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Introduction: No Time For Linear Time

By Jan Miezskowski and Julia Ng

If anyone has been secreting away a time machine, this might be the moment to unveil it. The past eighteen months have seen a pandemic caused by a novel coronavirus, a crippling global recession that has brought entire economies to the brink of paralysis, wildfire infernos on multiple continents coupled with the rapid disappearance of the ice caps, wanton acts of police brutality carried out with almost casual impunity, and heads of democratic states openly mocking the very principles and practices upon which their polities rest to the point of inciting violent insurrection. In the face of this formidable collection of calamities, who would not wish that we could go back several years, a decade, or even longer and try it all again? Yet who, by the same token, would regard such an enterprise as anything other than an idle—or cruel—fantasy? "What's done is done." Never has the long shadow of Lady Macbeth's imposing dictum loomed so large, no matter how many compelling reasons we have to resist its harsh truth. In a rare show of consensus, environmental activists, academics, and politicians all seem to agree that this is an age defined by the irreversible calamities that beset us, doomsday scenarios for which the question is increasingly less "What if?" than "When?" and "What we will do afterwards?"

Before relegating our hopes of reversing time to the scrap heap of tired sci-fi plots, we should recall that there are many domains in which the putative impossibility of retracting, repealing, or rescinding is challenged, be it in the philosophy of history, dramatic treatments of chance and

fate, or theological debates about forgiveness and redemption. Reversible relations are important for phenomenological models of touch, the transference in psychoanalysis, and legal discussions of retribution and restitution. Whether justly or unjustly, the carceral system operates on the basic idea that punishment can right wrongs. When a trial court commits a "reversible error," an appellate court can overturn the resulting judgment. In tort and in common law, *restitutio ad integrum* (restoration to original condition) governs the awarding of damages to a claimant in order to make whatever injury they may have sustained effectively disappear. During the Occupy movement, the Strike Debt group revived the ancient Hebraic idea of a "jubilee year" that would occur on a rolling basis and during which slaves would be emancipated, debts cancelled, and everyone released from obligations and returned to their land to live off natural providence. Indeed, as we take stock of the wealth of different social, political, and legal investments in reversibility, we may well wonder how we have managed not to identify it as an integral aspect of our lives.

Going further, it could be argued that reversibility is at the heart of our understanding of causality to the extent that it finds a grounding in the doctrines of the European Scientific Revolution. Newton's second law, the quantitative predictor of motion, is time reversible, meaning that the equation looks the same whether time is sent forward or backward. To take the familiar example of a video of a ball being tossed back and forth, it should be impossible to know whether the clip is being played forward or in reverse without some external cues, most immediately the movements of the people doing the throwing and catching. Whatever the directionality that inheres in the path travelled by an object, it is inconsequential for calculating the relation of change between point A and point B; indeed, the direction of that change, for instance, the increase or decrease of velocity, has to approximate zero if the relation between antecedent and consequent is to be calculable at all. Whenever we think of change as a sequence of "nows" that progress by supplanting each other from one point to the next, which is to say any time we think in terms of causal

connectivity, we effectively eliminate any sense of real change at all and preserve only the relation called "change," which we implicitly treat as imperishable and beyond the scope of our ability to affect or suspend. In our very need to presume the existence of a "natural" domain that is impervious to our motivated, goal-driven activities, we end up conceiving of an indestructible and directionless force responsible for the displacement of bodies from point A to B. It would appear, then, that our reason works hard to eradicate temporal change in the interest of being able to affirm the orderliness of nature and the persistence of identity over time. Contrary to our experience that time flows in one direction, that things come to an end, and that *fugit irreparabile tempus*, our rational mechanics will even hold that smoke can flow back into a chimney.

