

The Future(s) of Literature?

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What are we enquiring about when we ask about the future of literature? What do we mean by the *future* of literature?

We are asking about how literature might be otherwise than it is now. But more than this, the question concerns how literature might *in the future* be otherwise than it is now. This is not the same as asking about how literature might be elsewhere, in other contemporary cultures, nor even how literature was or might have been in the past. The implicit claim is that in the future literature might be—or might have to be, if it is to survive—different in a distinct and unprecedented way. What might lead us to think that the future is a category that is unique in this regard, i.e. that it is the crucible in which and out of which a distinctly radical form of transformation might happen? Well, change is always temporal, but saying this doesn't get us very far—we could, in this regard, just as well ask about the history of literature as the future of literature. The future, though, is unknowable in a way that the contemporary and the past isn't. Even if we accede to the idea that there are inevitable epistemological constraints on our knowledge of the present and past, we would have to concede that the future is unknowable in a special way. However, if the future was indeed radically indeterminate—utterly unknowable—speculating on the future of literature would be pointless—at best a diverting but unedifying indulgence, the stuff of fantasy and daydreams. So we do have expectations, hopes and fears about the future and we have ideas about how the cultures that

we are concerned with (literary and otherwise) are currently moving forward towards, or realising, the future.

But let us be clear about what we mean by ‘future’ in this context. We are not trying to anticipate the status of literature (or anything else) a million years from now, nor ten thousand years from now, nor a thousand years from now, nor five hundred years from now, nor, I would say, a hundred years from now—on the evidence of the last hundred years we wouldn’t want to be so presumptuous. All of these futures—to a greater or lesser degree—are so remote and removed as to constitute objects that resist and render pathetic any attempt to position them intelligibly within a non-scientific epistemological framework. Speculating on this future from a cultural perspective would indeed be the stuff of fantasy and daydreams.

Conversely, however, when we think about the future of literature it is hardly likely that we are thinking about literature one week from now, or even a year from now—perhaps anachronistically a year from now might be regarded as the present, if we allow the lived moment to be protensive as well as retensive. Let me go out on a limb, then, and suggest that the future of literature might begin around five years from now. Five years seems to allow the possibility of enough change to have taken place to mark out a space in which distinct and unprecedented transformations could happen in a cultural sphere. It took approximately five years for You Tube, Facebook etc to rise to prominence and transform the way billions of people spend their time online. Given the rate both of the uptake and development of e-readers and the like, comparable changes in the way we interact with literature over the next couple of years are not unimaginable. So the near lip of the crucible of the future in which literature could perhaps be transformed in a distinct and unprecedented way is approximately five years away. The far lip of that crucible is, I would suggest, around fifty years away—beyond that we edge perilously away from the anticipatable future and move towards fantasy and daydreams. So for the purposes of the question of the future of literature, it seems to me

that the future begins approximately five years from now and, as it were, ends, approximately fifty years from now. That, perhaps, is the future we mean when we talk about the future of literature. But I'm not sure our thoughts about the future are nearly so subtle or finely calibrated as that. If, as I'm suggesting, 'the future' is really just a placeholder for a space and time in which distinct and unprecedented—though, significantly, thinkable and potentially anticipatable—change can take place then we lose nothing by suggesting that the future of literature is—picking a point between 5 and 50 that mark a likely sweet spot between radical transformation and relatability—twenty years from now. So much for the future, then.

But although we think that we might be able to anticipate how things could be twenty years from now (unlike, for instance, how things might be two millennia from now), why should we anticipate that? In other words, why should the idea of literature twenty years from now (unlike, for instance, the idea of literature next week) inspire anticipation? Well, the obvious answer has already been given: in twenty years from now literature might have changed in a radical but still relatable way. But so what? This on its own—the sheer fact of change, the possibility of novelty—isn't enough; it's not enough, for instance, to prompt the sort of anticipation that the Futures of Literature network is, at least in part, an expression of.

>>There must also be something about how we are inclined to regard the sort of change that might happen within the next twenty years—change, to reiterate, that is unprecedented but relatable—that prompts anticipation. And this is where our thoughts about the future are potentially revealing of who we are, and of what our ideologies and biases are, and perhaps in this light the future is not as radically open and unconstrained as we might like to believe it to be.

So how do we tend to regard the future, twenty years or so from now? There is certainly a grim fascination with the thought that within twenty years things might have gone very badly and members of the Futures of Literature network might find themselves pushing a shopping trolley stuffed with meagre provisions down a road through a bleak and barren landscape while trying to evade roving gangs of cannibals ... But an apocalyptic version of the future is the last thing on our minds when we raise the question of the future or futures of literature.

