form enabling Central and East European and Romanian authors to present and think critically about a wide array of political topics ranging from multicultural to regional and ethnic situations and political rights” (92), thus compensating for their lack of substantial treatment within hegemonic political discourse. A similar drive resides at the center of Andrei Terian’s chapter, which starts from a panoramic view of Romanian “anti-PC monomania” and its evolution over the past two decades, in light of his assertion that

an efficient way of standing up to politically disenfranchising and philosophically reductionist ideologies, politics, and politics such as conservatism (“old style” or “neo”), nationalist chauvinism, xenophobia, populism, fundamentalism, racism, classism, and sexism (...) is building not so much, and certainly not in the first place, a counter-discourse, irrespective of how progressive and rhetorically appealing this may be, but a community willing to engage, *qua* community, in counter-political and, indeed, counter-narrative acts (108-109).

Corin Braga’s “Anarchetype: Reading Aesthetic Form after ‘Structure’” closes off the first part of the volume through a departure from the overly ethical concerns of the preceding interventions, and a return to the assumed metatheoretical stance of Teodora Dumitru’s opening chapter. Complementarily addressing the issues of literary form, evolution, and value, Braga revisits his previously articulated concept, the *anarchetype*, a structural and morphological category which subsumes the “anarchic, iconoclastic, antinomic, anti-systemic, and anti-canonical” territories of literary production. Looking to enrich its disciplinary implications, the author delineates the relationship between archetype,

genre formation, and the stable admission of literary artefacts into the canon. Identifying the problematic relationship between a text's archetypal centeredness and its perceived aesthetic value, Braga ultimately calls for a reframing of the archetypal/anarchetypal dyad, beyond "binary terms such as structured vs. unstructured and centered vs. amorphous" (137). Although seemingly functional as benign descriptors, they carry an implicit axiological weight which makes them troublesome, causing the significant restraining of the discipline's object of study. Therefore, Braga welcomes their replacement with "a more typologically neutral analysis to which descriptive terms such as archetype and anarchetype could be of real use at a time when out theory commons is taking another look at 'form'" (137).

The second section of the volume, comprised of five individual chapters, centers the concept of temporality and its permutations across the "post" regime. Arguably, the extensive treatment of the issue might suggest the progressively weakened theoretical vigor of spatiality (which has monopolised the theoretical imagination of the past several decades, following the much discussed 'spatial turn'). As Chapter 12 will also illustrate, renewed involvement with time does not happen at the expense of space, and it does not read as a conflictual substitution of discordant paradigms. Rather, the new, "post" temporalities advanced here bear the epistemological traces of the extensively cultivated disciplinary interest for issues of place and situatedness, therefore managing to renounce self-evident axiologies in their projects of futurity. Carmen Mușat's chapter offers an eloquent example of such effective cross-contamination; in her theorizing of *post-synchronism*, she approaches the cultural complexes of Romanian literature, attempting to locate the influence of spatial-temporal location on a culture's sense of self-understanding; she concludes by reflexively wondering whether critics and theorists might "imagine a scenario in which cultural difference, pace, and time might be pressed into the service of a more just, effective, and coordinated union" (154). In a sense, Bogdan Crețu's subsequent intervention engages this very issue, approaching the formulation of *post-presentism*, which is, "in fact, an attempt to make presentism more – rather than less – historicist and deploy it, thus historicized, pragmatically or (...) 'strategically'" (160). Concerned with the presentist perils of retroactive interpretation – understood as "a continuity unfolding in the opposite direction, from the present to the past" (164) – the author calls for a formula of contemporary presentism which should

*smooth out* the transition or the cognitive passage from one cultural moment to the next, put them in an ‘ontological’ dialogue *with each other and with the future*. (...) We must recognize that the past needs to be retrieved and known for its cautionary lessons, and that the present, with its sometimes shortsighted, ‘short-term’ outlook, is hardly the repository of truth. A constant tension, a critical dialogue, and a constant commerce between various time zones of history are all necessary, I believe, if we are to keep hopes for a certain future alive. (175)

