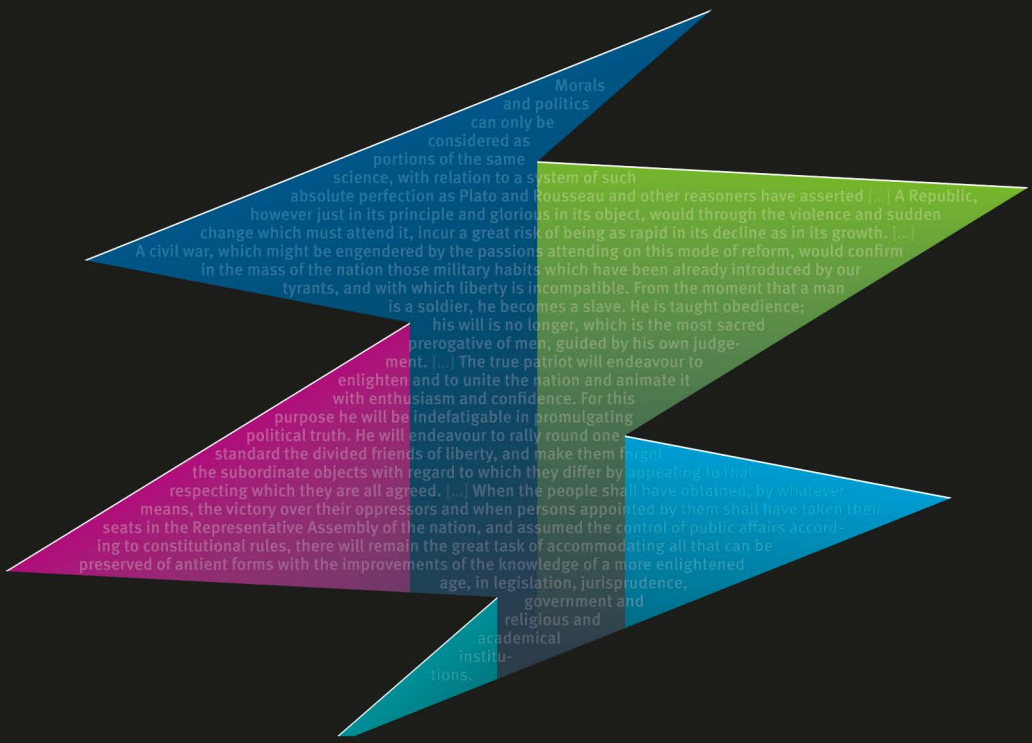
Understanding Public Debates

What Literary Studies Can Do

Jens Martin Gurr



UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC DEBATES

By historicizing and contextualizing them through readings of carefully selected literary texts, literary studies can contribute to understanding and rationalizing key debates waged in many pluralist societies today – whether on different conceptions of liberty, identity politics, historical commemoration, challenges of globalization or responses to climate change. *Understanding Public Debates* presents case studies including Milton's *Paradise Lost*, P.B. Shelley's 1820 *Reform* essay, Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, the songwriting of Neil Young and Edward Young's 1720s "Sea Odes," recent climate fiction as well as non-literary conflict narratives. Rather than mining texts for arguments for or against certain positions, this book is interested in *how* texts stage these debates by means of multiple perspectives, narrative situations or ambiguities. By suggesting how educators might use literary texts as conversation starters for more rational debates, the volume also contributes to Public Literary Studies. Three important fields are here brought together: (1) the study of societal debates and conflicts and the ways in which they challenge pluralist societies, (2) explorations of the societal functions of literature and of non-literary narratives and (3) discussions of the role and functions of literary studies. The book ends with ten crisp theses on how literary studies can contribute to understanding and rationalizing such conflictive debates.

Jens Martin Gurr has been Full Professor of British and Anglophone Literature and Culture at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany, since 2007. He is the author or coauthor of five monographs, including *Charting Literary Urban Studies: Texts as Models of and for the City* (Routledge, 2021) and (with Julia Hoydis and Roman Bartosch) *Climate Change Literacy* (Cambridge University Press [Elements series], 2023).

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For Johanna and Antonia

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the Munich Conference of the German Society for English Romanticism. Ed. Christoph Bode, Sebastian Domsch. WVT, 2007. 239–256.
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INTRODUCTION

This book makes the case that literary studies can play a key role in understanding public debates in present-day pluralist democracies[1] – by historicizing and contextualizing them through readings of carefully selected literary texts. The debates I discuss include those on different conceptions of liberty (as they arose, say, during the COVID pandemic), on identity politics and "cancel culture," on questions of cultural memory, what to remember and how to commemorate key events and figures from a nation's past, but also on challenges of and responses to globalization or on how adequately to deal with climate change. Some of these have become so acrimonious and have often solidified into larger conflict formations along recurring lines that as veritable "culture wars," they challenge the continued functioning of pluralist democracies (see also Sandel 3). Though readers may immediately think of the U.S. and the immediate present here, debates over these and similar issues – if frequently in somewhat less polarized form – also rage in other pluralist societies. In the case of debates over historical (dis-)remembering, for instance, though the concrete events and figures will be specific, the debate over monuments, street names and adequate forms of commemoration will be waged in remarkably similar constellations, with remarkably similar arguments and with remarkably similar conflict dynamics (not least those fuelled by social media).

Thus, the fact that this book is written from the perspective of someone working in the field of Anglophone Literary and Cultural Studies at a German university does not matter much to its central proposition. Undeniably, the role of British, American and other Anglophone literatures

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is, of course, very different in Germany (or in other non-English-speaking countries) from what it is in the UK or the U.S. themselves. Most of the issues discussed in this book, however, are virtually independent of this fact: I outline what I think may be a useful contribution literary studies can make regarding its potential societal role, and texts from Anglophone literatures just happen to be my examples, which could easily be replaced by texts from other cultural and literary traditions. So to be sure, could the debates themselves: Discussions of literary texts might also have illuminated other important debates, say, on questions of migration and integration (Shakespeare?), the limits of satire (Swift's "Modest Proposal" comes to mind), adequate responses to a pandemic (Defoe's *Plague Year*?), the regulation of biomedical innovation (Shelley's *Frankenstein*?) and the pernicious escalation dynamics of social media (one might think of Eggers's *The Circle* and *The Every*[2]), and many more would have lent themselves to being discussed. Nonetheless, the debates I focus on are clearly among the central ones, not only in U.S. and UK contexts: Debates on liberalism, the connection between anthropological and political convictions as well as the widespread discontents with democracy; on identity politics, societal polarization and the "culture wars"; on whether the genocide of Native Americans, slavery and racism are to be seen as aberrations from the ideal or as America's original sin and as constitutive of U.S. history; but also debates about the challenges of globalization or about appropriate ways of coping with the climate crisis.

I develop the argument in six case studies, engaging with texts ranging from Milton's *Paradise Lost* to Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, from – in that order – the songwriting of Neil Young to a justly forgotten Edward Young poem and from Shelley's 1820 essay "A Philosophical View of Reform" to 2020s climate fiction. Each chapter thus discusses one or two, at the most a handful, literary texts. The exception to this is the final, more conceptual chapter, in which, rather than addressing one individual debate, I argue that an understanding of – non-literary – conflict narratives can help understand the dynamics of conflicts themselves. Here, the toolbox of literary studies is brought to bear on non-literary texts. The sequence of chapters neither proceeds chronologically, which would suggest some sort of overview, nor by genre, which would imply a typology, but thematically, organized around the debates each chapter proposes to help illuminate, beginning with the broader and more fundamental questions of liberalism, democracy and the role of assumptions about "human nature," through the cultural wars over identity politics and questions of history and cultural memory, to more specifically topical debates about globalization or climate change, all the way to the dynamics of such conflicts generally and what conflict narratives can tell us about them.

Throughout this book, I have tried to limit theoretical considerations and discussions of method to what is necessary in order to make my point: The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Trying to make this a readable book also for broadly interested readers outside professional literary studies, I will thus – in a way that may leave some literary studies readers dissatisfied – only fairly briefly comment on theoretical issues such as the status of literary texts in the history of ideas, the perceived tension between historicizing and presentifying approaches or the functions of intertextuality. Moreover, proceeding more by showing than by telling, individual chapters – sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly – "do" different things in introducing the approach to literature the book as a whole proposes (see the chapter summaries later).

In terms of societal relevance and impact of the texts discussed, let's not be unrealistic: While, on goodreads.com (April 30, 2023), *Paradise Lost* (somewhat surprisingly the most widely discussed of my texts) had some 157,000 reviews (not all, one gathers from the comments, by voluntary readers), Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations* some 58,000 and *The Human Stain*, one of the most widely debated and celebrated U.S. novels in recent decades, just over 39,000 reviews, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* had over 6,000,000 and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* over 9,000,000 – just for the sake of perspective.

