

RŪTA ŠLAPKAUSKAITĖ¹

Q: Literary history, be it national, local, or regional, is perhaps the most conservative form of literary study, with many claiming that the method is outmoded. What can literary histories do to overcome both the risk of obsolescence and their inherent conservatism?

A: Framed as it is, the question may be read as appealing to ideas about agency—personal, disciplinary, and institutional—in the appraisal of cultural forms as objects of critical scholarship, especially the study of literature. But the guiding assumption about the nature of literary history or histories, as simultaneously an endangered and a dominant academic species in critical humanities, is itself worthy of consideration. The convergence of our sense of the outdatedness of teaching and studying literary history, on the one hand, and its entrenchment in institutional practices, on the other, it seems to me, has a structure of the uncanny in that it captures the intellectual and affective resonance of our current moment at the same time as it throws us back to critiques of postmodern sensibility, with Jean-François Lyotard diagnosing the postmodern condition as a disillusionment with grand narratives, Fredric Jameson lamenting the “weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality” (1991, 6), and Francis Fukuyama declaring the end of history consequent upon the victory of liberal democracy over the Soviet totalitarian regime. Yet, as the twenty-first century unfolds into its third decade, a number of these observations recede into doubt, whether through the durability of intellectually reflexive forms of art, like the historical novel (think of Linda Hutcheon’s reasoning about historiographic metafiction), or modes of entertainment, like genre fictions and blockbuster movies and TV series, or newly emerging geopolitical horizons of precarity, like global warming, international terrorism, racial, social, and climate injustice, nuclear imperialism, and war. There’s a haunting feeling that we have seen this before and one wonders if history has come back as a farce or as Feste’s prophecy in *Twelfth Night* about “the whirligig of time” which “brings in his revenges” (5.1.374).

¹ Rūta ŠLAPKAUSKAITĖ is an Associate Professor of English literature at Vilnius University, Lithuania. Her research interests include Canadian and Australian literature, neo-Victorianism, and environmental humanities. Among her recent publications are “An Ecology of the Hewn in Susan Vreeland’s *The Forest Lover*” in a collective monograph *The Northern Forests* co-published by the University of Tartu and Montreal’s Imaginaire Nord, “The He(A)rt of the Witness: Remembering Australian Prisoners of War in Richard Flanagan’s *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*” in *Anglica: An International Journal of English Studies*, and “Precariousness, kinship and care: Becoming human in Clare Cameron’s *The Last Neanderthal*” in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. Email: ruta.slapkauskaite@flf.vu.lt.

In so far as the study of literary texts involves bringing to presence horizons that exceed the seemingly given and contemporary, reading and writing always engage with the temporality of aesthetic being realized through a hermeneutic performance of what in *Truth and Method* Hans-Georg Gadamer calls “a transformation into the true” (2012, 112). Seen this way, historical horizon is shown to inhere in the ontological structures of literature itself, submitting the temporal alienness of aesthetic forms as “a task for consciousness and an achievement that is demanded of it” (124), which guides interpretation into a merging of horizons as a premise of hermeneutic understanding. Literature, as Gadamer reminds us, exists not “as the dead remnant of alienated being, left over for a later time as simultaneous with its experiential reality”, but as “a function of being intellectually preserved and handed down” (154), which is to say as an act of signification originating in the past that solicits the interpretive attention of the present. From a hermeneutic perspective, then, making sense of literature “brings its hidden history into every age” (154), recasting contemporaneity as a grasp of the full presence of meaning embodied by the modes of being we call art.

At the heart of the hermeneutic conception of reading as an intersubjective experience, of course, is the notion of tradition, which reinscribes as intellectual proximity that which would otherwise remain a historical distance in the interpretive consciousness’ attempts to understand literature as “a historically effected event” (Gadamer 2012, 299). The dynamic nature of understanding in this reasoning reinforces the idea that tradition, rather than being “a permanent precondition” (293) or a cognitive monolith of critical orthodoxies, is “a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated” (291). History, in this trajectory of thought, bears both on the subjectivity of the interpreter and the subject matter of interpretation, entangled as they are in the hermeneutic circle of familiarity and strangeness. Arguably, what this means for the study of literary texts is that our aesthetic epistemologies must accommodate a sense of the past as “a positive and productive condition enabling understanding” (297) if we are to account for the hermeneutic situatedness of all of our interpretations.

