



# Literary theory between contingency and contiguity: Yakov Druskin’s “Law of Heterogeneity”

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## Abstract

The notion of chance epitomizes the limits and challenges of any theory’s struggle for control over itself as well as over its objects. Although contemporary literary theory has adapted its terminology and conceptual framework in line with the emergence of dynamic, “open forms” (Wölfflin in *Principles of art history: The problem of the development of style in later art*, Dover Publications Inc, New York, 1986), chance has nevertheless remained a highly problematic category to come to terms with. How can literary theory embrace chance? The paper approaches this question in three steps. First, it reconstructs three basic poetological propositions against whose backdrop contingency gains profile: the proposition of causal connections as a means to transform literature into a realm of necessity, the proposition of form as a means to reduce arbitrariness, and the proposition of control as a means to protect the aesthetic object against the risks of external intrusions. The second part of the paper discusses a largely forgotten but highly relevant approach to the problem of contingency by Yakov Druskin. Druskin links the function of contingency in theoretical investigation with concepts of contiguity and proximity, first of all touch. His fragmentary sketch of a “law of heterogeneity” represents a paradoxical attempt to theorize contingent obstruction as a privileged systematic device to establish physical contact. The third part of this paper unpacks the implicit urge to rethink the traditions of theory formation itself through the “law of heterogeneity.” It argues that Druskin’s law introduces a different type of theory, one which is deeply indebted to the tactile, thus challenging the ocularcentrism of *theoría*.

**Keywords** Contiguity · Contingency · Tactility · Ocularcentrism · History of senses · Contact zone

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## The laws of literary theory

In 1932, Maxim Gorky wrote in response to an amateur writer who had asked for editorial feedback on his attempts at prose:

First of all, let me remind you that there is not and cannot be anything in the world that happens ‘suddenly’.—Everything ‘unexpected’ is preceded by a process of conditions building upon one another, the combined force of which generates a result that may well appear to be ‘sudden’ or ‘accidental’. You write, “A feeling of bitterness suddenly exploded in his soul.” But even explosives such as dynamite do not explode suddenly, nor for some mysterious, elusive reason, but rather because of impact, pressure, friction, etc., and each of these causes of explosion also has its own reasons. Dynamite is a chemically complex substance, yet it is still formed in a particular way (Gor’kii, 1932, p. 8).<sup>1</sup>

Gorky’s criticism may have been somewhat discouraging to its recipient. His instruction has the virtue, however, of summarizing as explicitly as possible three literary principles that claim validity far beyond the realm of Soviet Socialist Realism in the early 1930s.

The first of these principles could be called the law of causality. As a modern successor to the model of providential thinking, the law of causality banishes chance from literature by rationalizing the unfamiliar. It does not only purport that nothing can happen in a literary text beyond a precisely determined sequence of discrete causes and effects; it is also based on the assumption that the order of the literary world must be aligned with the system of natural sciences, thus making fictional subjects proceed like stimulus-response chains. Very much in line with Siegfried Kracauer’s description of history, literature is therefore regarded as “a realm of necessity—an expansion of the natural realm” (Kracauer, 1971, p. 106), subordinating every literary plot line to the narratives of natural sciences. That is why Gorky’s advice comes along with two book recommendations: John Joly’s *The surface-history of the Earth* (1925), a geological study of the formation of the continents and the measurement of the age of rocks, and D. H. Scott’s *The evolution of plants* (1911), a Darwinian history of the development of fauna. They represent the basic textbooks of modern literary theory.

The second principle could be described as a law of form. It claims that form can only exist where chains of causation apply. Even in its most complex arrangements, form reveals itself as a state of material organization that is based on the principle of causality. Form is thus not only inextricably linked with the determinability

<sup>1</sup> “Прежде всего разрешите напомнить Вам, что в мире нет и не может быть ничего, что являлось бы ‘вдруг’. —Всякой ‘неожиданности’ предшествует процесс нарастаний условий, соединенной силою которых и создается результат, являющийся будто бы ‘вдруг’— ‘случайно’. Вы пишете: ‘В душе его вдруг взорвалось чувство горечи’. Но и взрывчатые вещества, напр. динамит, взрываются не вдруг, не по причине ‘таинственной’, ‘неуловимой’, а вследствие удара, давления, трения и т.д., причем каждая из этих причин взрыва тоже имеет свои основания. Динамит— вещество химически сложное, а все же определенно оформленное.”

of cause-effect relationships; it can, as it were, even in its most obscure, puzzling, and seemingly disruptive manifestations be condensed to the rational and coherent scheme of a formula or a calculus. The German philosopher Odo Marquard therefore spoke of “[the use of] form to reduce arbitrariness” (*Beliebigkeitsersparung durch Form*) in art (Marquard, 1991, p. 121). Every material, and every event, however explosive and multidimensional it may be, can thus be defined and disciplined through form. Even where form is granted a series of transformations, these are never accidental but regulated. It is exactly this determinism that places form in such an intimate relationship with norms.