As for the choice of texts themselves, it does not play much of a role whether they are classics (*Paradise Lost*), less widely known texts by "canonical" authors (Shelley's "Reform" essay), largely forgotten poems (Young's naval lyrics) or recent novels (2020s climate fiction); all these are texts which (a) seem to me to work well as case studies and (b) which I know well and to which (apart from the most recent ones) I have kept returning, partly with different guiding questions because they keep fascinating me. It will be noted that this is a Western-centric and overwhelmingly male list of authors. I very much wish this was different. One reason for this is evident: For the longest time from Plato to the present day, women writers were largely excluded from or marginalized in public discourse. Another reason is my own limitation: The texts I discuss are ones that I know best and that, from the texts I know, best lend themselves to arguing my case. I would be delighted to see a more diverse corpus of texts used for comparable discussions.

What I mean by saying that these texts lend themselves to arguing my case is that they not only provide entry points into the debate by, for instance, having characters take key positions in the debate; this alone would be rather uninteresting. What interests me about these texts is the staging of contradictions, ambivalences and ambiguities in the debate: In a recent climate fiction novel, the activist protagonist, in conversation with a

fellow activist with an entirely different educational and professional background, asks her: "what's your dissent? If you had to say something the rest of us don't want to hear, what would it be?" (Markley 703). Here, in pointing out disagreements within one camp in a debate and in exploring opposing perspectives, even in entertaining the possibility that the other side in a debate might also have a point, lies a key strength of literary texts of the kind that interests me here. In Keats's classic formulation of what he regarded as a mark of "Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously," we might speak of "*Negative Capability*," which he defines as the ability "[to be] in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (370, emphasis original).

To be sure, though I argue that the texts can provide illuminating insights into these debates (the argument for the continued relevance and insightfulness of literature), the texts alone are not sufficient: In addition to maintaining that literature develops, negotiates and transmits knowledge in unique ways (see Felski or Hörisch), I also argue for the crucial significance of educated reading. This book is, therefore, at least as much a plea for a specific way of "doing" literary studies and of using literature in helpful ways as it is an argument for the relevance of literature. Literature logically cannot prove anything about the extratextual world; we should not mine literary texts for arguments in support of one claim over another (for this as a principle in teaching literature, see Garrard 122). That texts can be extremely suggestive in making one explanation plausible or highly implausible is another matter (to be kept strictly separate). Rather than looking for evidence in favour of any given view, Garrard has pointed out, attention to questions of form and strategies of representation are central to the "work" texts can do in comprehending complex issues: "narrative technique functions as a cognitive technology that shapes [. . .] comprehension" (Garrard 122). Similarly, Nikoleris, Stripple and Tenngart have insisted that, in negotiating complexity, literary texts function as "learning machines" rather than "truth machines" (308).[3] In Myren-Svelstad's formulation, "learning to read literature competently entails learning to critically evaluate and re-evaluate opinions, postponing conclusions, and acknowledging that several diverging viewpoints can be reasonable at the same time" (17).

This also suggests, as I will repeatedly insist, that we read literature *as* literature: To read, say, a novel merely for *what* it says about a given issue without paying attention to questions of perspective, to contradictions, ambiguities and ambivalences is to mistake it for a declarative contribution to a debate; to do so is to tap into literature far below what it is capable of doing. All my texts are complex, ambivalent, possibly contradictory; and

the complexity, ambiguity and ambivalence are crucial to my argument that literary texts lend themselves to illuminating debates.

In making this argument, this book brings together three otherwise largely separate fields. The **first field** concerns individual key political debates and challenges. Key studies here include Fukuyama's *Liberalism and its Discontents* (2022), Mike Hulme's *Why We Disagree about Climate Change* (2009), Iceland, Silver and Redstone's *Why We Disagree about Inequality: Social Justice vs. Social Order* (2023), Ezra Klein's *Why We're Polarized* (2020), Mark Lilla's *The Once and Future Liberal* (2017), Susan Neiman's *Learning from the Germans: Confronting Race and the Memory of Evil* (2019), Michael Sandel's *Democracy's Discontent: A New Edition for Our Perilous Times* (2022), Rachel Greenwald Smith's *On Compromise: Art, Politics, and the Fate of an American Ideal* (2021) or Ulrich Willems's *Wertkonflikte als Herausforderung der Demokratie* (2016). These studies – and many more might be mentioned – have vital things to say about key debates of our time, about societal conflicts, polarization and the resulting challenges to democracy, but they are not concerned with how literature relates to these debates and have no interest in defining a potential role for literary studies.

The **second field** is that of research on the uses, functions, potentials and pitfalls of literature and of non-literary narratives. Here, a first type of study – again, many more might be mentioned – is that which is concerned with different functions of literature. This includes Felski's *Uses of Literature* (2008), Gymnich and Nünning's *Funktionen von Literatur: Theoretische Grundlagen und Modellinterpretationen* (2005), an edited collection on different functions of literature generally, or Jochen Hörisch's *Das Wissen der Literatur* (2007), on the specific ways in which literature generates, stores and transmits knowledge. These works are highly illuminating on the uses and functions of literature but do not engage with societal conflicts and the way literary studies can help understand them. A second type – again, more might be mentioned – engages with functions of narrative generally. These include Peter Brooks's *Seduced by Story: The Use and Abuse of Narrative* (2022), Hanne, Crano and Mio's edited collection *Warring with Words: Narrative and Metaphor in Politics* (2015) or Koschorke's *Fact and Fiction: Elements of a General Theory of Narrative* (2018). These are highly insightful studies on uses and functions of narrative and partly also engage with conflict narratives but are not specifically concerned with literature, let alone with individual texts. They make no argument about the potential contribution of literary studies to understanding key debates in pluralist societies. Moreover, since they are partly or exclusively concerned with non-literary, "real-world" narratives, they are only relevant to the argument in Chapter 6. Within this group, a

few individual titles specifically address the role of narrative in conflicts (mostly, however, in violent conflicts and hardly in societal debates). These include Sara Cobb's *Speaking of Violence: The Politics and Poetics of Narrative in Conflict Resolution* (2013) and Müller-Funk and Ruthner's edited collection of *Narrative(s) in Conflict* (2017). These are primarily concerned with narratives in violent conflict (a topic related to the subject of Chapter 6 in the present monograph). Furthermore, where – as in the case of Müller-Funk and Ruthner's collection – they are concerned with literary texts, the interest is primarily in how texts represent the conflict, not with how they stage a debate.

A **third type** of works is monographs and edited collections on the current situation (commonly diagnosed as a "crisis") in literary studies specifically and in the humanities more generally. The "crisis of literary studies" book and the related "future of literary studies" book has long been a genre in its own right, and many more might be mentioned: Merve Emre's *Post-Discipline: Two Futures for Literary Study* (forthcoming; see Emre 2019, 2020), James F. English's *The Global Future of English Studies* (2012), Richard Gaskin's *Language, Truth, and Literature: A Defence of Literary Humanism* (2013), Eric Hayot's *Humanist Reason: A History, an Argument, a Plan* (2021), Paul Jay's *The Humanities "Crisis" and the Future of Literary Studies* (2014), Petar Ramadanovic's *Interdiscipline: A Future for Literary Studies and the Humanities* (2022) or Karen L. Thornber's *Futures of Literary Criticism* (forthcoming). Many of these are inspiring proposals for how a productive future for literary studies might be envisioned, but they largely do not engage with the challenges increasingly polarized political debates pose to present-day pluralist societies *or* with how literary studies might help understand, contextualize, historicize and rationalize such debates. Some recent studies within this tradition of defining a role for the humanities, however, have argued the case for a more public role of the humanities. Here, Dillon and Craig's 2021 *Storylistening: Narrative Evidence and Public Reasoning* comes closest to my own attempt at making core competencies of literary studies available to the public. Their book shares with Martha Nussbaum's impassioned and compelling pleas for the continued relevance of the humanities (and not least of an engagement with literature) – the idea that literature can contribute importantly to public life, democracy and the functioning of a pluralist society by teaching forms of knowledge that are not available otherwise (see, e.g., Nussbaum 1995, 2016). In a very different vein, my book shares ideas with Gerald Graff's 1992 classic, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*. However, while Graff is largely concerned with controversies *within* the humanities and especially between "traditional" and "progressive" literary studies and the way in

which they prevent more effective teaching and more appropriate communication about the role and function of the humanities to the wider public (see, e.g., 36), I am more concerned with the way in which we might make core competencies of and insights from literary studies available to the public in understanding – and possibly improving – key public debates. This book thus ties in with recent efforts in a number of disciplines to further what has often been called the "public humanities." I find myself in sympathy, for instance, with Jonathan Floyd's definition of the potential role of "public political philosophy" and its potential to contribute to "better public deliberation" (Floyd 137): "The role of the public political philosopher is simply to illuminate options, enrich debates, nuance conversations, and indeed democratic deliberations, without having to pick sides, in the sense of strongly aligning oneself to any particular party or policy" (Floyd 135).