The unspoken assumption underpinning the way we think about possibility is that events can be treated as reversible even if our experience tells us otherwise. In this sense, we might say that a time machine is in operation whenever we calculate a next step or articulate a certainty about the phenomenal realm. The possibility is built into possibility, so to speak, inasmuch as possible experience hinges on the arithmetic of cause-and-effect. In contrast, when we act spontaneously in accord with our ownmost inclinations, we venture into the territory of the irregular and unforeseeable, the speculative, and hence the irreversible: a kingdom of ends for some, a confrontation with our ineluctable finitude for others. Modern reflections on our status as free yet finite beings can thus be characterized as a struggle to reconcile our experience of ourselves as autonomous and mortal with this piece of science fiction that seems to inform many of our most familiar ideas about ourselves and the world. From this perspective, modern epistemology and moral philosophy, legal and political institutions, the concept of historical occurrence, and even the differentiations we strive to uphold between what is and is not discursive are all products of our efforts to grapple with the countervailing tendencies of reversibility and irreversibility, even as the exact relationship between them cannot readily be grasped as a binary opposition or a dialectical

dynamic, assuming that the two can be said to belong to the same logical, epistemological, or ontological order at all.

As a physical being, any discussion of reversing time can feel like an existential affront. Individual organisms inexorably age and die, or in slightly more technical terms, the cells of an embryo divide and give rise to different sorts of cells, but an adult organism does not gradually lose cell differentiation and revert to ovum and spermatozoon. A similarly unidirectional development takes place on the phylogenetic level: amphibians do not devolve into fish, birds do not revert into reptiles, and so on. Even if some scientists allow that it is hard to show that evolution *always* leads to an increase in the complexity of organisms, no one imagines that more developed life forms will suddenly start devolving back into single-celled entities. Moving from biology to physics, the picture is further complicated by the second law of thermodynamics, which holds that the total entropy of a system can never decrease, meaning that one cannot conceive of a process that could be taken from one state to another and then back again without any change in the level of unavailable energy. Cast against the horizon of linear time, reversibility would be an impossibility, something that may be approximated in a very specific laboratory situation but is in truth just a useful idealization for theoretical purposes. Of course, the second law of thermodynamics also states that the entropy of an *isolated* system never decreases over time, leaving unclear the extent to which such a schema is viable when what is at issue is spontaneous human agency. One of the defining characteristics of free action is its capacity to transgress the borders of whatever domain would putatively circumscribe the instance of its praxis. In this regard, might it not be plausible to think of human striving as both an entropic and negentropic force?

To be sure, entropy's march is not easily checked. The sense that true reversibility is a fantasy is bolstered by the realization that there will always be traces of any change of state, determined or random though it may have been, and that the physical world constitutes a vast and

endlessly differentiated archive of the effects of whatever has taken place, a monument to the impossibility of an event truly being undone or wished away without any remainder whatsoever. To genuinely reverse a process would mean eliding any material or immaterial record of it, or as the villain in a recent superhero film observed, to truly turn back the clock, one would have to annihilate every atom in the universe for fear that one proton or electron would still retain a mark of what had once been; *and* one would have to restore the potentiality of every possible alternative universe whose actualization had been precluded by what was previously the case. On a more fundamental level, it is impossible to say that something has taken place—an event has transpired, a cause has realized an effect—absent some manifestation of spatial and/or temporal change, and this in turn presupposes a differential dynamic that is originally repetitive and hence anything but originary. If iterability comes "first," as it were, if something occurs only insofar as it recurs, there being no other way for it to be recognized and registered, in short, if everything that we can identify as a process must have happened before, then no play of marks and traces can revert to a null point in order to begin again, because such a tabula rasa space or time never existed in the first place, and to attempt to intervene in these sequences is necessarily to extend them as much as to roll them back. A pure reversibility would thus seem to require no less than the erasure of everything, and yet even this would quickly reveal itself to be merely a stage in one of the most venerable cycles, the eternal recurrence of creation and destruction in which undoing and redoing are effectively indistinguishable.

One of the intriguing albeit perplexing things about the concept of reversibility is that no matter how formidable the arguments against its very viability as a phenomenon, its influence shows no sign of abating. Nowhere is this more acutely—and consequentially—in evidence than in neoclassical economic theory, where ideas of equilibrium and homeostasis are casually, even sloppily, borrowed from the physical sciences. The result is the all too familiar belief in the self-

correcting power of "free" markets, their supposed ability to react to unexpected stressors and restore the interplay of capital and labor to a prior state that is allegedly stable, not to mention equitable. Far from simply underwriting arguments against state intervention in the economy, this notion of market elasticity has been extrapolated into an entire philosophy of life by conservatives, who wield the ideology as a weapon against any proposed regulation of human behavior, which in their thinking proves to be more or less synonymous with corporate behavior. This vision, or fantasy, of perfectly adaptive markets has been disseminated around the globe, leaving its mark on the social and political fabric of countless societies despite the fact that it is routinely acknowledged in the academic literature that economic systems display numerous properties—extreme yet unforeseeable volatility, permanent unemployment, radical changes in consumer tastes and expectations—that suggest that this particular conception of homeostasis is a theoretical fiction at best, a pernicious lie at worst.