But how do we account for our historical situatedness in the epoch of the Anthropocene and against its horizon of ecological disruptions? In narrower and more practical terms, how do we approach the institutional narratives of literary history, whose symbolic capital, as Christine L. Marran demonstrates in *Ecology Without Culture: Aesthetics for a Toxic World*, largely derives from erasing the historicity of the biotic world and employing culturally sanctioned biotopes “to perform human value” (2017, 11)? For Gadamer, “To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete” (2012, 301) and the ethical stakes of this epistemological open-endedness seem to rise ever higher with the ongoing increase in global environmental precarity. Given the multiscalar terms of reference the Anthropocene brings into operation, our historical

moment seems particularly mindful of literature's capacity to lay bare the "multivalent traffic between matter and ideas", which Jennifer Wenzel calls "the disposition of nature" (2020, 3), encompassing both how humans understand nature and how they make use of it. Attention to formal choices in discourse, Wenzel argues, can boost a mode of reflexivity that performs "reading for the planet" as "a dynamic process of rescaling" (2), which rethinks the alignments between literature, history, environmental activism, the climate system, and the whole planet. Inclined toward the angle of environmental humanities, the discourse of literary history, too, has the potential to put its epistemological incompleteness and institutional tenacity into the service of critical thinking that encourages and enables us to heed planetary imperatives and "stay with the trouble" (Haraway 2016).

This certainly seems to be Wai Chee Dimock's view in *Weak Planet: Literature and Assisted Survival*, where she observes that "Literary history has yet to be seen as a mediating network of this sort: imperfect and incessant. Seen that way, as a nonsovereign field weakly durable because continually crowdsourced, it offers one of the best examples of redress as an incremental process, never finished because never without new input" (2020, 7). The conceptual promise of this approach springs from Dimock's thinking about literary history's witnessing of vulnerability as a shared ontological condition, which not only rescales and decenters human historical experience, but also redistributes agency in the domain of authorship, where "it bears the imprint of the nonhuman as well as the human" (2020, 4), and institutional practice, where attentiveness to precarity can forge new ties of solidarity against the dominant ethos of utility, the tiredness of old models, and inherited structures of power. Read against the light of the *long durée*, as Dimock does in *Through Other Continents. American Literature Across Deep Time*, literature "throw[s] into relief trajectories and connections that might otherwise have been obscured" (2006, 4), with the *deep time* of the planet Earth closing in on the hubris of human sovereignty and calling for renewed commitments to the ethics of kinship and "collateral resilience" (2020, 12). "Faced with the impending catastrophes of the twenty-first century", Dimock's argument insists, "literature offers many options, including the counterintuitive one of going forward by reaching back, giving the present a prehistory, an archive notable for its granularity and depth" (2020, 6). Rather than entering the institutional dialectic of *obsolescence/conservatism*, then, perhaps a more viable and sustainable option for the discourse of literary history is to draw on the host of excellent work in the environmental humanities, like that of Kate Rigby, Simon Estok, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Steve Mentz, and Catriona Sandilands, to reinvigorate and recalibrate the very terms of intellectual engagement through which literary texts and cultural practices are situated in "an incremental lifeline" (Dimock 2020, 174) of the cultural ecology of risk, extinction, and persistence?

Q: *Literary histories are known for their preoccupation with identity. Canons are made or broken by them, ideologies are affirmed or restored, and writers are recovered or left out. As intellectual enterprises that hold a certain authority over a segment of culture, can they become a culture in and of themselves?*

A: I could begin with an unnecessary reiteration of the verdict of postcolonial criticism, which emphasizes the social constructedness of literary canons as sites of ideological conflicts, complicities, and contradictions, while also admitting to being fascinated by Harold Bloom's trust in the aesthetic transparency of canonicity as "a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange" (1994, 3). But I am more interested in how our thinking about canons furnishes troubling links to ideas about tradition and inheritance, especially as they figure in the context of institutional practices and their critiques. Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins*, a book-length study of the impact of neoliberal governance on university culture, and Sara Ahmed's *What's the Use?*, a more recent critical examination of utility and meritocracy in institutional life, provide some of the most thought-provoking insights that gauge my own ambivalence towards canon-making.

