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Thomas Constantinesco

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“What Help from Thought?”: American Literary Criticism in a Time of Pandemic

Thomas Constantinesco

Sorbonne Université

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As I write this contribution to this *ALH* forum in the spring of 2020, the world is facing the pandemic of coronavirus Covid-19, one of the most challenging global health crisis in recent history. For a few months, while countries have gone into lockdown one after the other, before beginning to ease restrictions in an equally uncoordinated fashion amidst fears of a second wave of infections, life has come to a relative standstill, initially bringing with it, at least for me, an uneasy sense of both numbness and urgency about what role literature and literary criticism might have to play in such a time of crisis. “Crisis is a Hair,” Emily Dickinson writes,

Toward which the forces creep

Past which forces retrograde

If it come in sleep

To suspend the Breath

Is the most we can

Ignorant is it Life or Death

Nicely balancing. (F1067)

But is to “suspend the Breath” indeed “the most we can,” as literary scholars, in a time of crisis? Is literature merely the record of our helplessness in the face of the unfolding of history and the unravelling of the world ?

Although initially resonant in this respect, while time itself seemed to suspend during the first weeks of the pandemic, Dickinson’s antiphrastically “[i]gnorant” claim also speaks to the poem’s knowledge of a provisional and precarious “balancing” between past and future, brought about by the confrontation between “Life” and “Death” which “Crisis” consists in—a “balancing” which threatens to turn into a toppling at any moment and which literature registers and criticism arguably seeks to account for. In this view, the function of literary criticism is none other than to read the “great variety of morbid symptoms” which, as Gramsci famously observed, appear during the crisis’ “interregnum,” while “the old is dying and the new cannot be born” (*Selections* 276). Despite recent calls to move beyond symptomatic readings in the field of literary studies, literary history reminds us forcefully at this particular historical juncture, as pleas for a “new normal” vie with pressures to go back to “business as usual,” that it does offer a rich archive of such moments of crisis, where signs and figures are seen “Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born,” as Matthew Arnold put it in 1855 in “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse” (301), a decade before he published his landmark meditation on “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time.” Whereas some texts surely are successful at grasping “the auspicious signs of the coming days[] as they glimmer already” in the present (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 68) or the fateful tokens of a world on the brink of collapse, literary historians however flesh out after the fact the diagnosis that these texts make, and almost inevitably so, once history has indeed unfolded,

in a belated recognition of the potential of literature to illuminate its own time (e.g., Pétilion). The gap, in this account, between literature's timeliness and the historical hindsight that underwrites criticism foregrounds more generally the fraught question of the relation between literature, criticism, and the times, between the literary past and the critical present, which the pandemic compels me, as a nineteenth-century Americanist, to reconsider with renewed urgency. By doing so, the crisis may be seen to fashion its own critical model, as one in which it is the function of criticism to respond to the exigencies of the times and to meet the fast pace of our constantly changing circumstances—even when those seem for a while to elongate and suspend time—in order to reflect on, and emphasize, the resonance and the relevance of literary history in the present.

This model of literature's and criticism's timely relevance intervenes in two conversations animating literary studies for a long time. One pits presentist against historicist conceptions of literature and literary criticism; the other wonders whether and how literature can be made to matter, both within and outside the academy. The terms of the first debate are by now familiar. *Annales* historian Marc Bloch offered a standard version of the presentist side of the argument in the opening pages of *Strange Defeat* (1946), his account of the French army's debacle during the Battle of France in 1940 and a text which has enjoyed renewed currency in France during the pandemic for its diagnosis of the state's failure to prepare adequately for a shattering crisis. "[W]e can truly understand the past," Bloch wrote, "only if we read it by the light of the present" (2). Historicist-minded critics on the other hand usually discard such presentist approaches as, in fact, unhistorical and reductionist, taking exception to their "naïve tendency . . . to read their own period's assumptions and values into the texts and events of the past" (Insko 2019, 14). By contrast, historicism customarily deploys a discourse of otherness between past and present, out of a proclaimed respect to the past's utter difference from the present. As L. P. Hartley memorably remarked in the opening to *The Go-Between* (1953): "The