The third principle can be described as the law of control. It arises directly from the two previously mentioned postulates. While causality and control meet in their desire to subordinate any type of event or fact to a limited set of operations, form and control share the claim to grant seemingly arbitrary incidents or experiences stable depictions and descriptions. If every sequence of events can be ascribed to chains of causation and structured in accordance with their mechanics, the likelihood of providing comprehensive accounts and of making reliable assumptions about unknown or unfamiliar matters increases both retrospectively and prospectively (or preventively) with regard to anticipation, representation or plausible prognostication of events. Neither does anything autopoietic occur ‘of its own accord’ under the rule of the law of control, nor are the production and reception of the artwork conceivable beyond the sovereign mastery of any given material. The law of control thus protects the aesthetic object against the risks of an expanded horizon of speculation and manipulation.

Through these three laws, literature and literary theory immunize themselves against precarious phenomena such as suddenness, chance, imponderability, potentiality, and—more generally—openness. And it is these three laws which enable literature to perform a function that Marquard has described as “mastering contingency” (*Kontingenzbewältigung*; Marquard, 1986, p. 130). The laws of causality, form, and control render accidental, chaotic or seemingly random events and structures subject to semantic availability and logic accountability. With the metaphor of the explosion that Gorky employs, this demand for literary governance is captured in a nutshell. Literature as dynamite does not only put the virtuosity of artistic control to the test. It also threatens maximum destructive effects when the laws of causality, form and control fail, and the explosive devices of art detonate, turning causally organized form into destructive momentum.

## The law of heterogeneity

One might be tempted to subsume this model of the calculable artwork under the doctrines of Soviet literary teachings, declaring it a poetological anachronism and confronting it with numerous examples of modern poetics of contingency that persistently undermine the three laws mentioned above. After all, the aesthetics of modernism “defines itself through non-systematicity” (Koschorke, 2002, p. 146). We need only consider the crucial role of aleatory text games, the practices of writing unconsciously (*écriture automatique*) and speaking transrationally (*zaum'*), or the

poetics of disjunction and defamiliarization that Russian Formalism has identified as a driving force in the evolution of modern literature and poetry. Nonetheless, even these counterexamples would not resolve the principal problem of literary theory that Gorky addresses with explosive force: The notion of chance epitomizes the limits and challenges of any theory's struggle for control over itself as well as over its objects. Significantly, this challenge has persistently been perceived as the force of a (potentially devastating) eruptive blast. Lotman's statement that the "moment of explosion breaks the chain of cause and effect, causing an entire era to rise up and a collection of identically probable events to come into view," undertakes a reevaluation of this potential damage while also testing the abilities of theory to safely handle similar situations of unpredictability (Lotman, 2013, p. 64; see also Lotman, 2009, p. 14).

Although modern literary theory is—in contrast to Gorky—more prone to a certain systemic flexibility due to the increase in experimental, open forms brought forth by literary history, chance has nevertheless—along with the related notions of contingency, optionality, ludism, fortune, risk, unpredictability, indeterminism, randomness, uncertainty, singularity, etc.—remained a highly problematic category. Recent literary scholarship diagnoses in modernity an "aesthetic and scholarly allergy to chance," (Dillmann, 2011, p. 2) or even speaks of "demonic connotations" that contingency has never shed (Schmitz-Emans, 1994, p. 289). As "resistance against the Enlightenment ideal of order and rationality," contingency remains a highly ambiguous phenomenon (Dillmann, 2011, p. 4). Following transcendental idealism, modern literary theory tends to posit art as an object of sovereign construction and thus of a specific aesthetic calculation, reasoning, and judgement—thus, contingency appears as an erratic and therefore subversive factor, which poses a threat to the aesthetic order. Taken to an extreme, literary theory can entirely deprive contingency of its aesthetic viability: "Chance as such evidently cannot be shaped poetically" (Müller, 1978, p. 266).