The crux of Readings' take on the *canon* pertains to how he distinguishes it from *tradition*, enveloping both categories in his arguments about the ongoing crisis of contemporary culture as "the immanent principle in terms of which knowledge within the University is organized" (1999, 87). In his account, the structuring force of the notion of the *canon* has a specifically American inflection, derived from the revolutionary ethos of a republican democracy, in whose eyes the hereditary weight of *tradition* casts into doubt the whole enterprise of democratic choice. Contrasting F.R. Leavis's emphasis on *tradition* in literary scholarship in the UK to the American New Critics' aversion to historicity and commitment to treating "the artwork as essentially autonomous, capable of evoking a response without extraneous information to guide interpretation" (1999, 84), Readings shows how the latter disposition gave rise "to arguments about the canon precisely because the canon is, in fact, the surreptitious smuggling of *historical* continuity into the study of supposedly discrete and autonomous artworks" (84). The appeal of the *canon* as opposed to *tradition*, the argument continues, rides on its link to the will of the people, who are posited as the ultimate agents of culture to be studied, cultivated, and inculcated as a vehicle of "a national cultural identity" (85). However, under the aegis of neoliberal governance, which promotes the corporate image of what Readings calls the University of Excellence over the Enlightenment legacy of the University of Culture, the notion of the *canon* can lay claims neither to the unifying idea of the

nation-state nor to a coherence of cultural instruction nor to the metonymic promise of their aesthetic effects. Culture itself, for Readings, has lost its meaning and become “dereferentialized” (99). Conceived as a market site of simultaneous production of knowledge and delivery of services, the University of Excellence—which sadly is the academic home for most of us—dispenses with the social contract that used to bind educational institutions to individual passage through time and intellectual thought and instead masquerades “efficient knowledge” (163) as thought, erasing in the process the ethical pull of reciprocity that binds the university’s administrators, academics, and students in a network of mutual obligations and accountability. I cannot help but echo Readings’ poignant observation that in a university which operates as a transnational corporation the culture wars and revisions of canons are but a bureaucratic technique of sidetracking our attention away from the breakdown of culture’s internal relations and communicational circuits to the discursive proliferation of “efficient knowledge” (163), in which literature competes with all the other forms of cultural production. Keyed to the logic of market economy, what relevance, other than instrumental, can the idea of the *canon* or *tradition* have for the study of literature?

The crisis of the function of the canon Readings highlighted in American academic culture in the 1990s, unfortunately, remains a symptom of the recalcitrance of the utilitarian calculus by virtue of which universities today continue to promote “education for profit-making” rather than “education for a more inclusive type of citizenship” (Nussbaum 2010, 7), replacing the civic notion of the common good, which relies on thinking as a social practice, with a market ideal of knowledge production, which steers academic performance towards “maximizing the welfare of consumers” (Sandel 2021, 227). The critical reflections of Martha Nussbaum and Michael Sandel, both of whom I cite to support Readings’ reasoning, bring us back to the issue of values at the basis not only of our thinking about the formation of literary canons and traditions, but also about the conceptual scope of democratic culture and the work we expect it to carry out. Nussbaum’s defense of the usefulness of a humanities education makes a good point in arguing that “Citizens cannot relate well to the complex world around them by factual knowledge and logic alone” (2010, 95). But if literary canons and traditions are to be conceived only as institutional knowledge hinging on the reproduction of inherited forms and practices, then it is hardly surprising that they end up transmitting the ethos of utility disguised as the imperative of excellence. Sara Ahmed’s critical examination of utility as university policy offers some remarkably profound insights into the conceptual contradictions of meritocracy as a principle of social justice. An important part of her argument stems from observing the ways in which the idea of use follows

