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*Between Science and Literature: An Introduction to
Autopoetics (review)*

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Book Reviews

Ira Livingston. *Between Science and Literature: An Introduction to Autopoetics*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006, 192 pp., ISBN 0252072545.

In *Between Science and Literature: An Introduction to Autopoetics*, Ira Livingston, focusing on performativity, treats the text itself as occasion for play. He coins terms such as “autopoetics” (his renaming of autopoiesis—self-making, minus the “i,” which has traditionally stood for a discrete self), writes creative interludes that build “epistemological art” using household items (in his words, “Michel Foucault meets Martha Stewart”), and even provides stage directions (a quoted passage about eugenics should be read in a “Dr. Strangelove accent”). All of this playing, however, has a serious point: to look at the possibilities of theory in the here-and-now requires testing the limits of our own imagination. As Livingston states: “[O]ne can still ask productively of a theory: What can it do and where can it go? What is it possible to think and to do with it, and what kinds of things or thoughts does it make more difficult or unintelligible?” (10). These questions invariably raise the issue of self-reference, and Livingston considers the ways that systems loop in on themselves at all levels.

That the book’s form is also recursive—for relatively brief chapters echo one another and encourage perspective shifting and cross-disciplinary exploration—makes reviewing the book a bit of a challenge. But at the risk of betraying the author’s nonlinear approach, I want to trace out where his ideas are heading. He promotes self-referentiality as creating opportunities for metadiscourses (in which literary texts, as he illustrates throughout, play a significant part) that sustain interdisciplinary work. For instance, the central concept of autopoetics—that systems are not static, but instead are always in the state of becoming—both enables cultural theory’s voicing of performativity and gives rise to the idea, supported by Livingston’s quote from Lee Smolin, that “there are no things, only processes” (80) in relativity theory in physics. We then turn to a fascinating account of Humberto Maturana’s development of autopoiesis through his crossing of political and disciplinary boundaries: his participation in the student takeover of the University of Chile in May 1968 causes his rethinking of the philosophy of organization that initiates the transformation of circular organization in cognition into autopoiesis, a term derived from *poiesis* (creation, production) in an essay on *Don Quixote* by his friend, Jose Bulnes (85–86). The invention of autopoiesis models, at a metadiscursive level, how, according to Livingston, “[p]art of the circularity of an autopoetic system is a kind of causal loop, which also appears as a kind of time loop” (88). But if this episode has a reconciliatory ending, others do not. Livingston invokes the debate over a 1990 repatriation act, restricting the collecting of

artifacts on Native American lands, that reifies traditional ways of validating truth claims. Archaeologists, protesting that their pursuit of knowledge was at stake, overlooked how their acts of “discovery” legitimate colonialist ideology by assuming the mantle of objectivity for their narratives about the origins of Native Americans and downplay the value of competing narratives developed by Native Americans themselves.

To resolve such conflicts, Livingston proposes what he calls a “no-trump bid” that allows us “to work maximally *between* temporal and cultural frameworks, between disciplines, between identity categories, and between the universalizing zoom of theory and the extreme close-up of historicist description” (111). His proposal, which comes by way of poststructuralist theory, serves a specific and crucial function: “enacting the more sprawling and edge-of-chaos kind of performativity and autopoetics (as against the interiorized and discrete kind)” (111). Thus Livingston’s concern about theory is *not* that it is sprawling and chaotic, but rather not sprawling and chaotic *enough*. For, he argues, that is the only way to interrogate the ideological frames that shape what we think we know. Take, for example, George Lord Macartney’s 1793 visit with the Chinese emperor Qianlong, recounted in James Hevia’s *Cherishing Men from Afar* (1995). Livingston connects how the constitution of modernity depends on its imagined “backwards” other to how Macartney and his fellow British, deeply invested in viewing the East as feminized and irrational, misread Chinese guest ritual “as merely *representing* relationships rather than as performing or *producing* them” (129). We have here not so much the idea that history must be restored or recovered, as the more interesting claim that past and present knowledge regimes, and their influences upon one another, remain forever under construction.

The recursion of past knowledge regimes can be glimpsed more clearly in what Livingston calls a “return to resemblance.” In this provocative chapter, the idea that biological and social systems fractally mirror one another, he contends, produces a modern version of the Renaissance paradigm “Great Chain of Being” that naturalizes cultural beliefs. Despite the major change in regarding thermodynamics as creative rather than destructive, which has guided descriptions of self-organizing systems, such a change does nothing to alter dominant ideological narratives. All that happens, he points out, is the cultural framing for these narratives shifts: rather than life as a “tragic hero” who reflects the decline of the white upper class, life becomes a “surfing CEO with a cellphone” who rides energy flows in a process that mimics economic patterns of accumulation (135–38). Because, as Livingston comments, “[i]t is now rather difficult to restore the sense of scandal in the resemblance between descriptions of self-organizing processes in biology and physics and the transnational neoliberalism they tend to underwrite” (138), we need to do the more politically progressive theorizing that the no-trump bid makes possible.

Which he proceeds to outline for us, reading Samuel Delany’s “The Star Pit” (1965) as an anecdote for the scientific rationalizing of transnational neoliberalism. Livingston then relates the story to Delany’s memoir, *The Motion of Light in Water* (1988), about his experiences as a writer in 1960s New York City. Livingston’s chapter on Delany, moreover, builds off of his earlier use of queer theory to look at the construction of modernity in Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1990), extending a critique of the social regulation of desire into the postmodern era: the self-referential loop generated by the juxtaposition of the “open” system of the memoir against the “closed” ecosystems in the story that mirror the narrative’s own closure and foreclosing of desire. Yet even with its sometimes fatal limits on

desire, the story refuses to structure notions of success and failure as polar opposites—a refusal that, Livingston believes, can allow us to view contradiction as “sustainable action,” politically linking the project of queer writing, which explores the productive constraints on/of “ambiguous citizenship” (172), with the internal paradoxes that sustain self-organizing, autopoietic systems.

If that chapter, which unfolds the possibilities for uniting queer theorist Judith Butler and systems theorist Niklas Luhmann, is an imaginative move, the last chapter ventures even further out—starting as a cultural analysis of alien-abduction narratives, and then becoming a science-fiction story about these narratives that redefines identity as always/already unfamiliar, subjectivity as nonself-identical. Livingston proposes: “Alienism does not *take the place of* other differences and differentials such as class and race and nationality. Instead, it *subtends* them; that is, it cuts across these other differences, reinforcing them even as it relativizes them somewhat” (180). The book ends on a note of ambiguity, putting forth alienism as a concept still in formation. By refusing closure, the narrative acts out Livingston’s intent to “*hold open questions*” (181). Autopoetics is projected into the future, where perhaps we will be able to regard the perceived divide between scientific fact and literary fiction differently.

And so Livingston invites us to envision with him the promise of such a future. In a book that is enjoyable, engaging, and concise, his self-reflexive invitation leads us to rethink our own position *between* science and literature. For it is in that space, this book demonstrates, where the most challenging theoretical work is yet to be done.

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