past is a foreign country; they do things differently there” (5). Yet this ethics of difference remains subtended by a position of intellectual superiority, whereby present readers consider themselves better equipped than their historical counterparts to uncover the uniqueness of the past and pierce its unspeakable secrets. Interestingly, however, this superiority complex is something that historicists share with presentists who, following “a Whiggish sense” of history, also posit that “the anxieties of the past” have largely remained obscure to those who experienced them, but can be helpfully illuminated by the concerns of the present (Hutner, “The Pleasure of the Past in the Present” 10). Historicism and presentism thus come across as the two sides of the same critical coin: both claim, albeit for different purposes, that we read the past from the present, whether the reading produced ultimately heightens or elides the difference between past and present. One of the functions of literary criticism in this regard may well be to imagine ways of “[n]icely balancing,” per Dickinson, these two extremes, between the presumption of the past’s distinctiveness and its indistinguishable collapse with the present, and to recognize the dialectics of distance and proximity that inescapably underscores our readerly relation to literary history.

From this perspective, both the somewhat naïve presentism that criticism ought to eschew and the more refined presentism that haunts historicism are also symptomatic of a deeper desire: that literary criticism and literature in general continue to matter in our time. The complex of critical superiority vis-à-vis past texts therefore appears to be underwritten by its contrary: a complex of disciplinary inferiority, a dogging anxiety that literature and literary criticism be condemned as irrelevant. From Rita Felski’s *Uses of Literature* (2008), to Italo Calvino’s 1986 book by the same title, back to Emerson asking about “the right use” of books in his 1837 address “The American Scholar” (57), the inextricable issues of the uses of literature and the functions of criticism have been central to the field of literary studies, as it “had to grapple with questions of legitimation” (Fluck, “Shadow Aesthetics” 11). In “Experience”

(1844), Emerson himself ventriloquizes the classic charge that criticism is of no practical use, which the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic confronts me with in turn: “But what help from these fineries or pedantries?” he asks. “What help from thought? Life is not dialectics. We, I think, in these times, have had lessons enough of the futility of criticism” (478). In the wake of the New Historicist turn, discussions of the relevance of literature and literary criticism have often wagered on the politics of literary texts as providing a critique of a world increasingly driven by the forces of capitalist exploitation while modeling alternative forms of commonality, in an effort to claim thinking and writing as a ways of acting, *pace* Emerson, then, for whom “[o]ur young people have thought and written much on labor and reform, and for all that they have written, neither the world nor themselves have got on a step” (“Experience” 478). It is the case, though, that Emerson’s own disavowal of thinking as ineffective is complicated, if not altogether challenged, by the essay’s assertion of its own thinking procedures and its foregrounding of the community that this thinking produces (“We, I think”). Yet the kind of accusation that “Experience” voices in the first place has continued to find its way into academic discourse to this day. In one of the latest rejoinders to date, Victorian scholars Elaine Freedgood and Michael Sanders remark sardonically that: “We will not defeat neoliberalism with literary theory” (“Response” 118)—nor will we, I may add, defeat a pandemic, but it is surely not the issue and literary criticism might nonetheless provide useful interpretive procedures to understand, and maybe conceptual tools to resist, some of the more dire social and political consequences of the economic, environmental, and health crises we live through. Challenging however the relevance of relevance as the index of scholarly endeavor, Freedgood and Sanders also note, more pointedly perhaps, that it is “never value-free” (“Response” 118), and thus never entirely divorced from the logic of capitalism that it seeks to expose. In a similar vein, Elisa Tamarkin helpfully problematizes the notion of relevance as, on the one hand, implicitly tied to notions of utility and marketability and, on the other hand, as being a function

of timeliness and immediate interest (“Reading for Relevance”). The dual meaning of currency, as indexing the course of time and the circulation of money, contemporaneity and profitability, speaks powerfully to the contradictory measure of literature’s relevance, which aims to defy, but simultaneously reinscribes, the laws of the marketplace.