a circular logic, whereby what is in use in institutional settings gets conflated and confused with what is or may be useful, so that attempts at revision and diversification amount to commodification and/or repetitive strains of “wall work”, which is to say “scratching the surface; scratching at the surface” of institutional screens (Ahmed 2019, 151) that reinstate the “gap between what is given expression as intention and what is being done” (148). Ahmed’s term for such masquerade of axiological praxis is “nonperformativity” (153), a structure of in/activity employed to foreclose expected effects, which also ensures the alignment of use/fulness with the usual, resulting in a metalepsis of use as inheritance to be passed on as an institutional norm and injunction. For as the scholar deftly observes, “An inheritance not only can be *what* you receive but can be a matter of *how* you are received” (165).

Lest we think that concerns over the cultural work of inheritance as a practice of alienation stay within the ambit of social representation in university contexts, Ahmed also troubles the conception of discursive tradition as a mode of inheritance enacted through the use of “citational paths” (2019, 168), which summon up the referential system of competence at the same time as they reproduce the silences that police the boundaries of academic excellence. Tethered to a strong view of the canon or tradition as a regime of value that preserves the *status quo*, studying literature foregoes any possibility of critical intervention on terms other than those procured through the well-trodden tracks of “institutional funneling” (185). Seen this way, the weight of inheritance becomes a gift of power, citational as much as social: “To be trained within a discipline is to learn to follow a citational path: certain work does not have to be regarded because it does not come into view if you follow a path, which means work can be discarded without deliberation” (168). To be sure, Ahmed is not arguing against the practice of citing, which is pivotal to the ethical sharing of research, but in calling attention to the normative bias of citational paths, she demonstrates how institutions function as “container technologies”, “a way of holding things or holding onto things” (170), where inherited structures and habits institute restrictions that shape both the subjectivities confronting them and the work they elicit. In a utilitarian conception of education, such restrictions speak the language of meritocracy, all the while keeping from view the system’s use of selection as a mode of assistance given only to those who fit the inherited requirements. Consequently, in discourse as in institutional life, not to follow the well-trodden path is to become a misfit: “The more we use the more used terms, the more we are aligned; we are going the same way others are going. If you tried to deviate, to change direction, you would get in the way of other people’s motions” (195).

Is there a way to counteract institutional resistance to change and the corporate hijacking of revisionary impulse? In Ahmed's view, "To build an alternative university requires crafting different routes from what is behind us: the fainter trails, the less used paths...it takes willed work not to reproduce an inheritance, not to create the same old shape" (2019, 196). In Readings' terms, it calls for the cultivation of an ethics of "dissensus" (1999, 187), whose communal dynamics derive from reciprocal obligations "that we cannot finally understand" (188) rather than any position of social authority. Perhaps thinking of canons as weak epistemologies, provisionally *weak canons*, is one way in which literary scholarship could galvanize the stretching and puncturing of institutional walls that systematize thought as disciplinary enclosures and manage subjectivities which are given access to the inner sanctum? Could a *weak canon*, organized around the principle of contingency and continuous correction, do more justice to the fallacies of cultural memory as well as institutional constraints and recover some of Readings' vision of a symbiosis of culture and canon as endlessly open to revision and committed to ethical growth?

Q: For literary histories, literary periods are, first and foremost, instruments of contrast and vehicles of legitimization. Oftentimes, periodization speaks more of literary historiography's status anxiety and disciplinary autonomy than of their function in describing and investigating literary histories. Does periodization still matter beyond preserving the authority of periodization itself?

A: The writer Elias Canetti has once observed that the human preoccupation with chronology traces the mobility of their desire, wherein the "recurrence of the days, whose names they are conscious of, gives them security" (1979, 43). This is one way of saying, I suppose, that however limiting in their conceptual work, the categories on which we rely in the ordering of life and experience are indispensable to our efforts to understand the world and our place in it. In this respect, periodization in literary history is no exception. This is not to say that it should not be seen as problematic. The tendency of chronological brackets to collapse into each other, together with the mercurial character of such designations as neoclassical, Baroque, Augustan, or early modern, are symptomatic of the logic of metalepsis that runs through the inventory of historical categories, making them prone to revisions of dominant narratives of literary history. Yet there is a value to periodization in terms of how it helps us structure the cumulative process of change, particularly as it draws parallels between geology and social history, making it possible for humanities scholars to align the accretion and erosion of meaning with the larger uncertainties of planetary order.