Literary theory's defeatism about chance has been tested numerous times, yet hardly anywhere as poignantly as by Theodor Adorno's statement that "no work of art deserves this name as long as it distances itself from anything contingent to its own law" (Adorno, 1995, p. 328).<sup>2</sup> While Adorno is unwilling to accept chance as a "simple relief from the burden of form, which the aesthetic subject is no longer able to bear," dispensing itself from the responsibility of consciously constructing and penetrating a work of art, his aesthetic theory unearths contingency as a particular expression of the heterogeneous that remains exterior or even alien to the form but yet persists as art's irreducible point of reference and rejection. This double bind holds true for theory as well: There can be no theory of art that keeps contingency at a safe distance. Yet how can theory of art embrace chance?

<sup>2</sup> Full quote: "Kein Kunstwerk verdient seinen Namen, welches das seinem eigenen Gesetz gegenüber Zufällige von sich weghielte. Denn Form ist dem eigenen Begriff nach nur Form von etwas, und dies Etwas darf nicht zur bloßen Tautologie der Form werden. Aber die Notwendigkeit dieser Beziehung der Form auf ihr anderes untergräbt jene; sie kann nicht als das dem Heterogenen gegenüber Reine geraten, das sie als Form ebenso sein will, wie sie des Heterogenen bedarf" (Adorno, 1995, pp. 328–329).

It is striking that answers to this question tend to use the rhetoric of paradoxes and oxymorons to capture the self-contradiction of systematic classification and contingency. A particularly stark example of this rhetoric is Silvio Vietta's thesis (2001, pp. 32–33) that aesthetic modernity has “generated its own aesthetics of chance, which it has done not by chance, but rather for reasons of historical logic,” such that chance “necessarily” penetrates aesthetics with “inner historical necessity” in the form of a “chain reaction of revolutions” in order to revolutionize aesthetics from within. Chance and compulsion appear to depend on each other in a dialectical connection here, and thus to neutralize one another. In keeping with Adorno (2013, p. 149), one could speak of regression to “chaotic regularity, in which accident and necessity renew their fatal pact.”

In the following reflections, I would like to pursue another pairing, which is less apparent and less inclined to synthesize: the connection between chance and doubt. This is a nexus that has been proposed by a largely forgotten thinker on the margins of the history of theory: the Russian philosopher, musician, and mathematician Yakov Druskin (1902–1980). In the mid-1920s and early 1930s, Druskin was a member of the Chinari, an informal intellectual circle of Leningrad philosophers and poets that shared members with the last Soviet avant-garde movement, the absurdist Oberiu group (Jaccard, 1992, pp. 77–94). Centered around Leonid Lipavsky, Alexander Vvedensky, Daniil Kharms, Nikolay Oleinikov, and Druskin himself, the Chinari lacked a consistent scholarly canon but without constraints discussed questions in the philosophy of time, the metaphysics of the infinite, the possibility of neighboring worlds, concepts of nonsense (*bessmyslitsa*) and theories of nothingness. In a brief essay on the history of the Chinari, Druskin wonders what united its members who were, at first glance, so different. He goes on to answer: “It was a literary-philosophical community of five people, each of whom knew his own profession well but at the same time was more than a narrow specialist in his field and was not afraid to ‘penetrate’ into foreign territory, be it linguistics, number theory, painting or music” (Druskin, 1985, p. 399).

In this atmosphere of intellectual freedom and transdisciplinary dialogue thrived some of the most innovative and creative minds of the century. Yet also some that remained in the shadows of a totalitarian regime or fell prey to it, hardly ever having the chance to be heard beyond the confines of their communities, let alone to be published during their lifetimes. It was largely thanks to Druskin's efforts that, following Kharms' arrest in 1941, his manuscripts were saved. Druskin's own writings were published only posthumously, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and have so far received only sparse scholarly attention. His numerous essays and notebooks mostly investigate philosophical and theological questions, sometimes linking them with aesthetic issues.