Attentive to the unique challenges that the idea of reversibility presents for our understandings of the medial and modal dynamics that underwrite our physical and metaphysical systems alike, this collection of essays explores the topic from a variety of perspectives, with a particular focus on what it would mean for acts of signification and representation to be annulled or undone. While we primarily discuss nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors, all of the contributions engage with longstanding debates in literary theory, aesthetics, and political philosophy. Together, these pieces constitute a powerful reflection on the scope and import of a grievously understudied concept.

In the collection's first essay, "Undecidability and Reversibility," Julia Ng tracks the ways in which the concepts of undecidability and reversibility are co-implicated in discussions of language and politics in Jacques Derrida and his interlocutors, including Immanuel Kant and Walter Benjamin. Readers of Derrida have tended to treat reversibility as coincident with undecidability,

with the result that the temptation to reverse the logic of the violence inherent in the founding of any normative order into its apparent counterpart, a law-inaugurating violence that is essentially indistinguishable from violence that asserts and conserves itself in the guise of law, is cast as a necessary risk in the democratic process. Yet Derrida also hints at another sense of reversibility, one that realizes the transformation of one thing into another without contradiction, somewhere beyond the "symbolic order" of the juridico-political. Drawing out the connection Derrida establishes between undecidability and reversibility as two distinct structures of language and time, Ng argues that Derrida conceives of reversibility as a propensity for transformation that is based on an energetic conception of nonlinear writing he initially develops in "The Double Session" and *Of Grammatology*. Guided by remarks in *The Beast and the Sovereign* and "Force of Law," Ng then sketches out the sociopolitical ramifications of a transformative reversibility. At stake throughout is the urgency of distinguishing between the two senses of reversibility intimated by Derrida, one deeply conservative in that it destroys law to preserve violence that is enshrined as law, the other perhaps something else altogether.

The relationship between modality and mediality is at the forefront of Jake Fraser's "Turning Back Time: Friedrich Kittler, Reversibility, and Media of Time Axis Manipulation." Fraser opens by asking what it is about technologies of recording, storage, and playback that allows their users to go well beyond simple reversals in manipulating temporal sequences. Observing that any medium that can be read or played *back* can and will be read or played *backwards*, he focuses on the way in which repeatability and reversibility appear to go hand in hand. Guided by Friedrich Kittler's work, Fraser argues that reversals of chronological sequence rely upon recording media's ability to spatialize stretches of time. The essay closes with a reading of some late Nietzsche fragments in which the brain is analogized to a telegraph operator and reversibility becomes crucial to the body's claim to be

a medium in which time-serial data streams can be rearranged, a role Kittler insists that the body cannot play.

The poetics of critique are a central concern in Kevin McLaughlin's "Delimiting Literary Criticism: Walter Benjamin's Dissertation." McLaughlin begins by asking whether Benjamin's doctoral project on the romantic concept of literary criticism reveals the limits of established academic literary studies by pointing toward an esoteric dimension that eludes the discipline's grasp. The ensuing discussion elucidates the significance of Friedrich Hölderlin for Benjamin's early thought, in particular Hölderlin's notion of the infinitely connected and its importance for his concept of rigor, which will in turn prove crucial for the development of Benjamin's own critical practice of presentation and citation. Having maintained that a "medium of reflection" that appears nowhere in Friedrich Schlegel's writings is nevertheless to be "cited" as the entirety of his philosophy, Benjamin pursues a thoroughgoing reconceptualization of reversibility's status as a precondition of delimitation and thus of reflexivity as such. The result is a unique understanding of the sobriety of art as a sphere of inscription, transcription, and translation.