In a related attempt to reclaim “critical theory in dark times” from the accusation of irrelevance, Wendy Brown gives the idea of relevance a further turn of the screw by theorizing it provocatively not as “punctuality” but as “untimeliness.” Noting that from Arendt to Brecht and back to ancient Greece, the notion that we live in “dark times” has been a recurrent one, she observes that the phrase names “an experience of darkness . . . rife with diabolical forces that can neither be mastered or comprehended, forces that frighten as they spook and heighten a felt impotence,” leaving us “disoriented, frightened, and stumbling in the dark” (“Untimeliness and Punctuality” 9–10). Writing in 2005, Brown identifies “terrorism” and “empire” as the main causes of the specific darkness of our contemporary times, yet her description is equally fitting for the complex sense of panic, confusion, numbness and anxiety that the pandemic of Covid-19 has elicited. She further argues that what makes critical theory necessary and necessarily untimely is precisely the imperative to resist the dominant conception of time-as-fear that the times and their frightful specters would impose upon us:

To insist on the value of untimely political critique is not, then, to refuse the problem of time or timing in politics but rather to contest settled accounts of what time it is, what the times are, and what political tempo and temporality we should hew to in political life. Untimeliness deployed as an effective intellectual and political strategy, far from being a gesture of indifference to time, is a bid to reset time. Intellectual and political strategies of successful untimeliness therefore depend on a close engagement with time

in every sense of the word. They are concerned with timing and tempo. They involve efforts to grasp the times by thinking against the times. (4)

The idea that we ought to “grasp the times by thinking against the times,” which Brown formulates through Nietzsche and Benjamin, resonates with Giorgio Agamben’s own theorizing of contemporaneity as untimeliness, which he draws from Roland Barthes’s reading of Nietzsche. “Contemporariness,” Agamben writes, “is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism.*” And he concludes with the paradox that: “Those who are truly contemporary . . . are thus in this sense irrelevant” (“What Is the Contemporary?” 11).

The dialectics which consists in conceiving of criticism—literary and otherwise—as relevant because it is irrelevant, and therefore as constituting a form not of inaction but of paramount action, is one that, as I argue elsewhere (“*The Dial*”), Emerson and his fellow Transcendentalists repeatedly mobilized. In a journal entry of 1847, for instance, Emerson dismissed the imperative of “centrality,” or relevance, and claimed “irrelevant” and “impertinent” reading as offering fruitful vistas on “the hour that passes” (*JMN* 10: 34–5). In “Self-Reliance,” he further equated living “in the present” to living “above time” (270). Rather than a flight from history, as has often been argued, the insistence on living “above time” actually registers—or so the critical consensus now goes—“an ability to live . . . fully in the present tense” (Guthrie 93; see also Allen 186–216; Insko 2019, 93–126). Yet this ability remains predicated on a paradox, as well as on an important tropological shift, whereby the relation of the individual to the present is conceived spatially rather than temporally, and specifically in terms of spatial distance. To live fully in the present thus means to be at a remove from it and only the true contemporary is able to discern and inhabit this gap within time itself. For Emerson—as for Agamben for that matter—this singular ability is the preserve of the poets.

They are the true contemporaries, for their powers of vision and expression enable them to see and say what others cannot. They deserve therefore a better mode of criticism than the one they are routinely subjected to:

Criticism is infested with a cant of materialism, which assumes that manual skill and activity is the first merit of all men, and disparages such as say and do not, overlooking the fact that some men, namely poets, are natural sayers, sent into the world to the end of expression, and confounds them with those whose province is action but who quit it to imitate the sayers. (“The Poet” 449)

Sublating his Transcendentalism as in fact a superior form of materialism, Emerson denounces the blind spot of traditional criticism, which mischaracterizes both sayers and doers and “confounds” the ones with the others, all the while offering a reinvigorated “legitimation” of both poetry and criticism as more authentic forms of social and political work (“The Poet” 459). Readings of this sort have certainly helped to recover the political force that drives Emerson’s philosophy and to redeem him from the charge of inaction. They have also helped, by the same token, to warrant the relevance of many of our politicized readings of his works, and of nineteenth-century American literature more generally (e.g., Castronovo and Nelson).

This kind of critical apparatus, where the function of criticism is to extract from literary texts a critical politics that eventually speaks both to these texts’ historical context and to their readers’ present circumstances, has been put to productive use from the very beginning of the pandemic of Covid-19, as had been the case following the high point of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Wald, Tomes, and Lynch 2002). Building on advances in the field of medical humanities, Sari Altschuler and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon for instance have put together from the start of the pandemic a collaborative “Humanities Coronavirus Syllabus” with

a view to “help us think and teach about contagion, global health, and community in a time of social distancing and fear” (1). The reading list includes, for the US in the long nineteenth century, novels and tales by Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, or Jack London—about smallpox, yellow fever, cholera, and plague outbreaks or the wearing of masks in the public space—along with critical studies demonstrating the longstanding entanglement of health and politics, as well as race, gender, and class, and exploring the narratives, characters, and tropes that have emerged and circulated in relation to the spread of infectious diseases (e.g., Otis 2000; Wald 2008).

