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Simultaneous Order Reconsidered: Twain, Eliot, Faulkner

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1. The Land of Desire, the Conquest of Distance

The turn of the last century saw science and technology revolutionize ideas of spatio-temporal structure: Edison's kinetograph, Marconi's wireless telegraph, and Roentgen's X-ray, together with Einstein's theory of relativity, caused people to believe in the possibility of transcending the limits of perception and exploring new frontiers of terra incognita. Fin-de-siècle Americans were obsessed with the desire for "the conquest of distance." The reason is very simple, actually: In late Victorian America, populations were shifting from the eastern seaboard westward across the continent. By the 1890 census, of the 62,947,714 people counted, 17,000,000 lived west of the Mississippi River. Indeed, this same census declared the disappearance of a designated frontier line. Rather than lose the frontier spirit, however, this land of desire managed to discover, or perhaps we should say invent, it somewhere else.

In step with his times, one of the best-known of Missourians, Mark Twain, devised a global communication tool called the "teleelectroscope" in his meta-detective story, "From the 'London Times' of 1904" published in the November 1898 issue of the *Century Magazine*. With this,

he predicted the advent of one of a frontier to come, that is, cyberspace, particularly as it was achieved by means of the Internet in the late twentieth century. In his story, this new device is produced in Chicago in the autumn of 1901, a year after the Great Exposition of 1900 in Paris, where Henry Adams began praying to the Dynamo as a symbol of “ultimate energy” embracing “silent and infinite force” (Adams 1594). According to Twain, this is how the teleelectroscope works:

As soon as the Paris contract released the teleelectroscope, it was delivered to public use, and was soon connected with the telephonic systems of the whole world. The improved ‘limitless-distance’ telephone systems was presently introduced, and the daily doings of the globe made visible to everybody, and audibly discussable, too, by witnesses separated by any number of leagues. (128).

David Ketterer has aptly classified this story into a category he designates “instantaneous communication,” because the high-tech tool in “From the ‘London Times’ of 1904” allows global and simultaneous communication via “the international telephone-station.” In so doing, it effectively narrates the ways in which the world gets smaller and smaller, with everything happening simultaneously and the land of desire expanding forever and ever. Rereading Twain’s story from today’s perspective surely makes us want to connect the fin-de-siècle obsession with the conquest of distance and the ubiquity of Satan, the anti-hero, in Twain’s *The Mysterious Stranger*.

In this paper I would like to start with Twain’s short story “From the ‘London Times’ of 1904” as a prophetic work of modernist poetics and relate it to the idea of simultaneous order as proposed by representa-

tive Modernists T.S. Eliot and William Faulkner.

2. A Reading of Twain's "From the 'London Times' of 1904"

Having said this, I should very quickly point out that it is actually very difficult to determine whether or not Twain was the inventor of this high-tech pre-internet device, the "teleelectroscope." For history tells us that in the 1890s Twain became acquainted with the Polish genius of science and technology Jan Szczepanik (April 13, 1872 in Rudniki-April 18, 1926 in Tarnow, Poland), who invented and announced to the public in 1898 a new machine he called a "teleelectroscope," or *fernseher*, an apparatus for tele-reproduction of images and sound using electricity. Some of his ideas did influence the development of the wireless telegraph and television, promoting the development of telecommunications. Although when and where Twain first heard of Szczepanik and his devices cannot be determined precisely, the extent of this young inventor's reputation was such that Twain may have seen references to him anywhere in the mid-1890s. Afterwards, though, as Szczepanik's photographer Balicer recalls, Twain got so fascinated with the teleelectroscope, "an electrical telescope that increased the power of the ordinary instrument" (Burnam 366) that he first met this so-called "Austrian Edison" in Szczepanik's own laboratory sometime in 1898. Consequently, Mark Twain winds up writing in 1898 an article called "The Austrian Edison Keeping School Again," and a tale, "From the 'London Times' of 1904," both of which foreground his invention the "teleelectroscope" as the key to understanding the whole narrative. Historically speaking, then, it is safe to say that this "teleelectroscope" was devised by Szczepanik, not by Twain.

Yet, "From the 'London Times' of 1904" is by no means a biographical story of the "Austrian Edison." Although Twain truly modeled

his character Szczepanik after the real Szczepanik, he radically altered the evidence of Szczepanik's technological genius by re-inventing the teleelectroscope himself not as the archetype of television but as the prototype of Internet, blending "fact, melodrama and romance," dramatizing the story as the "wildest of burlesques!" (Burnam 367).