In "Arcadian Gestures in an Irreversible World: Stoppard, Serres, and Panofsky," Christopher Johnson argues that Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* explores the possibility of a true physical reversibility by staging the second law of thermodynamics while at the same time performing other mathematical, physical, and literary modes that lay claim to provisionally forestalling the march of entropy. The discussion of Stoppard, whose play is ultimately deemed both entropic and negentropic, is complemented by an analysis of Michel Serres's understanding of translation as a dynamic that can at least briefly disrupt the flow of time and casualty, a doctrine that Johnson deftly juxtaposes with the dynamics of intermedial translation that emerge in Erwin Panofsky's interpretation of two seventeenth-century paintings by Nicolas Poussin that are both titled *Et in Arcadia ego*.

The writings of Oskar Pastior, the only Germanophone member of the OuLiPo, are the main focus of Jonas Rosenbrück's "Palindromitis: Reversibility, Undoing, and the Time of Language." Pastior experimented extensively with the palindrome and the anagram, two textual forms that literally—to the letter—bear within themselves the possibility of their own undoing. Read forwards and backwards, the palindrome betrays a tension between the cyclical or "eternal" return of the same syllables and an untimeliness or non-time, which is marked by a loosening of the link between a word and its position within a syntagm. In Pastior's anagrammatic poems, various collections of letters and syllables appear to constitute a form of signification that is independent of the texts' thematic, grammatical, and lexical features. Here, a word can only become meaningful to the extent that it is dispersed across other words, usually to the point of unrecognizability.

Taking up the question of linguistic events, Brian McGrath reads Emily Dickinson's "Reverse Cannot Befall" through Paul de Man's claim that reversibility is a defense against something truly new occurring in language. Dickinson's text, argues McGrath, finds strength in its own defensiveness, its capacity for resistance, as the poetic self protects itself from any reversal of fortune by generating its own ground of constancy. A potential for instability nonetheless lingers, because this fantasy of poetic subjectivity is articulated through antimetabole, a figure in which the same words or ideas are repeated in reverse order, resulting in an ambiguous gesture of self-assertion through self-limitation or even self-negation. In this fashion, Dickinson's poem invites us to understand reversibility as a kind of irony rather than the other way around.

In "Language Swaps: On the Reversibility of Translation," Jan Mieszkowski examines the contrasting paradigms of equivalence that inform different theories of translation. Juxtaposing the boasts of Google Translate's engineers with Derrida's efforts to defend an indefensibly idiosyncratic translation of a single word from Shakespeare, Mieszkowski asks what it would mean to reverse a translation back into its original, or if, following Benjamin, any so-called original is always already in

flight from itself, anticipating its own transformation into a foreign tongue, if not into a language that does not yet exist. In the second part of his essay, Mieszkowski considers an Emily Dickinson poem, "My life closed twice before its close," and Paul Celan's rather "free" translation of it. Celan is most faithful to Dickinson's English, argues Mieszkowski, at the points at which he overtly breaks from the sole elements in her text that did not need to be translated because they were not words at all but punctuation marks. The translator's fidelity to his object thus turns out to rest on his capacity to reverse the irreversible.

In "On Recovering the Past: Textual 'Reversibility' in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*," Deborah Goldgaber elucidates the unique dynamics of Philip's poem cycle, which is made up entirely from words taken from the legal decision about the massacre of captive Africans on a British slave ship in 1781. Since these juridical documents are the only extant record of the event, it would appear that the thoughts and the experiences of the victims have been forever lost, yet in *Zong!* a reversal takes place whereby the whole of the past is revealed to be "diffractively present" in these textual traces of the atrocity. As Goldgaber shows, Philip's poems do violence to the court records, effecting a rift in the language that allows another story to tell itself, as if what had been archived were not simply the legal proceedings but the spectral survival of everyone and everything that the manifest records excluded but that can now begin its own hauntological address.

In the final piece in our collection, "Exhaustion: In Defiance of Homogenous Empty Time," Erin Schlumpf shows how the nineteenth-century obsession with neurasthenia returns in twentieth-century film and literature produced in the midst of post-colonial strife and the advent of globalization. Focusing on France during the *trente glorieuses* and China of the Post-New Era, Schlumpf identifies a melancholic exhaustion that reverses the telos of the Cartesian subject and its arc of self-discovery. In several works by Samuel Beckett and Ge Fei, this exhaustion confounds the efforts of modern governments to engineer a collective memory by bringing to the fore an

asynchronous language of trauma that resists the state-mandated elision of mourning, a form of protest that defies both the orderly temporal progression of a common national narrative and the flow of capital.