The present monograph is, as far as I can see, the first to draw together these three fields in order to argue how literary studies can help understand and possibly rationalize political debates in pluralist societies. The following chapter-by-chapter overview indicates some of the key themes and conclusions of this book. It also briefly indicates how each chapter explicitly or implicitly contributes to developing the "approach" I outline throughout the book as a whole (for the sake of readability, I otherwise keep the discussion of methods and approaches to a minimum).

Chapter 1, "The Long Shadow of Plato: Milton, Shelley and Problems of Liberty and Liberalism," by far my longest, engages with the tradition of connecting anthropological persuasions and images of human nature on the one hand and political beliefs about how a society should be organized on the other. To set the scene, I begin with a number of twentieth- and twenty-first-century thinkers on questions of liberty and on the precarious connection between republicanism and democracy, such as Isaiah Berlin, Nadia Urbinati and Michael Sandel. Taking my cue from their historicization of debates about populism, societal polarization and anti-democratic tendencies in Western democracies, I show that probing reflections on "Democracy's Discontent" (Sandel) and two different "concepts of liberty" (Berlin) also lie at the heart of my central texts – mainly Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Shelley's "A Philosophical View of Reform." In brief, I aim to show how the Platonic "body politic analogy," the notion of a correspondence between individual dispositions and the organization of the state in Plato's *Republic*, and its deeply pessimistic judgement that the majority of people, ruled by their passions, are hardly able responsibly to handle liberty and must, therefore, be restrained, has recurred again and again with the most unlikely of writers and political thinkers, frequently with rather unpleasant implications even in writers often thought of as

comparatively liberal. Both *Paradise Lost* and Shelley's "Reform" essay, in their engagement with questions of liberty, tie liberty to anthropological convictions. In both cases, adherence to the Platonic notion of the body politic, the connection between a hierarchy of the mental faculties within the individual on the one hand and the body of society and the form of government on the other hand, as well as the equally Platonic *pessimistic* assumptions about people's average potential to act responsibly, here lead to potentially authoritarian political persuasions. These convictions, to be sure, are also central to current political debates. In the context of my overall argument, the chapter thus also serves to outline a pragmatic literary studies approach to the history of ideas.

In **Chapter 2**, "Complicating the 'Culture Wars': Rereading *The Human Stain*," I read Roth's novel as a remarkably even-handed dissection of the heated debates – frequently referred to as the "the culture wars" – over a complex set of issues, including those coming under the labels of "identity politics," "political correctness" and "cancel culture" but also with regard to questions of historical commemoration. Though by no means identical, the conflicts over these issues have, along mostly congruent fault lines, coalesced into a larger aggregate conflict. In contrast to a widespread reading of *The Human Stain* as an ultimately conservative critique of "political correctness" in the 1990s and early 2000s, as a novel that might also be read as implicitly condemning what has often been described as the 2020s evolution of the same struggle into "cancel culture," the chapter argues that Roth's critique is far more balanced with regard to these issues. Where the novel seems problematically dated, from a post-#MeToo point of view, is in its apparent blindness to questions of status and power differences in sexual relationships. In its representation of how originally leftist arguments about the relativity of knowledge lend themselves to appropriation by the right – the "post-truth" debate, in shorthand – however, it is remarkably prescient in pointing to far more recent debates. The chapter also serves to argue that attention to literary form and to questions of perspective, rather than being an escapist exercise in dodging the central thematic issues, is crucial to understanding how texts themselves can enact the debate. Moreover, in the context of agonistic plurality with its deep disagreements and fundamental conflicts, an understanding of literature as a means of fostering learning about – and of practicing dealing with – different perspectives, ambiguity and complexity is simply more adequate and more helpful than one that all too quickly disambiguates, pinpoints or dismisses.

Chapter 3, "America the Beautiful? Neil Young's Explorations of Genocide, Racism and the Foundations of 'America'" reads Young's negotiations of American history through over five decades of his career as a subtle and forceful intervention into debates over national identity and the

politics of memory. Though Young's work discursively appears to uphold the distinction between an ideal "America the Beautiful" on the one hand and the genocide of Native Americans, slavery and deep-seated racism on the other, a range of textual and musical strategies make them so central to American history as to make the distinction illusory. Examples range from 1970s negotiations of slavery and racism in "Southern Man" and "Alabama" and references to the genocide of Native Americans in "Pocahontas" or "Cortez the Killer" via Young's soundtrack to Jarmusch's 1995 anti-Western *Dead Man*, the subtle fusion of topical critique of the War in Iraq with searching probing into genocide and "manifest destiny" on Young's 2006 protest album, *Living With War*, the dark side of Young's folksy *Americana* (2012), explorations of the entanglements between capitalism and environmental destruction (*The Monsanto Years*, 2015) all the way to his revival of classic protest songs in his 2020 COVID lockdown EP, *The Times*. In addition to the discussion of textual and musical strategies, Young's role as a Canadian-born "Inoutsider"[4] to the U.S. will also play a role here. The chapter thus also proposes an approach to popular music (especially that of musicians with a broad appeal to people on both sides of the usual political and cultural cleavages) as an occasion for conversation where there may otherwise be little common ground for dialogue.

Chapter 4, "Edward Young's Abysmal 'Sea Odes': Mercantilism, Free Trade and Globalization," is an experiment in responsible presentification: It suggests a reading of Edward Young's naval lyrics – especially "Imperium Pelagi" (1730) – which have justly been regarded as poetic failures, as globalization poems. Simultaneously historicizing and presentifying, the chapter argues that even these obscure eighteenth-century texts can be meaningfully discussed in the light of twenty-first-century globalization debates, which can be shown to have their roots in the early eighteenth century. As a highly revealing document in the eighteenth-century rivalry between the opposing doctrines of mercantilism and free trade, "Imperium Pelagi" is revealed to be highly conflictive in that it oscillates between celebrating trade as beneficial to all on the one hand and a proto-nationalist discourse of competition and British naval power on the other. In contrast to Young's professed originality in treating this topic, the texts are shown to be part of an ongoing discourse even in their time. Moreover, "Imperium Pelagi" is shown to contain what appears a prescient anticipation of twenty-first-century fears of Chinese dominance in international trade. In discussing these issues, the chapter argues that historicizing and presentifying approaches by no means have to be mutually exclusive if the roots of present-day concerns can be traced to intellectual contexts of the text in question.

In **Chapter 5**, I discuss "Cli-fi Novels as Models of and for Climate Futures" and engage with the potential functions of climate fiction in societal

debates about climate change. I here also discuss challenges of fiction-based climate change communication, as they have become apparent in climate fiction over the last, roughly, 20 years. Arguing that climate communication through fiction has reached an impasse in that previous cli-fi has largely failed to project ways forward, the chapter outlines two more recent types of cli-fi, both of which, in addition to depicting the climate crisis, put greater emphasis on exploring ways into the future. One such type, here represented by Charlotte McConaghy's 2021 novel, *Migrations*, seems to take for granted that environmental disaster can no longer be averted and appears to focus on coping mechanisms (one might, in shorthand, refer to this as "the loss and mourning" branch of cli-fi). Another type, here represented by Kim Stanley Robinson's 2020 *The Ministry for the Future* and Stephen Markley's 2023 *The Deluge*, has been referred to as "socioecological transition stories" (Mackenthun). Drawing on model theory and its applications in literary studies and arguing that models are – in varying degrees – both *descriptive* representations *of* the entity they model *and* explicitly or implicitly *normative* blueprints *for* the future of that system, I show that these novels are not only conscious of their own function as models but that they also, to an unprecedented degree, reflect on the importance of modelling to the climate debate and contain detailed discussions of the achievements and limitations of different types of models. Both these novels thus explicitly unfold the model theory that informs their take on climate futures. Discussing them as highly complex and multi-facetted representations of the climate crisis and of the debate about how to address it, the chapter again maintains that their potential can only be realized if we read them as fiction rather than – as too many reviewers have done – mistaking them for thesis novels promulgating blueprints.[5] In the context of my overall argument, the chapter thus also suggests how the theory of models can help illuminate functions of literary texts in modeling societal debates.