At this point, let me remind you of the story. Twain narrates from the near future, actually six years ahead from the year he was writing the story. Szczepanik gets involved with a mysterious conspiracy and ends up being discovered as a corpse in the dark and unused compartment of a cellar under Captain Clayton's house. Since it was well-known that Captain Clayton had consistently criticized the teleelectroscope as a wasteful toy and led the opposition against Szczepanik, the former was swiftly arrested, indicted, and brought to trial, charged with his murder. Although he denied the murder, "the evidence against him was perfect in every detail, and absolutely unassailable" (Twain 129). Thus, he was sentenced to death. However, after some time in jail Clayton gradually felt like diverting his mind with the teleelectroscope. Luckily, he had his wish. The narrator, a friend of both Szczepanik and Clayton, clearly shows us how attractive and addictive the teleelectroscope becomes for Clayton:

The connection was made with the international telephone-station, and day by day, and night by night, he (Clayton) called up one corner of the globe after another, and looked upon its life, and studied its strange sights, and spoke with its people, and realized that by grace of this marvelous instrument he was almost as free as the birds of the air, although a prisoner under locks and bars. He seldom spoke, and I never interrupted him when he was absorbed in this amusement. I sat in his parlor and read and

smoked, and the nights were very quiet and reposefully sociable, and I found them pleasant. Now and then I would hear him say, "Give me Yedo": next, "Give me Hong-Kong": next, "Give me Melbourne." And I smoked on, and read in comfort, while he wandered about the remote under-world, where the sun was shining in the sky, and the people were at their daily work. Sometimes the talk that came from those far regions through the microphone attachment interested me, and I listened. (130)

The interaction between Clayton and the teleelectroscope in this passage reveals how easily this fantastic device attributed to someone called Szczepanik is somewhat similar with, but finally radically different from, what the real Szczepanik designed in real history. I repeat: While the real Szczepanik invented his "teleelectroscope" as the archetype of television, Twain's Szczepanik ends up producing what we have to call the prototype of Internet. The question then is why did the author so modify the nature of the machine?

In order to solve the problem, it is necessary to see how the latter half of the story unfolds. Deeply involved with netsurfing, the death-row convict Clayton happened to see the Czar's procession in Peking (Beijing) celebrating the coronation of the Russian Czar as the new Chinese emperor. Watching the screen of the teleelectroscope, the narrator suddenly sees the figure of Szczepanik alive and well in Beijing and simultaneously realizes that Clayton is innocent. Although Szczepanik was reported to have been murdered by Clayton, it turns out he merely disappeared from among some American friends and fled to the other side of the northern hemisphere: "He had not grown used to being a world-famous person, and had been forced to break away from the lionizing that was robbing him of all privacy and repose. So he grew a

beard, put on colored glasses, disguised himself a little in other ways, then took a fictitious name, and went off to wander around the earth in peace" (133).

Here, we see that the old teleelectroscope has been developed into a new model designated one of the "teleelectrophonoscopes of the globe," which enables Clayton in Chicago to speak with Szczepanik in Beijing, and through which "for many hours the kings and queens of many realms (with here and there a reporter) talked with Szczepanik, and praised him" (133). The rapid development of technology especially empowered the means of transportation and communications, making the globe smaller. Twain's teleelectroscope, you see, prophesized the advent of the modern age, in which it became more difficult to distinguish between the East and the West, and the primitive and the avant-garde, and image and reality: everything started going on simultaneously. But we should also note well the distinction between the living and the dead at stake in Twain's story, too. Certainly, Szczepanik said he only wanted to escape from the United States, simply avoid the inconveniences of becoming a celebrity. Yet, it is also true that the corpse discovered at Captain Clayton's house was "easily identified as Szczepanik's" (129). In Twain's text, we are not given a clue as to how to distinguish between the dead Szczepanik in Chicago and the living Szczepanik in Beijing. In this way, it is as if Twain wants us to think of the teleelectroscope as conquering not only time and space, but also reinforcing the rule of simultaneous order between the past and the present — even between the dead and the living.

Twain's radical and romantic renovation of this high tech machine could well sound a bit fantastic, at least far-fetched. However, if you take into account the fin-de-siècle discursive space in which people found "invisible forces" so powerful that they could not tell the effect of

wireless technology from the effect of spiritualism, it begins to make perfect sense. Accordingly, for Twain and his contemporaries, it was far from strange to conceive of the cutting edge of technology as something capable of manifesting the co-existence of the supernatural and the technological, occult science and modern science, and even the dead and the living. As we know from Twain's biography, he actually paid visits to spiritualists, desperate to see again his own dead brother Henry and dead daughter Susie. Without belief in "invisible forces," which deconstruct the distinction between electricity and spirituality, the modernist concept of simultaneous order could not have come about in quite the same way.