Dimock's work in *Through Other Continents* and Tobias Menely's *Climate and the Making of Worlds* are good examples of the recent attempts in critical humanities to move beyond the vernacular understanding of periodization into an analytical praxis which connects discursive formations to "the planet's multitudinous life" (Dimock 2006, 3). For Dimock, the lack of categorical rigour in the term *genre*, especially, offers a means to remap the domain of literature as "a phenomenal field of contextually induced parallels" (74), where aesthetic forms are linked through kinship rather than lineage, reconstituting literary history as "a fractal model of looping: a model of recursive kinship" (86), with "coils of words" bearing the weight of the "coils of time" (92) in the interactive fabric of signs, scales, conventions, and their transformations. Built on the model of "fractal geometry", which "spills over onto several scales at once" (75), this architecture of poetic filiations effectively puts periodization in abeyance, highlighting the incompleteness of historical paradigms and the "animating hybridity" of "the classifying process itself" (91). The loops and layers of kinship that keep the cartography of meaning amenable to ever new threads of connection are commensurate with the principle of change. As Dimock points out, "That is why literature has a *history* to begin with. This history is not the story of a single genre, and can never be told using only one. Nor can it can [*sic*] be told as the story of a single language, a single chronology, a single territorial jurisdiction, for it is the scattering and mixing of genres that make literary history an exemplary instance of human history, which is to say, multipath, multiloci, multilingual" (91).

Menely's reading of seventeenth - and eighteenth-century English poetry through the lens of what he calls "the climatological unconscious" (2021, 3) is a similar conceptual push against "the inadequacy of received forms of inquiry" (1) in the epoch of the Anthropocene, itself a contentious term of periodization. Pressed up against the unfolding planetary catastrophe, his interpretations single out poetry as a site of energy transactions between micro-ecologies of private imaginations and macro-ecologies of the Earth system, which nourish the poetic register of geohistorical worldmaking. For Menely, "Poetry offers an archive of geohistory because poems formalize the activity of making as a transformative redirection of planetary energy" (15). The sense of periodization is key to this conception of geohistorical poetics because the poems studied in *Climate and the Making of Worlds* are anchored in "a particular phase of planetary history, the latter half of the Little Ice Age" (6), whose impact on social infrastructures accelerated the growth of industrialization, merchant capitalism, and imperial expansion as structural solutions to climate anxiety. Importantly, however, rather than seeing literary history as "simply 'embedded in specific historical occasions'", Menely recognizes all poetic work as a stratified

composition of time's pressures, "an archive of endurance and incipience" (16). Against the idea of periodization as a logic of disruption and departure Menely measures the principle of sedimentation, whereby "[a]ny text preserves, revitalizes, and refigures symbolic material inherited from earlier phases of history in its weave of allusions and generic affiliations [...]" (16). The ethical upshot of this reasoning recalls Steve Mentz's use of composture as an ecological metaphor for the logic of recycling organizing the volatility of cultural forms: "This vision imagines history as a comingling and fecund process, a fertilizing combination of the living and the dead. History as we encounter it in texts and representations is shot through with multiple temporalities" (2015, x). It is this alluvial flow of time into which Canetti taps when he thinks about the interlocking structures of literary history: "It is certain that nothing comes about without great paragons. But their works are also paralyzing: the deeper one grasps them, i.e. the more gifted one is, the more convinced one becomes that they are not to be reached. Experience, however, proves the opposite. Modern literature came into being *despite* the overwhelming model of Antiquity" (1979, 51).

I am not using this as an argument against periodization in literary history; my modest hope is only to call attention to the conceptual and creative possibilities, as made manifest in the instances I have touched upon, of expanding chronology to include the nonhuman experience of time in the frame of planetary enmeshment. Thinking of periodization as sedimented "routes of transit" (Dimock 2006, 3) may bring a stronger awareness of our institutional orthodoxies that cast literature as a domain of human sovereignty rather than "the home of nonstandard space and time" that it is (4).