Chapter 6, "Understanding Conflicts through Conflict Narratives: Narrative Path Dependencies and the Chances for Compromise," takes the discussion to another systematic level: No longer showing how a specific literary text can illuminate one particular societal debate, it argues that, by studying the role of narratives in such processes, literary studies can importantly contribute to understanding how conflicts generally develop and escalate – and what role narratives might play in regulating them once they *have* escalated. To do so, I synthesize several distinct research fields: 1) research on societal conflicts and on the mechanisms of conflict regulation central to the functioning of pluralist societies;[6] 2) research on path dependencies and especially more recent research on what has variously been called "discursive lock-in" or "narrative path dependency"; 3) mediation

research and research in peace and conflict studies on how conflict narratives influence perceptions of a conflict; 4) research on the cognitive functions of plot patterns, cognitive models and scripts; and 5) narratological research on conflict narratives. Thus, peace and conflict research – e.g., on Northern Ireland, Rwanda or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – has shown that adherence to specific conflict narratives significantly influences actors' attitudes towards a conflict. However, the way in which such narratives *about* a conflict function as "formatting templates" (Koschorke 197) and shape the behaviour of actors *in* the conflict remains understudied. Developing further existing research on both the cognitive functions and the ideological implications of narratives and plot patterns, the chapter advances the notion of "narrative path dependencies." Narratology, it is argued, can thus help understand how conflict narratives either "naturalize" hostility and enmity and predispose actors towards prolonging the conflict or how they can make reconciliation appear a plausible option. However, while I thus engage with recent debates on the importance of narrative to numerous societal fields and with the "narrative turn" in a number of disciplines, I also suggest we should heed warnings not to *over*-emphasize the role of narrative.

My **Conclusion**, in ten theses, brings together my central arguments. I conclude by suggesting (as a literary scholar whose competencies end here, this is all I can do) that educational institutions – from kindergarten to higher education – are crucial here for several reasons: These are institutions everyone goes through in formative periods of their lives and institutions in which many of the key debates are waged anyway, in which conflict behaviour is acquired and in which a culture of reasonable debate can and must be learned and practiced. Moreover, it is in primary and secondary education (and in some formats and fields of higher education) that learning with and through literature (in age-appropriate ways) happens anyway or can easily be made to happen. Finally, a number of the key debates even originate in and around educational institutions themselves.[7]

As a whole, the book thus also suggests *one* response to the unrelenting (self-)questioning of the current role of literary studies in academia and in society generally: What is it that literary studies do, and why is it worth doing? The present brief section, rest assured, is the only time I will so much as hint at a need to "defend" the field of literary studies. In the introduction to a special issue on literary studies in interdisciplinary contexts, Ursula Kluwick and I phrased part of the issue as follows:

> [H]ow, as a discipline, [should we] deal with the only seemingly paradoxical observation that the often diagnosed decline of institutionalised literary studies, perceivable in low public esteem and dwindling student

> numbers, at least in North America, but increasingly also elsewhere, coincides with the growing prominence of literature in business studies, medical ethics, and numerous other academic and societal fields[8] – and with an almost ubiquitous celebration of the power of "storytelling" and uncritical, simplistic, or downright misleading references to the importance of "the narrative" of an institution, a city, or a community, etc. [. . .]. What, we should ask ourselves, does it say about our discipline if we, who think we "own" the study of narrative, are not even considered relevant sources by respectable academics in other disciplines who find "narratives" central to their concerns? Should we lament the fact, sulk, and remain in our corner?
>
> *(Gurr, Kluwick 11)*

This is not the place to rehearse the long discussion and to revisit the various views on the role literature might play in contemporary society and on the function criticism and the teaching of literature may perform for students, for the university in general and for society at large. It will hardly be surprising if I here maintain that, as an archive of society and as arguably the most important form of cultural self-reflection, literature still does have a key role to play. Similarly, I believe it is possible to reclaim for literary studies a less contested and precarious place in society and in the canon of subjects at university. Even without resorting to the naïve and presumptuous notions of the English department as the centre of a thriving university (in the vein of F.R. Leavis & Co), there is good reason to be far less defensive and far more optimistic than literary scholars currently often are.

Literary studies can do all sorts of other things, but one thing it does well, its core competence, as it were, is to understand and explicate complex texts – broadly understood to include writings, semiotically accessible artefacts, products and actions. This is the central business of literary studies; and if it is no longer concerned with producing readings of texts which do justice to their historical contexts while at the same time (if only implicitly) attempting to make them "relevant" in some sense to present-day concerns (or at least to be able to answer the "so what?" question), one might as well stop doing literary studies altogether. Thus, a form of pragmatic, theoretically informed historical scholarship which seeks to do justice to texts in their historical contexts while simultaneously attempting also to make them relevant to our own concerns can, I believe, better bring out what the field is capable of doing than approaches that only do either (or neither) of these.

Responsibly taught, literary studies impart valuable skills to students, and responsible research can fulfil crucial needs to the society which funds it; and I am far from claiming that the most necessary and helpful benefit of Anglophone Studies to society is the cheap utility for the labour market

sometimes proclaimed by the educational bureaucracy. This will hardly be controversial to practitioners of literary studies who have thought about the wider relevance of what they do; if *they* are not convinced of the importance of what they do, who else should be? The validity of what literary studies has to teach, I argue, lies in the ability to deal with the complexity, ambiguity and contradiction that are the *forte* of challenging literary texts – and of literary studies prepared to engage with them. It is here that literary studies can contribute to addressing one of the most pressing problems of present-day pluralist societies.

Notes

1 Thus, I am not concerned with the role of literature and writing in historical debates. Nor do I deal with the role of literature in war. The "power of the written word to shape the destiny of nations" (11) and "books and authors, poets and publishers as key resources in the business of war" (12) are the subject of Andrew Pettegree's excellent recent study, *The Book at War: Libraries and Readers in an Age of Conflict*.

2 One reason for choosing otherwise is the fact that, illuminating as Eggers's novels are about the dynamics and the consequences of social media, they are relatively unrewarding as literary texts. I later discuss my assumptions about the aesthetic dimension of texts and how vital questions of ambiguity or complexity are to a text's potential to illuminate a debate – and thus also to my selection criteria for texts to be explored here.

3 Similarly, stated with regard to "[i]magining climate futures" but applicable to grappling with any complex issue, Milkoreit has argued that this "is something that we – our brains and our social technologies of imagination – need to learn and practice" (172; emphasis added). Fiction thus provides "an unusual tool [for] strengthening our imagination skills" (172). These functions of literature and the function of "literacy" understood, not least, as the ability to deal with perspective, ambiguity and complexity, are discussed in more detail in Hoydis, Bartosch, Gurr (6, 14f. et passim).

4 I owe the term to Claudia Perner's 2013 dissertation, "US-American Inoutside Perspectives in Globalized Anglophone Literatures." Published: https://duepublico2.uni-due.de/receive/duepublico_mods_00031698. Perner, in turn, develops the notion further from Nnaemeka.

5 This chapter has its origin in two projects, "Climate Change Literacy," funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, and "Just Futures: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Cultural Climate Models," funded by the German Research Council (DFG), the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in the UK and the Austrian FWF Wissenschaftsfonds.

6 The challenges to pluralist societies arising from "deep disagreements" and the ensuing "fundamental conflicts" as well as strategies of regulating such conflicts are the subject of an ongoing collaborative research initiative at the Universities of Münster and Duisburg-Essen ("Agonistic Plurality: Deep Disagreements and Fundamental Conflicts as a Social, Political and Educational Challenge to Pluralist Societies"). A related project at the Universities of Duisburg-Essen, Münster and Bochum is "Cultures of Compromise." The terminology of "deep disagreements" and "fundamental conflicts" follows Willems.

7 Here, too, my argument is indebted to discussions in AgonPlur, the interdisciplinary collaborative project "Agonistic Plurality: Deep Disagreements and Fundamental Conflicts as a Social, Political and Educational Challenge to Pluralist Societies" in the humanities, the social sciences and the educational sciences at the Universities of Münster and Duisburg-Essen (see fn. 5).
8 For this, see Emre's fascinating ongoing work on "post-disciplinary" professional engagements with literature and the institutional crisis of literary studies. For a brief account of her forthcoming book, see Emre (2020); for part of the argument, see Emre (2019).

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1

THE HISTORY OF IDEAS AND THE LONG SHADOW OF PLATO

Milton, Shelley and Problems of Liberty and Liberalism

> [T]he rationalist [concept of liberty], with its assumption of the single true solution, has led by steps which, if not logically valid, are historically and psychologically intelligible, from an ethical doctrine of individual responsibility and individual self-perfection to an authoritarian state obedient to the directives of an élite of Platonic guardians.
>
> (Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" 152)

Since thy original lapse, true liberty
Is lost, which always with right reason dwells
Twinned, and from her hath no dividual being:
Reason in man obscured, or not obeyed,
Immediately inordinate desires
And upstart passions catch the government
From reason, and to servitude reduce
Man till then free.

(*Paradise Lost*, XII, 83ff.)