3. Simultaneous Order from Eliot to Faulkner

This way of reading encourages us to reinterpret that other Missourian T.S.Eliot's modernist manifesto, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), where he questions the traditional notion of history by employing the idea of "simultaneous order."

One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which *the dead poets*, his ancestors, assert their immortality

most vigorously.

... Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; *the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order*. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity. (Eliot 34, emphasis mine)

Reading through the text today, we cannot help but notice how acutely conscious of the coexistence between the dead poets and the living poets, including himself, Eliot is. Since Eliot's theory of simultaneous order in this article often is considered analogous to his contemporary Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic concept of the synchronic, we are tempted to understand the concept of simultaneous order as structuralist and even scientific. And yet, I believe it was the poet's vision of the dead and the living working together that inspired him to write this manifesto. Reinvestigating Eliot's own occultist sympathies, we learn that the poet repudiated but incorporated spiritualism into his modernist poetics. Helen Sword starts her analysis of his works by reminding us

that Eliot attended séances in the 1920s presided over by P.D. Ouspensky (*Ghostwriting Modernism* 93). What is more, she considers “Tradition and the Individual Talent” to be conferring upon “the great authors of the past the status of remonstrative ghosts,” and she interprets his famous theory of the “extinction of personality” as “akin to that of a spirit medium” (94). In this way, Sword illustrates her point not only with Eliot’s articles but also with his major poems such as “Gerontion,” *The Waste Land*, and *Four Quartets*. Eliot came to believe in simultaneous order, which helped him radically question the very idea of tradition and history, for he did not study but has long been “haunted by the great poets of the past” (102).

Having considered Twain’s obsession with pre-Internet technology and Eliot’s fascination with the seemingly structuralist idea of simultaneous order, we find it easier to reappraise another form of synchronic time as represented by the Southern Modernist, William Faulkner. For example, his most famous story, “A Rose for Emily” (1930), is not only a typical Southern gothic romance but a cultural archive of Southern tradition and history. Immediately before revealing Jefferson’s “tradition” — Miss Emily Grierson’s necrophiliac romance with the Yankee Homer Barron — Faulkner provides us with the peculiar structure of Southern temporality:

The two female cousins came at once. They held the funeral on the second day, with the town coming to look at Miss Emily beneath a mass of bought flowers, with the crayon face of her father musing profoundly above the bier and the ladies sibilant and macabre; and the very old men — some in their brushed Confederate uniforms — on the porch and the lawn, talking of Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs, believing that

they had danced with her and courted her perhaps, *confusing time with its mathematical progression, as the old do, to whom all the past is not a diminishing road but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottle-neck of the most recent decade of years.*
(Faulkner 1928, emphasis mine)

At first glance, the Jeffersonians' vision of time seems to be the psychological effect of national amnesia. Since Faulkner himself wrote often of the American South as a defeated nation inflicted with its resulting traumas, this theory sounds plausible enough. From another perspective, however, it is difficult to ignore the influence on modernists not only of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* published in 1916 but also of Albert Einstein's general theory of relativity completed in the same year, which proposes that traveling at high speed close to the speed of light changes how fast you see time pass on distant objects. Of course, the very old men in Jefferson may strike us as just a bit stupid, for they cannot easily discriminate the past from the present, mistaking their reinvented memory for historical fact. In their own time, however, the advent of Einstein's scientific theory made it easier for modern people to assume a synchronicity between the past and the present. Faulkner's concept of synchronic time is not simply the traumatic effect of Southern gothic then, but also a Southern representation of relativity. Not so different perhaps from Twain's version of the teleelectroscope as not only high-tech but also supernatural, and Eliot's notions of tradition and history as not only structuralist but also spiritualist.

From a traditional perspective, it might seem that while Twain's reinvention of the teleelectroscope makes instantaneous communication both general and global, Faulkner's style reconfigures simultaneous

order as something both peculiar and local. Yet it is in the revolutionary idea of tradition proposed by T. S. Eliot, Twain's fellow Missourian and a fellow modernist to Faulkner, that we learn how to break out of the opposition between Twain's global and Faulkner's local. Within Eliot's text we witness a chiasmus between a Twain-like remythologizing of the technological and a Faulkner-like demystification of the supernatural. In elaborating the seemingly neutral vision of synchronicity, then, we may find ourselves able to reconsider the spatio-temporal relations between "universal" victors and local "defeated" nations. In order to further speculate on this problem, though, we have to keep oscillating, that is, continuously frustrate our desire to settle on only one viewpoint of simultaneous order, be it the scientific, the structuralist, or even the Gothic view. It is perhaps only through this constant oscillation that we can catch a glimpse of the way modernist poetics is structured as just another promising frontier in literary and cultural history.

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