There is simply no future for literature in that future and the question of the future of literature assumes that there might be some sort of future for literature. So anticipation of global disaster in our lifetimes cannot be the reason we are inclined to anticipate the state of literature twenty years hence. So, to ask the question again: if the possibility of change isn't, on its own, enough to motivate anticipation regarding literature twenty years from now, what is? Well, I would suggest two things underlie our anticipation: an implicit faith in progress and professional self-interest. I'll deal with both of these things in a little more detail.

First, faith in progress. This might be regarded as the nearest thing we have to religious faith in a techno-scientific age. Like the religions of the Judaeo-Christian tradition it seems to promise deliverance from an inadequate and unsatisfactory present condition. Things might be shit right now and indeed in the past, but belief in a law of progress reassures us that things will get better, that we are generally on the up, so we must trust in the future. Taken on its own, this bizarre historical theodicy isn't just incredible, it is incoherent. What propels it is an essentially humanist ideology that suggests that 'humans can make a better world than any in which they have so far lived' (Gray, ST, xiii) and what appears to offer it credence is the fact of rapid scientific and technological development. Thus we might regard faith in technology's promise to allow us to correct or overcome our all-too-human condition to be a displacement of concerns traditionally located in religious and, latterly, philosophical contexts (in the latter case we might think of the philosophical obsession of overcoming

[*überwindung*] metaphysics or epistemological blocks etc. And see Gray's essay on Santayana for the link between liberalism and Judaeo-Christian tradition). Depending on the strength of one's faith, the future can be positively transcendent and redemptive or merely consolatory, but the implication is, regardless, always the same: change, particularly deliberate change facilitated by technological development, is likely to be preferable to extant reality.

This faith in progress is a modern phenomenon (Gray remarks that in 'pre-Christian Europe it was taken for granted that the future would be like the past) and it is no coincidence that it arises not just as the consolatory mechanisms of religion falter and lose purchase over the popular imagination, but also as capitalism emerges as the dominant economic system of Western democracies. A belief in a law of progress is, of course, a gift to capitalism, and one that capitalist systems nurture and encourage. If what is coming is preferable to what is then you have the basis of an inexhaustible economic model characterised by dissatisfaction with what one currently possesses and an unquenchable desire for the new. Capitalism, then, is inexorably and ineluctably future-oriented. As Franco Berardi, or Bifo as he is known, puts it in his book *After the Future*: 'The rise of the myth of the future is rooted in modern capitalism, in the experience of expansion of the economy and knowledge. The idea that the future will be better than the present is not a natural idea, but the imaginary effect of the peculiarity of the bourgeois production model' (18). For Bifo, this myth of the future, so characteristic the twentieth century in particular, has now lost its power and we live in a postfuture of 'virtual life and actual death, of virtual knowledge and actual war' (17). Or do we? Might framing a research network around the question of the future of literature not continue, somewhat stubbornly perhaps, to manifest the exhausted and moribund progressivist ideological tendencies of a techno-capitalist liberal humanism. That, I am

suggesting, is one of the reasons we might be inclined to anticipate the state of literature in twenty years time.

The other reason is perhaps even more ignoble and difficult to justify: professional self-interest. This has the special capacity of allowing us to feel anticipation for the future of literature even if our faith in progress should momentarily fail us. That is to say, even if during a dark night of the techno-capitalist soul we doubt that literature twenty years from now will be, simply by virtue of its novelty, preferable to the indefinite preservation of today's literary practices, we are still filled with a desiring anticipation for that future. An anticipation born out the realisation that whether or not we like the brave new literary world on the horizon we must, as professional scholars of literature, accept it and adapt to it at pain of being left behind—of becoming out of touch or outmoded.

Allow me to make a couple of brief observations about these motivations for interest in the so-called future of literature.

First: both faith in progress and professional self-interest encourage a move away from a critical stance with regard to the world towards, instead, a tendency to reaction and adaptation to conditions as they unfold. So we anticipate the future only to describe it and adapt to it, not to criticise it, or prevent it or imagine things otherwise. (Interesting parallels with science here.) It is telling that our eagerness to anticipate the future of literature can be considered inversely proportionate to our willingness to ask what we want literature to be today. That is not a question that we are inclined to ask.