> Morals and politics can only be considered as portions of the same science, with relation to a system of such absolute perfection as Plato and Rousseau and other reasoners have asserted.
>
> (Shelley, "A Philosophical View of Reform," 70)

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Setting the Scene: Democracy's Discontents, Conceptions of Liberty and the Conservative Implications of Rational Self-Direction

In the 2nd edition of his 1996 classic, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*, now subtitled *A New Edition for our Perilous Times*, published in 2022, political philosopher Michael J. Sandel writes:

> Americans are deeply divided. Culture wars rage over how to contend with racial injustice; what to teach our children about our country's past; what to do about immigration, gun violence, climate change, COVID-19 vaccine refusal, and the flood of disinformation that, amplified by social media, pollutes the public sphere. Residents of blue states and red states, metropolitan centers and rural communities, those with and those without college degrees, live increasingly separate lives. We get our news from different sources, believe in different facts, and encounter few people with opinions or social backgrounds different from our own.
>
> *(Sandel 2022, Introduction 3)*

This might be the epigraph to most chapters in this book, and while Sandel is here referring to the U.S., comparable debates – if frequently in somewhat less polarized form – rage in other current democracies. Discussing the need for a shared political philosophy, Sandel comments on the crucial if often glossed-over distinction between the liberal and the republican conceptions of freedom as follows:

> The political philosophy by which we live is a certain version of liberal political theory. Its central idea is that government should be neutral toward the moral and religious views its citizens espouse. [. . .] Central to republican theory [, by contrast,] is the idea that liberty depends on sharing in self-government. [. . .] To share in self-rule therefore requires that citizens possess, or come to acquire, certain qualities of character, or civic virtues. But this means that republican politics cannot be neutral toward the values and ends its citizens espouse. The republican conception of freedom, unlike the liberal conception, requires a formative politics, a politics that cultivates in citizens the qualities of character self-government requires.
>
> *(4–6)*

What this passage also highlights is the notion – central to my discussion in this chapter – that republicanism requires "certain qualities of character,

or civic virtues." Equally central to my discussion is a point highlighted by Nadia Urbinati in an excellent reconstruction of the tradition of liberalism in the U.S. in a 2012 article, "Competing for Liberty: The Republican Critique of Democracy": She here engages with the tradition of "mistrust and criticism of democracy within the Roman and neo-roman tradition" of republicanism (608) and the "nondemocratic core of republicanism." Arguing that, "[w]hile today, republicanism and democracy are practically held as synonyms [. . .] some of the most [. . .] enduring arguments against democracy" originate from the "republican vision of liberty and government. [. . .] Attacks on democracy thus reached their peak in the eighteenth century, the century of republican renaissance and of the admiration for ancient Rome"; culminating in "the first powerful criticism of democratic sovereignty (by Edmund Burke)," while "disdain for democracy" was also part of the DNA of the U.S. republican tradition: "the authors of the *Federalist Papers* criticized democracy as the rule of the lower classes and took care to distinguish it from the republic" (Urbinati 608–609).[1]

The distinction between republicanism and democracy in the U.S. – understood, to be sure, as political philosophies, not as party designations – is far from a merely "academic" discussion. Writing just before the U.S. elections in 2020, George Thomas engaged with an argument strategically made by politicians of the Republican Party, who used the distinction to legitimize a potential election victory of Donald Trump against the popular vote:

> In 2020, Trump is the first candidate in American history to campaign for the presidency without making any effort to win the popular vote, appealing only to the people who will deliver him an Electoral College win. [. . .] In the past, losing the popular vote while winning the Electoral College was rare. Given current trends, minority rule could become routine. Many Republicans are actively embracing this position with the insistence that we are, after all, a republic, not a democracy.
>
> *(Thomas n.p.)*

Thus, the U.S. founding fathers' distrust of complete democracy and their institutional design (with especially the Electoral College and the Senate as institutions severely curtailing direct influence of the people and proportional representation) has far-reaching consequences to the present day.

It is important to note that the connection between assumptions about "human nature" on the one hand and notions about how the social entity of the state needs to be constructed is central – if often implicit – also to political conservatism. Thus, conservatism as inherently a "philosophy of human imperfection," as O'Sullivan's widely cited definition has it, has traditionally been marked by a largely pessimistic understanding of

"human nature": Limited human rationality and limited capacity for self-improvement and self-restraint justifies and even necessitates restrictions on individual liberties.

In a related vein, and with a view to political developments in the U.S., the UK and in continental Europe, Philip Manow[2] has recently connected various forms of incomplete democracy – in the sense of structures limiting the direct influence of the people such as, again, the U.S. Electoral College and their origins in a lack of trust in the people (see the *Federalist Papers* and the tradition of a lack of trust in democracy discussed earlier) to restrictions in democratic decision-making through more recent developments such as globalization or delegation to non-majoritarian institutions and technocratic bodies:

> What once appeared as the solution, the representative principle [the reference is to the notion that representative forms of democracy were devised to limit and contain the influence of the majority of the population], from the point of view of today's populists is the problem, namely camouflage of the blatant rule of elites. [. . .] Once complete democratic inclusion has been more or less granted, a different solution [in the sense of an option for decision-making] becomes more important; the depoliticization of questions to be decided, its exclusion from the realm of democratic decision-making: by codification through law, by constitutionalisation, by delegation to non-majoritarian institutions etc. [central banks, appointed expert committees] [. . .] and by globalisation or Europeanization (through the internationalisation of the law and the economy [. . .]). Once it becomes impossible in fully democratised democracy to restrict *who* can participate in decisions, it is at least possible to restrict *what* is decided on democratically – this is the fundamental dialectic of democratisation and de-democratisation of democracy. Populism episodically surfaces at the fissures generated by shifts between these two processes.
>
> *(Manow 42f.)*[3]

This seems to me to be a compelling account of the connection between historical limitations to democracy based on scepticism about the maturity of "the people," the interrelated processes of democratization and depoliticization and the recent forms of populism.

This connection between assessments of the people's political competencies and the form of government also lies at the heart of recent critiques of democracy. In this vein, Jason Brennan's notorious and widely debated 2016 *Against Democracy* argues for restrictions on the right to vote based on the degree to which potential voters are likely to make

informed decisions. Brennan refers to this proposed rule of the knowledgeable as "epistocracy" and explicitly mentions Plato's model of the philosopher kings in the *Politeia* as an example of such epistocracy (Brenner 14). Current debates about – *sensu* Sandel, Fukuyama, Urbinati or Manow – discontents with democracy and liberalism can thus be shown to revolve around essentially the same issues as historical debates.

One central issue that arguably lies at the heart of this tradition can be illustrated by means of Isaiah Berlin's classic 1958 essay, "Two Concepts of Liberty." Though emerging from discussions about different forms of totalitarianism in the 1930s and 1940s and thus not to be regarded as directly applicable to present-day debates, Berlin's discussion can here serve as a bridge because the conflation of anthropological assumptions, forms of government, political beliefs, different conceptions of liberty and the role of the body politic analogy that Berlin helpfully problematized is central to my argument in this chapter. Moreover, the conflation lies both at the heart of my two central case studies *and* informs key present-day debates on "democracy and its discontents." Berlin famously distinguished between what he called a "negative" conception of liberty, which regards liberty as the freedom from interference by another ("non-interference"), and the "positive" conception, which foregrounds liberty as rational self-direction.[4] The two don't sound so far apart, but the differentiation has striking and dramatic consequences:

> The freedom which consists in being one's own master, and the freedom which consists in not being prevented from choosing as I do by other[s], may, on the face of it, seem concepts at no great logical distance from each other – no more than negative and positive ways of saying much the same thing. Yet the "positive" and "negative" notions of freedom historically developed in divergent directions not always by logically reputable steps, until, in the end, they came into direct conflict with each other.
>
> *(Berlin 132)*

The momentous difference between the two conceptions, Berlin famously pointed out, arises from a notion contained in the understanding of freedom as "being one's own master": The self may not always know what is in its own best interest. In Rousseau and others, this then leads to the conclusion that this ignorant self must be told by others what its "true" interest is. According to the notion of liberty as rational self-direction, Berlin argued,

> the real self may be conceived as something wider than the individual (as the term is normally understood), as a social "whole" of which the

> individual is an element or aspect: a tribe, a race, a church; a state, the great society of the living and the dead and the yet unborn. This entity is then identified as being the "true" self which, by imposing its collective, or "organic," single will upon its recalcitrant "members," achieves its own, and therefore their, "higher" freedom. The perils of using organic metaphors to justify the coercion of some men by others in order to raise them to a "higher" level of freedom have often been pointed out.
>
> *(132)*

This can be exemplified by means of Rousseau's distinction between the "*volonté generale*," the abstract, idealized sense of what would, rationally, be best for a collective vs. the "*volonté de tous*," the empirical will of the majority, which may be misguided. In a notorious passage in the *Social Contract* (1762), Rousseau wrote that "whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be forced by his whole body to do so. This means nothing but that he will be forced to be free" (I, VII).[5]

Berlin summarizes the potential authoritarianism[6] inherent in this rationalist "positive understanding" of liberty as follows – and interestingly ties it to Plato's "philosopher kings" and thus, to Plato's conception of the body politic in the *Republic*:

> [T]he rationalist [concept of liberty], with its assumption of the single true solution, has led by steps which, if not logically valid, are historically and psychologically intelligible, from an ethical doctrine of individual responsibility and individual self-perfection to an authoritarian state obedient to the directives of an élite of Platonic guardians.
>
> *(152)*

I here want to engage with this set of interrelated issues – different conceptions of liberty, the role of anthropological assumptions about "human nature" (always in inverted commas) – and the notion of the "body politic" as well as their implications as potentially authoritarian, illiberal or at the least sceptical of democracy. This complex of issues, while it is highly topical, has a philosophical lineage going back at least to Plato, which is where the discussion will need to begin. But the conflation of concepts of liberty and anthropological convictions in the body politic notion, I will argue in this chapter, also lies at the heart of the texts I want to engage with here, namely, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Shelley's "A Philosophical View of Reform."[7] Conversely, I believe that a reading of these texts can go quite some way towards illuminating debates surrounding these issues in the seventeenth century, in the post-Napoleonic period around 1820 and in the present day.