Q: How is contemporaneity, as a historiographic milestone, negotiated in a global context?

A: As a literary scholar who has recently turned to the field of environmental humanities, my instinct is to think of our historical moment as a violent collision of referential points, a kind of metaleptic implosion, where our understanding of social processes must take into consideration the multiple scales of human entanglement in the nonhuman environment and its consequences for the planet. For example, the geopolitical implications of the war in Ukraine, which presses into being the volatility of precarity as contemporaneity's material and political condition, exceed the social and political domain, plummeting the whole world into an energy crisis that demands transnational ecological solutions incompatible with the current imperatives of corporate globalization and neoliberal economy. Yet the media coverage of the war hardly cares to

examine the complex, often invisible, links between the destruction and abuse of human life, state institutions, social relations, and the hazardous impact the war has on the nonhuman environment by way of production of waste, toxicity, contamination, and other forms of fast annihilation and “slow violence” (Nixon 2011). In this respect, the short-term solutions adopted by most Western democracies, old and new, with the emphasis placed on salvaging the economic order, seem to reinforce Wendy Brown’s incisive observations about the ascendancy of neoliberal rationality, which “disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities – even where money is not at issue – and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*” (2015, 31).

Part of the consequence of the incursion of war into the democratic imaginary of twenty-first-century Europe has to do with casting in relief the limitations of both our conceptual vocabularies and practical strategies in negotiating the relation between the *planetary* and the *global*. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s theorizing of how this tension bears on the current climate predicament strikes me as particularly resonant. In weighing in on the breakdown, caused by anthropogenic climate change, of the long-held epistemological separation of human and natural history, his essay “The Climate of History: Four Theses” alerts us to the material-semiotic interlocking of *deep* and *shallow* time, the *planetary* and the *global*, in a way that “appeals to our sense of human universals while challenging at the same time our capacity for historical understanding” (2009, 201). Resisting the temptation to dichotomize, which aligns the *global* with the human-made and human-centric and the *planetary* with that which exceeds the human and refers to the geobiological history of the Earth system, Chakrabarty shows us how both categories operate as human constructs, whose onto-epistemic relationality in the fold of the Anthropocene impels us to look for new forms of attention and action. The planet, in his reasoning, emerges from globalization, where the more we use the environment for power and profit the more we encounter the perspective of the deep history of the Earth. As Chakrabarty puts it, “The geologic now of the Anthropocene has become entangled with the now of human history” (2009, 212). This intersectional dialectic recalls Gayatri Spivak’s point about how the human position *vis à vis* the planet must concede an impasse wherein alterity constitutes subjectivity from within as much as from without: “The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. It allows us to think that we can aim to control it. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan” (Spivak 2003, 72).

From an environmental humanities’ point of view, our perception of the planet’s alterity has as many implications for critical thought as for political