With a persistent urge, Druskin's writings circle the notion of contingency, approaching it from unexpected angles and placing it in unconventional contexts. The title of his “Considerations in Biblical ontology, in the mystery of contingency, on my slavery and my freedom and on eschatology, which were not included into the ‘Seeing of Not-Seeing’” exemplifies not only this transdiscursive strategy but also a central vanishing point on Druskin's epistemological horizon: triggered by an instantaneous “mirror phase,” coincidentally seeing the reflection of himself in

the mirror of a glass door while exiting a shop, the text traces the initial horror of meeting his own/alien “anti-me” (*anti-ya*) back to the existential contradiction and contingency of being-in-the-world (Druskin, 2004a, pp. 35–124; Druskin, 2004b, pp. 125–172). How to frame “the mystery of contingency” within a noumenal and phenomenological experience that remains excluded from the realm of perceptual reassurance?

From this starting point, Druskin proceeds to link the function of contingency in theoretical investigation with concepts of contiguity and proximity, first of all, touch. The conceptual overlap between contingency and contiguity becomes especially apparent in the fragmentary sketch of a “law of heterogeneity” (*zakon neodnorodnosti*; 1936), which Druskin first explores in his diary. Druskin kept this diary from 1928 until his death, using it extensively as a medium of personal philosophical discourse (Kostromitskaya, 2015). An early entry from August 10, 1936, reads:

The law of heterogeneity. An investigation shouldn't have a continuous line. The analysis has to be interrupted from time to time, the chain of conclusions has to break off at a certain point. The thought shouldn't be finished, it shouldn't become quite clear. The system mustn't explain everything, something has to remain outside of the system—this is the last bit. Such a system will be diverse. A homogenous system, applicable to any case, is indefinite, it is an empty system and has no relation to touch. Touch is the beginning. Where investigation breaks off, where the last remainders can be felt as an obstruction of the system—this is where touch takes place. (Druskin, 1999, p. 77)<sup>3</sup>

Several strands of argument cross in this passage. The first pursues a mathematical line of argument, which surfaces at some points in Druskin's writing. In the passage quoted, Druskin takes up Gödel's incompleteness theorems. In these, Gödel showed that certain formal systems are not without internal contradictions and cannot prove their own consistency. Druskin does not mention the far-reaching logical implications of the incompleteness theorems at all but singles out one aspect from Gödel's complex argumentation: the fundamental question of how systematic consistency and contingency relate to each other. According to Druskin, incomplete, heterogeneous systems evoke not so much the incapacity for proof but rather the impossibility of completing the act of thinking. And this thinking cannot be completed because it allows for uncertainties.

This point about uncertainty connects the law of heterogeneity with the second line of argumentation. This second argument concerns the combination of contingency and contact. This connection is anything but self-evident, for starting

<sup>3</sup> “Закон неоднородности. В исследовании не должно быть одной непрерывной линии. Рассуждение местами должно прекращаться, в определенном месте цепь выводов должна быть оборвана. Мысль не должна быть доведена до конца, стать вполне ясной. Система не должна объяснять всего, что-либо должно остаться вне системы – это последний остаток. Такая система будет неоднородной. Однородная же система, объясняющая все, пригодна ко всем случаям, неопределенна – это пустая система, она не имеет отношения к прикосанию. Прикосание – это начало. Там, где рассуждение обрывается, где замечается последний остаток, нарушающий систему, там есть прикосание.”

with the philosophy of enlightenment the history of the senses associates touch primarily with the ability to establish a reliable connection to reality (Zeuch, 2000). Herder, the model philosopher of tactilism, ties his privileged treatment of the hand to the epistemic function of haptics, since the “ophthalmic human being with a thousand eyes but without feeling, without a sensing hand [...] would remain in Plato’s cave all his life, without clearly conceptualizing any physical property.” (Herder, 1890, p. 297) His poignant invective against Cartesian rationalism “I feel myself! I am!” enthusiastically celebrates this evidential weight of touch (Herder, 1994, p. 236).

Via touch—especially with the hand—we bridge distances, establish contact, foster relations, experience proximity and intimacy. This is why touch has been called a “mediator between us and other people and things, ‘a medium’ to restore contact, to bridge the gulf which divides us, in our upright posture, from everything else” (Straus, 1960, pp. 224–225). Exactly this bonding, coupling, world-connecting aspect is where many reflections on touch converge. In particular, the phenomenology of touch revolves around the question “Can we come any closer to reality than when it approaches us mani-festly, palpably?” (Waldenfels, 2002, p. 64).