Plato and the Body Politic Analogy

There is no need here for a full discussion of the soul and its relation to reason in *Phaedrus*, *Phaedo* and *Timaeus*. We do, however, need a few passages from these dialogues before we come to the overwhelmingly influential body politic notion in the *Politeia*.[8] Interestingly, Plato has Socrates depict the due relationship of soul and body in the political terms of a master-slave relationship, in which the soul is master and the body is to be subservient: "When the soul and body are joined together, nature directs the one to serve and be ruled, and the other to rule and be master" (*Phaedo* 80A). This connection between political and psycho-ethical thinking also lies at the heart of the *Republic*, as we will see later.

But for a further elaboration of Plato's understanding of the soul, we first need to turn to *Phaedrus*, one of his late dialogues. Socrates here depicts the soul as consisting of three parts, figuratively portrayed in the image of the two winged horses and the charioteer (*Phaedrus* 246A-254E). One of the horses he describes as noble in breed and character and fully obedient to the charioteer, whereas the other is ill-bred, unruly and impulsive. The task of driving for the charioteer, having to harmonize and bring into line the two horses, of necessity becomes troublesome, "for the horse of evil nature weighs the chariot down, making it heavy and pulling toward the earth. [. . .] There the utmost toil and struggle await the soul" (*Phaedrus* 247B). In a situation of erotic attraction to which this image of the tripartite soul is then applied, the charioteer has to hold together the temperate, modest horse and the lustful, unruly one intent on "proposing the joys of love" (*Phaedrus* 254A). Plato's understanding of a savage part of the soul intent on satisfying the cravings of the body as always conflicting with a reasonable, restrained authority capable of spiritual refinement and of partaking of more worthy forms of love – even though imparted via numerous intermediate sources – proved to be enormously influential throughout much Renaissance philosophy and poetry and beyond.

In the *Timaeus*, Plato goes one step further in having Socrates physically locate the three parts of the soul in different parts of the body (*Timaeus* 69 B-72 D. According to his account of the creation of the human body, which Socrates deems "probable" (*Timaeus* 72D), the gods located the reasonable, immortal part of the soul in the head, separating it as far as possible from the lower mortal parts in the chest "by building an isthmus and boundary for the head and chest by setting between them the neck" (*Timaeus* 69E). The mortal part of the soul was again separated into one "that partakes of courage and spirit, since it is a lover of victory" and one that is "subject to appetites for food and drink, and all the other wants that are due to the nature of the body" (*Timaeus* 70A). These are physically

separated by the midriff, with the nobler, valorous part of the soul located closer to the head, in the chest region, while the gods placed the "savage" part that "would not understand reason" in the lower abdomen (*Timaeus* 70A, 71A). The separation of the soul into a reasonable, conscientious "mind" and a primitive, unruly "instinct," as well as an intermediate section that is courageous and ambitious, is here firmly established together with the clear evaluation and hierarchy of these three components.

The most elaborate discussion of the soul, however, occurs in the *Republic*, where the doctrine of its three components is closely tied to the three castes of society. In books II and III, Plato develops the notion that it is natural and beneficial to have three separate classes in society, each characterized by a dominant trait: Above the general populace seeking personal gain and incapable of restraining their appetite, there are the guardians or soldiers (*Republic* 373D-376E), suited for their task by a strongly developed sense of honour and courage (θυμός) and the wise rulers (*Republic* 412B-415D), later styled philosopher kings (*Republic* 471C-474B), set apart by their wisdom and reason (λόγος). Having thus established the necessity of having three distinct classes,[9] each with their distinguishing attribute, Plato goes on to derive from this notion the doctrine of the tripartite soul we have already discussed in *Phaedrus*[10] and *Timaeus*:

> But now the city was thought to be just because three natural kinds existing in it performed each its own function, and again it was sober, brave, and wise because of certain other affections and habits of these three kinds. [. . .] [W]e shall thus expect the individual also to have these same forms in his soul, and by reason of identical affections of these with those in the city to receive properly the same appellations.
>
> *(Republic 435 B)*

The reference to the "same appellations" indicates that Plato names the three parts of the soul so that each recalls the title of that social class in which the respective part of the soul is uppermost. This analogy of three classes, each with another part of the tripartite soul as their dominant characteristic, is pervasive throughout the *Republic*.[11] "The entire Republic is governed by the parallelism of state and soul."[12] Apelt remarks in his annotations, "Corresponding to the three classes, i.e. the philosopher-kings, the guardians and the farmers, in the soul there are λόγος, θυμός and επιθυμία" (449, n. 46).[13]

From this static analogy of state and soul, Plato logically elaborates a dynamic notion of the parallel development of political and psychological structures in any transition to a new form of government. In Socrates's discussion with Adeimantos, it becomes apparent how corruption in the

form of government will also bring about corruption in the soul. Socrates traces the development of a timocratic type into an oligarchical type and shows how, in the course of that development, the greedy and unruly part of the soul will come to usurp the dominant position from the reasonable and courageous parts:

> [He] turns to the getting of money, and greedily and stingily and little by little by thrift and hard work collects property. Do you not suppose that such a one will then establish on [his soul's] throne the principle of appetite and avarice, and set it up as the great king in his soul. [. . .] And under this domination he will force the rational and courageous [parts of the soul] to crouch lowly to right and left as slaves. [. . .] Would not this be the character of the man who corresponds to such a polity [the oligarchy]?
>
> *(Republic 553C-D)*[14]

What I want to argue in this chapter is that this blending of political hierarchy with the psycho-physical internal hierarchy[15] in remarkably persistent ways – if in varying degrees of proximity to Plato's notion – reappears in the texts central to this chapter, both the two discussed in some detail, *Paradise Lost* and Shelley's "A Philosophical View of Reform" and in central debates these texts illustrate, namely, debates of the English Revolution and its aftermath, and those of the French Revolution and its repercussions in England, here touched upon in two brief sections introducing my detailed discussions of Milton and Shelley.

Entr'acte 1: Uses of the Body Politic during and after the English Revolution

The classic seventeenth-century account of the body politic, the notion of an analogy between the individual body and the larger social fabric of the state, occurs, of course, in Hobbes's 1651 *Leviathan*, where it is prominently expounded in the "Introduction":

> For by Art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMONWEALTH, or STATE, (in latine CIVITAS) which is but an Artificiall Man; though of greater stature and strength than the Naturall, for whose protection and defence it was intended; and in which, the Soveraignty is an Artificiall Soul, as giving life and motion to the whole body; The Magistrates, and other Officers of Judicature and Execution, artificiall Joynts; Reward and Punishment (by which fastned to the seat of the Soveraignty, every joynt and member is moved to performe his

> duty) are the Nerves, that do the same in the Body Naturall; The Wealth and Riches of all the particular members, are the Strength; Salus Populi (the Peoples Safety) its Businesse; Counsellors, by whom all things needfull for it to know, are suggested unto it, are the Memory; Equity and Lawes, an artificiall Reason and Will; Concord, Health; Sedition, Sicknesse; and Civill War, Death. Lastly, the Pacts and Covenants, by which the parts of this Body Politique were at first made, set together, and united, resemble that Fiat, or the Let Us Make Man, pronounced by God in the Creation.
>
> *(8)*[16]

This analogy is also central to the *Rump Songs*,[17] a 1662 collection of some 200 Royalist poems and songs fully entitled *Rump: or an Exact Collection of the Choycest Poems and Songs Relating to the Late Times, by the Most Eminent Wits, from Anno 1639 to Anno 1661*.[18] An overview of key motifs and literary strategies of the collection will show the almost ubiquitous expression of political thoughts in terms of the anatomy of the human body, thus echoing the common fusion of political thoughts with the reflections on the human faculties or parts of the human body we have seen in Plato. As a reference to the remaining parliament after Pride's Purge,[19] the term "Rump" first appears in an anonymous pamphlet, "The Bloody Rump," around the turn of the year 1648/1649 (for the history of the collection, see Fischer).