praxis, magnifying as it does the moral dilemmas of social and environmental crises as parochially and provincially human. Stranded on the cusp between the *global* and the *planetary*, as Chakrabarty shows, human geological agency does not square easily with their political agency, raising difficult questions about the material dissemination of the effects of global warming and the global distribution of the responsibility for it, especially if we agree that the Anthropocene “has been an unintended consequence of human choices” (Chakrabarty 2009, 210), a calamity we “have stumbled into...through industrial civilization” (217). What the ethical contingencies in Chakrabarty’s Anthropocene historiography bring to surface, I would argue, is the concatenation of the crises in global politics, planetary wellbeing, and human subjectivity, all scaled up to the demands of a phenomenology that keys the politics of war and peace to the environmental dialectic of extinction and survival. The human stakes of this conceptualization are raised through “species thinking” (213), an onto-epistemic structure through which the essay problematizes the implications of the ideas of singularity and universality for our understanding of human social activity and “the general history of life” (219). At issue here is the differential nature of personhood, which Chakrabarty finds inhospitable to the experience of biological universality. The observation merits a lengthier quote: “We humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such. There could be no phenomenology of us as a species. Even if we were to emotionally identify with a word like *mankind*, we would not know what being a species is, for, in species history, humans are only an instance of the concept species as indeed would be any other life form. But one never experiences being a concept” (220). This is a profound, though potentially problematic, insight, which deserves a more thorough analysis than the one I can give it here. For one thing, its emphasis on partiality recalls the critical consensus in environmental humanities on how the climate emergency manifests itself through different and geographically dispersed effects so that we do not experience it as a unitary phenomenon, but only as synecdochic traces of the time out of joint. On the more hopeful side of the argument, however, I locate the recent surge of the literary imagination that has brought into being a spate of Anthropocene fictions (e.g. Laura Jean McKay’s *The Animals in That Country*) and poetry (e.g. Adam Dickinson’s *Anatomic*), cli-fi novels (e.g. Diane Cook’s *The New Wilderness*), the aesthetics of the new weird (Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation*), eco-comedy (e.g. Will Self’s *The Book of Dave*), comics (e.g. Vincent Perriot’s *Negalyod*), fantasy (e.g. N.K. Jemisin’s *The Broken Earth* trilogy), and horror, all of which intensify the significance of the ongoing critical debate over the *global* and the *planetary*. Political praxis is yet to catch up with the commitments of critical thought, but I hope it is not beyond possibility.

Q: How do you comment on the legitimacy of literary histories written by a single author? Should literary histories become the domain of research collectives?

A: This seems to me a question that is both straightforward and complex at the same time. Or perhaps it calls for both types of answer. In straightforward terms, I read it as an issue of authorial freedom and agency, in which case placing any constraints on or injunctions against single authorship of literary history invokes a disciplinary measure that oversteps the mandate of the very discipline of literary history which the writing subject interiorizes and conveys through its writing. Rejecting the legitimacy of literary histories written by a single author would sideline the institutional and social complexity of authorship expertly examined in Michel Foucault's essay "What is an Author?" in favour of a less nuanced, possibly more naïve, conception of subjectivity as incapable of stepping outside of individual cognitive space and taking stock of the historical forces that shaped different cultural imaginaries. But why should we think that historiographic accounts like Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands*, Margaret MacMillan's *War*, or Niall Ferguson's *Doom*, all penned by single authors, are more reliable hermeneutic efforts than anything written by a literary historian? Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*, to rehearse my earlier example, cross-hatches a range of historical contexts and subjective views as it traces the formation of the idea of the canon in Western literature, but its single authorship does not lessen the book's scholarly insight and cultural gravitas, does it? Peter Ackroyd's ambition in *Albion* to sail through the seas of the English literary imagination is similarly vast, yet no less legitimate, or indeed admirable, for being guided by a single steersman.

The more complex angle of answering this question involves thinking about writing literary history as archival work, on account of which the act and event of writing become subject to ethical judgment and responsibility not shared by the writers of fiction. Jacques Derrida's theorizing about the archive guides my own thinking about the nature and scope of this analytical work that aims to stage meaning as a dialogue between the past and the present. A key idea I borrow from his essay "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression" is the notion of the archive as an impasse of memory conceived through the material consignment, preservation, and interpretation of the past in the broadest sense. In this conception of the archive as "the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory" (Derrida 1995, 14), the archons, those responsible for archival work, are granted hermeneutic responsibility not only to save memory from (self)destruction, but also to engage in explanation, commentary, and other forms of repetition, which make the archive paradoxically both "hypomnesic"

and “archiviolithic” (14). Writers of literary history, I would argue, are likewise exposed to this “archive fever” (14), in whose wake they acquire hermeneutic authority through the distributed agency of mnemonic traces and voices, presences and absences, which extend the boundaries of individual horizons towards the cultural experiences of other times and places. In so far as the phenomenon of language testifies to our apprehension that the human subject never coincides with itself, I do not see any particular reason to grant epistemic or moral privilege to multiple over single authorship in the discourse of literary history. Availability of multiple options, it seems to me, is not only a democratic principle of civic responsibility, but also a hermeneutic safeguard against *le mal d’archive*, which turns memory work against itself in all feats of interpretation, whether multi- or single-authored.

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