Haptic contact is historically and systematically correlated with a unique and non-negotiable experience of the real. And this experience implies nothing less than a reality test: What can be touched is said to exist. In his anthropological writings, Kant (2006, pp. 46–48) described touch as the “coarsest” of all the senses but also identified it as “the only one of immediate external perception; and for this very reason it is also the most important and most reliable instructive.” This becomes an axiom for subsequent philosophy of the senses. Georg Simmel’s Berlin lectures on Kant, delivered in 1904, show how much touch continued to represent an experience of reality that became extremely precarious in the modern period. Simmel (1905, p. 175) comes to regard touch as the “only bridge to reality,” even as the “actual sense of reality,” for “only what we can or could grasp appears to us to be fully possessed of reality.” Husserl (2008, p. 399) reformulates this possessive attitude into a mode of active participation in the world: “From the touch that simply perceives, in which material substance, the *res extensa*, is simply haptically constituted, and through which (in combination with the sense of sight) we constitute a realm of perception of *res extensae*, initially occurring by itself—existing [by itself], now arises a world in which we take action.”

It is precisely this position that spans proof of reality with proactive presence from which twentieth-century experimental psychology of perception proceeds in order to place the sense of touch at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of the senses. In *The world of touch*, one of the most elaborated statements from the vantage point of a phenomenological method in psychology, David Katz grants the sense of touch “precedence over all other senses” because “its perceptions have the most compelling character of reality.” Katz backs his claim that “nothing convinces us as much of the world’s existence, as well as the reality of our own body, as the (often painful) collisions that occur between the body and its environment” with a large set of experiments in tactile sensitivity. While he acknowledges a specific influence of visual representations on touch performance, one axiom remains undisputed: “What has been touched is the true reality that leads to perception” (Katz, 1925, p. 48).

Contrary to this use of the hand to ensure existence, however, runs another line of haptics that approaches touch with rising doubts. The first paragraph of Wittgenstein's reflections *On certainty*, "If you do know that here is one hand, we'll grant you all the rest" (Wittgenstein, 1969, p. 2), subjects Moore's famous "Proof of an external world" (1939) to a meticulous thought experiment. Moore (1959, pp. 144–145) had concluded from his premises "here's one hand, here's another," since these are "premises known to be true," that "therefore, there are external things." Wittgenstein takes this conclusion as the starting point for a radical epistemological skepticism that erodes any valid evidence of positive empirical knowledge (Gebauer, 2002). This suspicion that no ascertainment through touch can be attained has been raised before, notably in the field of phenomenological psychology. Erwin Strauss (1935, p. 407) concedes that, "Touch is coming closer; but," he points out, "it can also not be coming closer, if it were not to come from afar and if, in approaching, the possibility of distancing, specifically, of letting go, slipping, losing, were not to remain." The experience of letting go is thus deeply imbedded in the experience of touch; every touch is also about estrangement.

These caveats concerning the unifying, intertwining aspect of touch are deeply rooted in the history of culture with the figure of Doubting Thomas as a founding father. The apostle Thomas's doubt acutely affects Druskin's writings, which are permeated by a search for a new "Thomasian sign," a vision of a tactile language that would be able to overcome both existential estrangement and semiotic arbitrariness. At the same time, though, these writings seem constrained by an equally authoritarian "noli me tangere" (Strätling, 2021, pp. 266–279). In his diary entry from August 10th, 1936, Druskin (1999, p. 75) inquires "Why is touch interesting?," and he finds: "Christ healed by touching. Doubting Thomas had to touch the wounds of Christ." The key to solve this question and resolve this doubt, however, cannot be found in the simple assertion that "Touch is a connection with something. Touch is a criterion of existence" (Druskin, 1999, p. 77). Rather, Druskin suggests, touch takes on a medium position, and the medium position "is contingent and needs to be found by coincidence."

Druskin's reflections seem to be standing on the crossroads, where the sense of empathetic "nearing" or "nearness" and the possibility of separation both intersect and part, where the chiasmic interrelationship in touch flanks with touch as a rift. Touch does not establish a stable nexus or continuity, neither physically nor symbolically; on the contrary, it implies an experience of contiguity that borders on separateness. The law of heterogeneity raises this tactile ambiguity to the level of a theoretical challenge. It entangles touch with the incompleteness and uncertainty of systematic ascertainments; it questions the sense of touch in its capacity to provide unimpeachable proof of reality, proposing a new form of tactile theorizing.