Further exploring the “cultural logic of futural poesis” (180), Christian Moraru’s chapter is predicated on the observation that the futural nowness engendered by modernity has been dismantled by an emerging temporal paradigm, configured around “a future that has come – and gone – in and as our own present or immediate past” (180). To outline the coordinates of this mutation, Moraru turns towards its literary metabolization, identifying a blueprint of what he deems the “postfuturist” narrative (exemplified by Ian McEwan’s 2019 novel, *Machines Like Me*): a chronological arc which lacks sequentialist logic; an “a-succesional scheme (...) somewhat similar to (...) as the French would say, future anterior – things that might very well occur later on have already come into being during the overall realistically limned but historically amended current epoch” (182); the depicted future being behind its readers, both chronologically and politically. By tracing the fluctuation of this framework across contemporary fiction, Moraru showcases the way in which the architecture of literary temporalities symptomatically echoes historical time, as it flows and ebbs and collapses in on itself. Subsequently, Andreea Mironescu’s chapter sets out to revisit memory cultures, recalibrating the terminological tropes of memory studies (most specifically Marianne Hirsch’s post-memory) by acknowledging that “memory cultures are in modern times also theory cultures given that they provide a ‘habitus’ for the set of shared epistemological, discursive, and artistic practices that goes by the name of ‘theory’” (200). Her enterprise produces insightful conclusions, establishing the emergence of a “*geocultural kind of post-memory* in Romanian and world fiction over the last two decades” (211), which enables the recognition of “the many-layered, palimpsestic, and conflicted structure of memory in Eastern Europe” (211) which is “illuminated by other collective traumatic memories, but it also serves as a cultural vehicle for the surfacing and circulation of

unfamiliar, *long-space* and *deep-time* memories, for transcending national and European frontiers, and for reaching back into past decades, centuries, and ages” (211). The subsequent contribution, authored by Laura Cernat, further probes the articulation principles of the cultural past by charting the emergence, development and literary-historical functionality of *biofiction* (a hybrid formula, born at the juncture of literature and biography), with an eye to its subversive potential within peripheral contexts. Drawing on the literary dialogue between Ion Iovan and the Romanian modernist Mateiu Caragiale, she ultimately contends that bio-literary forms can actively participate in the renegotiation of the national literary canon, attesting how “fluctuations in symbolic capital also hinge on literature’s production and, as one can see, on literature’s reproduction as well” (227).

Generally committed to the display of critical modes, the volume’s third and final section opens its forays into metatheoretical territory with Ștefan Baghiu’s intervention, which undertakes the refashioning of geocriticism by being mindful “of the locational granularity of literary phenomena” (236) in an attempt to ‘situate’ or ‘site’ its analysis of how socioeconomic issues (such as poverty) show up in the imaginary of the cross-hemispheric Global Southeast literary system. To this end, the author advances the concept of *geocritique*, a retooled form of geocriticism which “can cast light not only on the imaginary of poverty in post-World War II literature but also on this literature’s place-determined, topospecific nature as well as on its status as a subset of a Global South network of texts, symbolic representations, and material culture” (247). Similarly engaged in recalibration efforts, Mihai Iovănel’s chapter posits that, albeit in crisis, critique, the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Paul Ricoeur), is a durably valid and relevant mode of ideological interpretation, which bears reforming. Iovănel sets out to do exactly that, by expunging “from critique its idealist and finalist or teleological components, along with other methodological presumptions coalescing around the claims of Jamesonian historicism” (252), thus arriving at *neocritique*, in itself an attempt “to bring literary and cultural studies to bear more effectively on the world ‘out there’ – in short, as I have said, to make a new, more acutely transformative pact with reality” (255). In a similar vein of embedding criticism into the fabric of social reality, Adriana Stan further discusses the emergence of *digicriticism*, a critical formula native to digital environments, inscribed among the all-encompassing effects of the digital relocation of

literary culture. Interestingly, Stan begins by highlighting the incremental divide between such “public”, nonspecialist online criticism and its academic, analog counterpart, showcasing the absence of a dialogic middle ground, and ultimately asserting the epistemological imprint of global hyperconnectivity on cultural reality. Interested in exposing the transformative impact of geographically ex-centric theory production, Caius Dobrescu’s chapter scrutinizes the activity of the Braşov school (run in the 1990s by Alexandru Muşina, Gheorghe Crăciun, and Virgil Podoabă), more specifically their reflective work on the human body, corporeality, and embodiment, which engendered their practice of *somatography*, “writing with and of the body and serving as an expressive site flaunting the fundamental integration of the somatic and the cogitative” (288). In the final chapter of the volume, Cosmin Borza approaches the literary canon, pointing out the recent resurgence of interest in the issue, against the dominant backdrop of pluri- and counter-canonical positions. Framed by the transition out of the postmodern and the postcolonial, the return of the canon is not synonymous, in Borza’s account, to a restoration of the essentialist-aesthetic positions of the 1980s, but rather marks the entry into the new stage of post-canoncity, brought about by developments in big data research and World Literature. Thus, he submits that post-canoncity enables a more rigorous, factual analysis, of “how canons are shaped and disseminated nationally, transnationally, and globally, as well as to provide untapped, relevant evidence of the power relations and inequities embedded in the makeup of social structures” (304).

Predicated on the world-systemic nature of post-millennial theoretical labour, *Theory in the “Post” Era* manages to assemble a heterogenous collection of interventions which capture the essential cultural gestures and ethical reflexes of “an era that seems at once epistemologically insurgent and blasé” (173). In doing so, it lays the lexical groundwork for its envisioned projects of communal futurity.