Other resonant possibilities from the nineteenth-century literary archive would include Louisa May Alcott’s *Hospital Sketches* (1863) and its grim satire of “Hurly-burly” hospital during the Civil War, where “disorder” (72), contagion, patient prioritization, and death on the ward are the sad norm amidst acts of medical and nursing heroism, or Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), in which the trope of slavery as a “poisonous” disease (53) and the space and the figure of the “loophole of retreat” (91–94) help to put both the racial politics of health and life under lockdown into perspective. Another possibility still, though perhaps more oblique—or irrelevantly relevant—would be Emerson’s 1851 “‘Address to the Citizens of Concord’ on the Fugitive Slave Law,” at the start of which he declared:

We do not breathe well. There is infamy in the air. I have a new experience. I wake in the morning with a painful sensation, which I carry about all day, and which, when traced home, is the odious remembrance of that ignominy which has fallen on Massachusetts, which robs the landscape of beauty, and takes the sunshine out of every hour. I have lived all my life in this State, and never had any experience of personal inconvenience from the laws, until now. They never came near me to my discomfort before. I find the like sensibility in my neighbors. And in that class who take no interest

in the ordinary questions of party politics. There are men who are as sure indexes of the equity of legislation and of the sane state of public feeling, as the barometer is of the weight of the air; and it is a bad sign when these are discontented. For, though they snuff oppression and dishonor at a distance, it is because they are more impressionable: the whole population will in a short time be as painfully affected. (54–5)

What remains for Emerson a metaphor, however embodied—slavery troped as contamination—may read, for those who have experienced the pandemic of Covid-19 as well as other epidemics, as a literal description. Figured as malaria, the bad air of slavery is no longer circumscribed to the swamps of the Southern US plantation world: it has reached the heart of Massachusetts and now threatens to affect or infect the nation’s whole population” with its “painful sensation.” Yet that model of contamination actually reads both ways for Emerson: as a looming threat but also as a promise of empowerment. Describing the horrors and the pain of slavery in 1844, on the occasion of the anniversary of the emancipation of slaves in the British West Indies, he concluded: “Well, so it happened; a good man or woman, a country-boy or girl, it would so fall out, once in a while saw these injuries, and had the indiscretion to tell on them. The horrid story ran and flew; the winds blew it all over the world.” (“An Address” 10) In this instance, airborne contamination by word of mouth turns into virtuous and global contagion rather than deadly infection, as the “horrid story” touches those who hear it and transforms them, through the operations of sympathetic exchange, into full-blown abolitionists and activists. The germs of slavery can thus potentially become their own cure and their circulation “all over the world,” though an “infamy” and an “ignominy,” is also a boon, insofar as it fuels the cause of abolition.

Rather than to “suspend the Breath” in a time of crisis, as Dickinson seems to recommend (F1067), Emerson emphasizes what Cynthia Davis has called “the utopian

possibilities of contagion” (“Contagion as Metaphor” 831) and invites us to breathe in the blowing “winds” of history and change, all the while warning us of the dangers of the bad air of slavery. Emerson’s entanglement of contagion and race, as well as his insistence on the viral power of words and stories, sound an unexpectedly compelling echo as the unfolding of the pandemic of Covid-19 intersects with the wave of demonstrations across the Western world in the wake of the death of African American George Floyd during a police arrest in Minneapolis in May 2020. In the space of a few weeks, the world has moved from panic following the outbreak of the epidemic to paralysis under lockdown life, to civil unrest in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Tragically and soberingly fast-changing circumstances indeed, yet ones with which American literature continues to resonate for us, as it captures the “air” or the atmosphere of history and equips us with models to take it in, while “balancing,” as Dickinson would say, the risks but also the potentialities of our exposure. Such is, I believe, the (un)timely relevance of American literature and American literary criticism at the present time.

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