However, the designation only gained wide currency in its application to the second Rump Parliament, the last, fiercely anti-royalist parliament of 1659 to 1660.[20] But although the term "Rump" was not used before 1649, it later came to be applied to all anti-royalist political opponents. It is this general, frequently retrospective usage that allowed even the large number of songs dating from 1639 and the first Bishop's War to late 1648 and the time of Pride's Purge to be classified under "Rump Songs."

Much of the poetry in the *Rump Songs* thus varies and expands on the traditional anti-revolutionary topos according to which all revolutionary liberalism is at best necessarily concomitant with a coarsening of morals and an anarchically licentious lifestyle. At worst, so anti-revolutionary rhetoric has it, political liberation is but a pretext for the subversion of all order and for unrestrained, anarchic debauchery – "License they mean when they cry liberty" (Milton, "Sonnet XII," line 11).

Behind the "licence and liberty" problem is again the metaphorical conflation of the body politic with the human faculties, and the suggestion that a political revolution or "turning upside down" of state institutions will naturally bring about a parallel revolution within the individual, which

will invert the hierarchical order of the human faculties by subjecting reason to the "vulgar passions."

But behind these references to the inverted and perverted order of the body politic, there are older classical traditions of writing about revolutions and times of upheaval. One such traditional intertext is the fable, found in Aesop and Plutarch, about the serpent whose tail aspired to rule the head. This tale of Plutarch is explicitly referred to in the *Rump* poem "Upon Cromwell's pulling out the Long Parliament 1653," which is subtitled an "Alligory" [sic]:

> As *Plutarch* doth write, (a Man of known Credit)
> A *Serpent* there was had a Mutinous *Tayle*
> Rebell'd 'gainst the *Head* that so oft had fed it,
> And would not permit it to lead, or prevail: (I, 320)

These traditional patterns of describing a revolution in the anatomical terms of a rebellion of the "members" – more specifically of the Rump or "*Tayle*" – against the "*Head*" as well as of the concomitant revolution of the human faculties became most plausible and suggestive after the trial and execution of King Charles I as the "head" by the Rump Parliament on January 30, 1649. The other established intertext is the fable of the rebellion of the members against the belly that occurs in Plutarch's *Vita* of Coriolanus[21] and is then famously expounded by Menenius in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* (I, i, 86–162).

This fable becomes even more significant as an intertext for the English Revolution when we bear in mind that there had long been a variant of it, according to which the members rebelled against the head rather than the belly (Peil, 17 et passim; Hale passim). A slightly later example of this version of the fable is by Roger L'Estrange, royalist journalist and pamphleteering opponent to Milton,[22] who contributed at least one poem to the *Rump Songs*.[23] In his *Fables of Aesop* (1692), L'Estrange, in abstracting the "moral" of the fable, shifts the centre of authority from the belly to the head: "The Publick is but one Body, and the Prince the Head on't; so that what Member soever withdraws his Service from the Head, is no Better than a Negative Traitor to his Country." In the "Reflexion" on the "allegory," L'Estrange asserts:

> This Allegory is a Political Reading upon the State and Condition of Civil Communities, where the Members have their Several Offices, and Every Part Contributes respectively to the Preservation and Service of the Whole. There is so near an *Analogy* betwixt the State of a Body Natural, and Politique, that the Necessity of Government and Obedience

> cannot be better Represented. [. . .] There are Degrees of Dignity [. . .] and One Part is to be Subservient to Another, in the Order of Civil Policy, as well as in the Frame of a Man's Body.
>
> *(L'Estrange 50f.; for brief discussions, see Hale 132; Peil 144)*

This blending of political hierarchy with the psycho-physical internal hierarchy is characteristic of much conservative or anthropologically pessimistic political thinking. It was apparent in Plato's *Republic*, and I will here trace it again in later texts, such as *Paradise Lost*, Wordsworth' *Prelude* and, more obliquely, even Shelley's essay. Throughout this tradition, references to the body politic are so clearly impregnated with conservative implications that we can speak of discursive path dependencies here (for this notion, see also Chapter 6); other conclusions were largely unthinkable.[24]

Anti-Democratic Republicanism: Human Nature and the Body Politic Analogy in *Paradise Lost*

I here want to illustrate the persistence of Platonic conceptions of the body politic in *Paradise Lost* and to show how Milton's conception can illuminate present-day debates about the "problems of liberty."[25] Rather than tracing Milton's republicanism and his anti-democratic views to classic republicanism through to Machiavelli as is commonly done, I argue that the Platonic conception of different social castes and their subdivision according to the mental constitution of their members is at least an equally important source. I will, therefore, discuss Milton's views of "the people" and the close connection between his views of "human nature" and his political thought both in *Paradise Lost* and in a number of other texts written at approximately the same time. Here, too, to be sure, I am not interested in deriving "answers" to current challenges from a seventeenth-century text, but in the questions it raises and in the way it stages the debate. The key to a political reading of *Paradise Lost*, I argue, lies in an anthropological diagnosis which forces Milton to give up his earlier optimism and to set out on a probing exploration of the challenges at the heart of any liberalism, an investigation that leads him to remarkably authoritarian conclusions. This exploration will be shown to revolve around the problematic nature of the senses and their relationship to reason. More specifically, I will argue that the senses are politicized by means of the body politic analogy: The internal hierarchies of reason, senses and passions are rendered with remarkable consistency in the *political* terminology of domination and subservience. By doing so, I highlight the role of Milton's anthropology and, particularly, his view of the senses and their relationship to reason in such a political reading.[26] I will argue that Milton's anthropological

views, as they become explicit especially in some of his later prose works and as they are developed in the Adam and Eve relationship, are far more central to a reading of the political subtext of *Paradise Lost* than they have been in previous accounts of the poem. Rather than being an apology for the Revolution, as the classic "leftist" reading maintains, *Paradise Lost* is the account of the failure of a Revolution: In the English Revolution as read through Milton's epic, political idealism clashes with anthropological realities.

Let us begin with what seems a politically inconspicuous passage on the five senses. Here is Adam, lecturing Eve on reason, fancy and the senses:

> But know that in the soul
> Are many lesser faculties that serve
> Reason as chief; among these fancy next
> Her office holds; of all external things,
> Which the five watchful senses represent,
> She forms imaginations, airy shapes,
> Which reason joining or disjoining, frames
> All what we affirm or what deny, and call
> Our knowledge or opinion.
> (*Paradise Lost* V, 100–108)

What we find here is a rather standard early modern understanding of the relationship between reason, fancy and the senses.[27] But what is illuminating is the way in which this discussion is metaphorically politicized by means of the body politic analogy: The relations among the inner faculties, as so often in Milton, are rendered in the political terminology of rule, domination and subservience.[28] This conflation of mental and political hierarchies, this politicization of the senses, I will argue, is central to an understanding of Milton's anthropology and its role in a political reading of *Paradise Lost*. I here follow Walker, who has argued that, "[t]hough there is considerable disagreement amongst historians of political thought over what the republican view of human nature is, there is [. . .] strong agreement *that* a view on this issue is a major premise in republican argumentation about politics" (§ 2, emphasis added). Walker compares Milton's views to the tradition of republican thought (Aristotle, Cicero, Machiavelli) and adduces a number of the key passages from *Paradise Lost* that I also discuss, but the importance of Milton's anthropological convictions and his image of human nature for a reading of the epic in the light of the English Revolution remains to be established.

In a passage from the *History of Britain*, begun in 1647 but not published until 1671, we find fairly drastic criticism of the revolutionary

leaders who have proven to be "unfit," but also a devastatingly pessimistic assessment of the people of England and their capacity for reason and responsible political participation:

> Thus they who of late were extoll'd as our greatest Deliverers, and had the People wholly at their Devotion, by so discharging their Trust as we see, did not only weaken and unfit themselves to be dispensers of what Liberty they pretended, but unfitted also to the People, now grown worse and more disordinate, to receive or to digest any Liberty at all.
>
> *("Character of the Long Parliament" 488)*[29]

The ideal form of government – and the one that would allow for the maximum degree of freedom – Milton claims in the "Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth," would be a republic "where no single person, but reason only swaies" (427). Barbara Kiefer Lewalski summarizes Milton's view on the subject as follows:

> Like others in the tradition of Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli, [Milton] believed that kinds of government – monarchy, aristocracy, democracy – must conform to the nature of the people, and that people get the government they deserve and are fit for. [. . .] [Monarchy] is a debased form of government only suited to a servile, debased people. Properly, government should be shared among the large body of worthy citizens who are virtuous and love liberty.[30]

This interdependence of the citizens' individual reason and virtue on the one hand and the freedom a nation is capable of attaining and maintaining on the other hand is indeed fundamental also to *Paradise Lost*.[31] The possibility of freedom, Milton argues in both his prose and his poetry, depends on the ability of the people to be reasonable, to control their senses and to restrain their passions: "Liberty hath a sharp and double edge, fit only to be handled by Just and Vertuous Men, to bad and dissolute, it becomes a mischief unweildy [sic] in their own hands" ("Character of the Long Parliament" 448). It seems, however, that as the 1650s wore on, Milton progressively lost faith in the moral and intellectual capabilities of his compatriots. How, we might ask with a view to contemporary debates, do agents in political crises make sense of political experience by using cultural resources – here the notion of the body politic and its implications from the *Politeia* – as a conceptual foil and, at times, as a "script" (see also Chapter 6).[32] What we can witness with Milton, I believe, is the way in which the experience of the 1640s and 1650s is conceptualized in terms

of the Platonic template of the body politic. This is what we need to study now, first in the prose works, then in *Paradise Lost*.