How is this reflected in the field of literature? As mentioned above, Druskin took his notes in close dialogue with the avant-garde artists' group Oberiu, whose experiments in absurdist literature attracted his vital interest. Not least among these was Daniil Kharm's collection of "Sluchai," often translated as "cases" or "incidences," texts that are essentially case studies in narrative contingency (cf. for example Jampol'skii, 1998). To examine the poetological implications of the law of heterogeneity, however, Druskin does not interrogate any works of



the literary avant-garde but rather surprisingly turns to nineteenth-century realist prose, a literary form which, as Roman Jakobson (1987) shows in his study on “Two aspects of language and two types of aphasic disturbances,” is based on contiguity patterns of construction (as opposed to similarity patterns) and gravitates toward the metonymic pole of language and literature.

In a diary entry of November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1939, Druskin cites a literary example of the law of heterogeneity. His quotation is taken from Nikolai Gogol’s “The Overcoat,” a short story that has often been regarded as a point of origin of modern Russian literature—but certainly not a text that has been tested for its notion of chance or contingency. A kind of poetic counterpart to Melville’s “Bartleby,” it tells the story of the clerk Akaky Akakievich, who leads a life entirely dedicated to copying until he sees himself confronted with the vital necessity of replacing his threadbare overcoat with a new one. The unexpected loss of this new coat, purchased after months of hard work and great sacrifice, leads to his early demise, followed by a phantastic resurrection as a coat-haunting revenant.

Gogol’s story has been subject to a large number of seminal essays on literary studies, making the text one of the most exhaustively interpreted pieces of prose in Russian literature. Against this massive body of elaborated scholarship, Druskin turns his attention to a seemingly minor detail, one overlooked by previous research. It is a sentence spoken rather negligently at the bedside of the ailing Akaky Akakievich: “Order his pine coffin now, for an oak one will be too expensive for him” (Gogol, 1938, p. 168). In the structure of this phrase, which is very much in line with the economic logic of the narrative, yet, uttered without any regard for the subject that is sentenced to death here, Druskin (1999, p. 89) detects a “change of direction”: the expectation of a logical or rather ontological progression, such as “Order him a pine coffin, for he will die,” is aborted and redirected. From the microlevel of a sequence out of joint arises a principal imbalance. Here, an economic ordering of two different options for burial, which is perceived as both unexpected and unethical, takes the place of the natural order of events: death followed by burial. This shift radically alters the situation, breaking the chains of cause and effect and suspending the mechanism of predictable narration.

Druskin’s reading of this semantical and syntactical rupture bears a significant resemblance to the concepts of contralogic construction and interval developed by formalism. While contralogic construction refers to types of unmotivated, partially grotesque narration that detach syntax from semantics, thus provoking effects of estrangement and misperception (Eikhenbaum, 1969), the interval denotes an interim in which the “inertia” (Tynianov, 1977, p. 168) of conventional relationships between phenomena is suspended; they are in a state of flexible or, as Tynianov calls it, “anarchic” openness to each other and do not move away from, towards, or in sequence with each other as they normally would (Tynianov, 1977, p. 191). Contralogic combination and interval share some characteristics with the gap described by Druskin (2001, p. 270), a gap that undermines any idea of regular and intact order: “The system cannot be completely sealed, i.e. entirely rationalized and consistent.” And, Druskin adds, that goes for life as well: “there must be empty spaces, gaps, crevices” (Druskin, 1999, p. 77).

In the context of the “law of heterogeneity,” contact and contingency meet exactly in this discontinuous experience, which affects not only the expectations linked up with narrative coherence but also the sense of unifying connection that touch seems to embody. Straus (1935, p. 361) alluded to the fragmentariness of each tactile impression, its imminent confrontation with the “void, as the yet-to-be-determined,” that drives tactile transitions into infinity: “In the touch-world, there is no closed, completed horizon; there are only moments, but thus also the urge to move forward from moment to moment. The touching movement thus becomes an expression of a restless and endless, never quite completed approach.” This intermittent nature of tactile experience sets the example for an experience of fractured narrative form. For as much as tactile data are framed by an unrecognized, untouched otherness, words of a text remain estranged elements that point to an irreducible alienation.

### Literary theory between contact and contingency

Against the backdrop of this crossover of touch and text, Druskin’s law of heterogeneity represents a paradoxical attempt to systematize contingency as a privileged device to establish contact; to literally get in touch with an artifact, yet at the same time indefinitely deferring coherence, closeness, and closure. The law of heterogeneity exemplifies the inevitable self-contradictory strategies of theorizing chance: claiming control while experiencing evasion. Thus, it runs counter to the three laws of literary theory outlined at the beginning of this essay.