Second: it is interesting, perhaps alarming, but hardly coincidental, that both ideas—faith in progress and professional self-interest—and their implications point towards an ideology that is squarely humanist and capitalist. So the question about the future of literature is precisely the question one would expect a liberal humanist living in a western capitalist economy to

ask; indeed such a person would take the question further—as of course we are doing—and ask not about the future of literature, but the *futures* of literature ... the plural signalling the apparent openness and open-endedness of growth and production, deregulation, lack of restriction, hyper-potentialisation of the future, an anthropocentric tendency to see the world through personal dramas, and an implicit faith in progress, all of which are hallmarks of both liberal humanism and capitalism).

In conclusion, I'd like to sketch possible alternatives to literary futurology. Given the prevalence and coercive power of the future-oriented tendency in literary studies and in the humanities more generally, one would be forgiven for thinking that there are no alternatives. Note, for example the comments of committed future-phile Mikhail Epstein in his recently published book *The Transformative Humanities: A Manifesto*. He states, perhaps slightly tautologically, that 'There is no future for those disciplines and methods that turn away from the future' (4). In a subsection of chapter 2 entitled 'Love for the Future' he asserts that 'Our priority must be to establish confidence in the future'. 'The purification of time', he says rather ominously, 'is the future's special function [...] the future has the purifying capacity of an eraser' (48-9).

From Epstein's perspective—and he in this respect is typical—the only alternative to an orientation towards the future is complacency and complacency in this perniciously coercive binary is deemed not to be an option. But is that so? I wouldn't necessarily like to make an argument for conservatism in literary studies but at the same time I wouldn't be in hurry to make an argument against conservatism in literary studies. Literary scholars above all should realise that complacency has only relatively recently become a dirty word and it is no surprise that it has become so with the rise of the modern conception of progress. If cultivating a sense of restless discontent is one of the most effective mechanisms of capitalist systems, then

complacency can only be viewed as an obstacle in the way of economic growth and market consolidation.

Perhaps rather than looking obsessively to the future to facilitate an overcoming of the present we ought to pay more attention to tradition and remembrance as a way of thinking literature otherwise (e.g. of speculative realism). Such an approach might be considered broadly Benjaminian: the Angelus Novus, lest we forget, is turned towards the past but his wings are outstretched and caught by a storm that ‘drives him irresistibly into the future’. Benjamin says that ‘What we call progress is *this* storm’. From this perspective Mikhail Epstein’s view that ‘there is no future for those disciplines and methods that turn away from the future’ is exactly wrong: there can be no future worth having unless one is turned away from the future towards the past. But I don’t necessarily want to make that argument either.

I would tentatively like to suggest that the future of literature be regarded with at least a degree of indifference. This is not because I don’t care about the future or indeed the futures of literature—quite the contrary. But for me the question of the future of literature is precisely that—it is a question. More precisely, literature might be regarded, as indeed it has been, most notably by Blanchot, following Schlegel, as its own question. On this view literature is open and critical and always addressed to a literature to come, a literature properly of the future, but not the future of twenty years from now, nor the future as definitionally contrastive with the present, but a future, or rather an openness to what is to come, which might be considered to be nothing less than the essence of literature. But does such a literature not demand that we tirelessly address the question of the future or futures of literature? No, I would suggest, not at all.

Addressing literature to the future seems to preserve a certain openness, but in fact the coerciveness of future-thinking and the fetishisation of novelty do precisely the opposite –

they close down openness. Such thinking is an enframing that is informed by a purely technological ethos, a thinking that already gives its full assent to technology –and here I’m following Heidegger in understanding technology as being unable to ‘let beings be. Everything, including man himself, becomes a disposable object for it’. So addressing literature to the future subjugates literature to the technological (even if a non-technological future for literature is imagined). The future, then, is no longer that which brings forth literature, a literature that is to come; rather literature is forced to develop and change in order to serve a technological idea of the future. In other words literature becomes one of the many things that are commandeered to maintain and support a techno-capitalist worldview. How do we resist this sort of enframing which so insidiously promises openness and possibility precisely while limiting certain responses and forcing others? This is where I think the implications of a radical indifference need to be thought through. Heidegger’s word for this sort of indifference was *Gelassenheit* or releasement or detachment, the basic mood of which is *Verhaltenheit* or restraint. This would offer a way of announcing a ‘simultaneous Yes and No’ to the future, a way of abandoning willing without passivity (neither passion nor passivity, then). This would be an attempt to keep the open open, establishing a certain critical distance between passion and passivity, awaiting, perhaps, a literature to come.