And yet the labeling of the law of heterogeneity *as* a law blends into a specific normative nomenclature. In his “Aesthetic Theory,” Adorno (1995, p. 221) surmised that contingency could ultimately be a “function of growing structuration” such that a new jurisdiction of form is “distilled” from the contingent and the heterogeneous. It has since become a truism that contingency and coincidence are logically bound to an order without which they would not be ascertainable in the first place. Druskin’s notes are equally caught in this double bind, even in terms of their own framing. As unsystematic, diary-style reflections sketched into impurity, they bear all the signs of spontaneous, unmethodological ad-hoc thinking. By drafting a law, however, these reflections *transform* the fragmentary into something that is no longer merely preliminary, accidental or unfinished, but rather necessary and immutable. Here, speculation speaks with the voice of legislation, and intellectual impromptu morphs into coordinated, statutory procedure.

The law that this voice articulates, however, appears to point beyond the dialectics of chance and order: the law of heterogeneity rejects abstract classification in order to introduce a different type of theory, one that is deeply indebted to the tactile. What makes this take on tactility in theory so compelling is its implicit impetus to rethink basic assumptions on the constitution of the theoretical. Even though glossary entries on ‘theory’ inevitably start with the etymological reference to the ancient *theoría* in the sense of “view,” “insight” or “mental vision,” we tend to forget (or overlook) the millennia-long “‘ocularity’ at least of the European history of knowledge and consciousness” (Konersmann & Wilson, 1995, p. 121) rooted in this twinning of theory and seeing. From Plato’s praise

of vision as the foundation of knowledge, indeed as the cause of man as a philosophical being, whose eyes enable him to “behold the revolutions of reason in the heaven and then use them for the revolvings of the reasoning that is within us, these being akin to those” (Plato, 1925, 47b), derives a “nobility of sight” (Jonas, 1954) that runs almost unchallenged through Western intellectual history. Blumenberg (1957) thus speaks of seeing as an absolute metaphor, which promises a total overview on unclear, uncharted terrain. Though philosophy and, later, optical science contribute some skepticism based on the existence of optical illusions and blind spots, still, knowledge and visuality enter into an inextricable bond. Theory as a “means of construction” that enables us to “summarize and control experience in uniform and synthetic manner” (Gadamer, 1960, p. 430), i.e. to operationalize it, is significantly based on the authority of a panoptical synopsis.

This epistemic enthronement of the eye also means ascribing a theoretical weakness or even an incapacity for theory to the other senses, especially the sense of touch. The ‘coarse’ sense of touch surfaces from time to time in reference to an experience of the real that “we can get our hands upon” (Mead, 1926, p. 382) only to recede again and give way to another “scopic regime” (Jay, 1988). Where, as in the law of heterogeneity, touch exceeds these limitations and defines not an inferior proxy to theory but its very idea, where the classic concept of theory as a systematic abstraction from physical entanglement is called into question—there, we gain access to an alternative theory. Druskin, however, does not advocate a return from noesis to imminent sensual perception, as has been postulated in the shift of the aesthetic to aesthesis. By no means is Druskin an emphatic theorist of the senses or the body—rather than clinging to the concrete, he steers clear of embracing the physical experience of a material world.

What, then, does theorizing on tactile terms mean? And how does it help to conceptualize chance? (Re)thinking theory through touch conceives of theory as a process that refuses dexterous possession to every approximation, instead opting for an inextricable entanglement with the object of our investigation. These entanglements do not form reliable ties, but include disturbance and resistance as paradoxical means to approach phenomena. From a sphere of conceptual command that strives for an axiomatically structured body of knowledge, theory thus turns into what we might call a contact zone. Pratt has proposed this term for situations, when seemingly uniform and coherent cultural or intellectual communities open up for translingual, intercultural diversity where “ideas and identities [are] put on the line” (Pratt, 1991, p. 39). Literary theory at the threshold of contingency and contiguity adapts this notion to conceive of theory as an intellectual space, where we witness unprecedented, spontaneous encounters between thoughts and things that are as intense as they are transient, prone to break up any time. In this sense, the law of heterogeneity is about developing a sensitivity to the contingencies of theory through the contiguities of touch. A thinker on the periphery of philosophical discourse Druskin proposes theory as a mode of tactical thinking that grasps through uncoupling and that facilitates our understanding where its fails to systematize our knowledge.

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