In *Eikonoklastes*, his 1649 defence of the regicide, Milton expressed his disgust at the popular reception of the royalist pamphlet *Eikon Basilike*. He here speaks of the people as an "inconstant, irrational and Image-doting rabble" and "a credulous and hapless herd [. . .] inchanted with these popular institutes of Tyranny" and denounces his countrymen as "by nature slaves, and arrant beasts; not fitt for that liberty which they cri'd out and bellow'd for, but fitter to be led back again into thir old servitude, like a sort of clamouring & fighting brutes" (601, 581). In the "Defence of the People of England" of February 1651, he laments the "stubborn struggles of the wicked citizens" and complains that kings were able to "shelter [. . .] themselves behind the blind superstitions of the mob" (316f., 521f.). In one of the more striking of his vulgophobic outbursts, he rails: "what a miserable, credulous, deluded thing that creature is, which is call'd the Vulgar," to whom he ascribes "a besotted and degenerate baseness of spirit" ("Eikonoklastes" 426, 344). In "The Readie and Easie Way," his last fierce and desperate argument against the Restoration during the last chaotic weeks of the Commonwealth, he advocated restricted franchise and an oligarchy to keep the mob in check (458ff.).

Hill rightly argues that "[f]or Milton liberty is licence, tending to anarchy, unless it is tempered by a recognition of God's purposes" (1977, 267). And his belief in the reason of the populace to acknowledge and follow just these "God's purposes" seems to have been limited to begin with and to have waned entirely as the 1650s wore on. Trubowitz even goes so far as to argue that "Milton's later writings are marked by a profound contempt for the English people" (390).

Let us turn to *Paradise Lost* and a reading of Milton's assessment of the "licence and liberty problem" and the hierarchy of the faculties.

This is not the place to attempt to add to centuries and libraries of discussion about Milton's account of Adam's and Eve's relationship and of the Fall itself. I am only concerned here with Milton's discussion of the proper relationship of the faculties, particularly of the senses and passions as opposed to reason, insofar as that is relevant to a political reading.

In the very first view we get of Adam and Eve in book IV, there seems to be a distinction in the attribution of the faculties of mind and body to Adam and Eve, respectively:

> For contemplation he and valor formed,
> For softness she and sweet attractive grace,
> He for God only, she for God in him.
> (IV, 297–299)

This distinction is confirmed by Eve in her account of her first encounter with Adam just after her creation and after she had seen her own reflection in the pond. She, too, affirms the superiority of "wisdom" over "beauty":

> I yielded, and from that time see
> How beauty is excelled by manly grace
> And wisdom, which alone is truly fair.
> (IV, 489ff.)

This seemingly simple and traditional conception of gender hierarchies, to be sure, is complicated and undermined in numerous ways:[33] The reading experience of *Paradise Lost* in places appears to work against the arguments the text makes on a propositional level. There is surely an effect that might be called "redemption through poetry," for instance as far as Eve is concerned, where the poetry goes against the grain of doctrine: Against what is discursively affirmed about her inferiority to Adam, she is in many ways the more interesting character.[34] However, Eve here affirms what is discursively explicit throughout much of *Paradise Lost*, namely, male superiority through superior intellect. But although Adam tells Raphael

> For well I understand in the prime end
> Of Nature her th'inferior, in the mind
> And inward faculties (VIII, 540ff.)

he is not able to maintain his superiority in the face of "her loveliness" (VIII, 547). Passion interferes and subjects "all higher knowledge" to its rule (VIII, 551). This is again made plain in the Archangel Raphael's admonitions not to confuse "love" with "subjection" in moments of passionate "transports":

> For what admir'st thou so, what transports thee so,
> An outside? Fair no doubt, and worthy well
> Thy cherishing, thy honouring and thy love,
> Not thy subjection.
> (VIII, 567–570)

Raphael exhorts him not to allow sexuality – shared by "cattle and each beast" – to "subdue" his soul; sexuality is here tellingly referred to as the "sense of touch":

> But if the sense of touch whereby mankind
> Is propagated seem such dear delight

> Beyond all other, think the same vouchsafed
> To cattle and each beast, which would not be
> To them made common and divulged, if aught
> Therein enjoyed were worthy to subdue
> The soul of man, and passion in him move.
> (VIII, 579–585)

To be sure, as the discussion of angelic love-life in book VIII makes clear (618–629),[35] sex itself is perfectly innocent if balanced by intellectual pursuits. Thus, there is nothing wrong with the sense of touch in itself or with sexual pleasure, even in prelapsarian Eden (see Moshenska 6); touch only becomes problematic when the senses overpower reason.

Given the centrality of reason to liberty in Milton's politics *and* theology, it is surprising, I believe, that Moshenska, like many other critics commenting on Milton's discussion of the senses, does not comment on the political implications of these anthropological discussions. Curiosity, passion, envy and hate: According to Milton in *De Doctrina Christiana* as well as in *Paradise Lost*, all factors in the Fall of Satan as well as Adam and Eve are sinful in that they are departures from reason.[36] As far as the anthropological implications of the Fall are concerned, Christopher Ricks has argued that Milton sought to dissolve the "dichotomy between body and spirit" (xvii). However, I have been arguing that Milton very firmly upholds the dichotomy: He merely complicates the clear attribution of body to Eve and spirit to Adam. But although *Paradise Lost* undermines a one-to-one correspondence of Adam with reason and Eve with the body, Milton's frequent stress on *her* beauty and *his* capacity for contemplation at least echo the traditional allegorical readings of the Fall, as A.B. Chambers has shown in an overview of Milton's sources and his reliance mainly on the reading of St. Augustine (118–130). One such allegorical reading was known to him in the form of Thomas Aquinas's summary of St. Augustine, a reading ultimately going back to Philo Judaeus:

> In every sin we discover the same order as in the first temptation. For, according to Augustine, the temptation begins with concupiscence of sin by the sensuality, signified by the serpent; reaches to the lower reason by pleasure, signified by the woman; and extends to the higher reason by consent to the sin, signified by the man.[37]

However, whether it is passion, pity or uxoriousness that causes Adam's Fall (as commentators in the considerable critical debate over the question have variously maintained), Diekhoff rightly remarks that the dialogue with Raphael foreshadows Adam's Fall and its cause: An insufficient use

of reason to which the senses and the passions they induce are not suitably subjected (64ff.). Raphael's earlier admonitions are then closely echoed in the Son's reproaches to Adam *after* the Fall:

> Was she thy God, that her thou didst obey
> Before his voice, or was she made thy guide,
> Superior, or but equal, that to her
> Thou didst resign thy manhood and the place
> Wherein God set thee above her [. . .]
> [. . .] whose perfection far excelled
> Hers in all real dignity? Adorned
> She was indeed, and lovely to attract
> Thy love, not thy subjection, and her gifts
> Were such as under government well seemed,
> Unseemly to bear rule, which was thy part
> And person hadst thou known thyself aright.
> (X, 145–156)

In the state of Adam and Eve after the Fall, the subjection of passion and the senses to reason is yet once more brought home as having been the central sin and fault. The inversion of the classic Platonic hierarchy of the faculties is here again tellingly depicted in a blend of political and psychological terms:

> For understanding ruled not, and the will
> Heard not her lore, both in subjection now
> To sensual appetite, who from beneath
> Usurping over sovereign reason claimed
> Superior sway.
> (IX, 1127–1131)

The anthropology developed in the relationship of Adam and Eve, I argue, can be read as an expression of Milton's exasperation at the lack of reason and understanding in the populace. The course of the revolution, it seems, led Milton to shed much of his earlier faith in reason – or more precisely, in the capacity of the majority of his compatriots to use theirs.

While it may well be true that, in the 1640s, Milton (unlike Hobbes) did not believe that the revolution he was hoping for must necessarily result in anarchy and the loss of freedom (see Dyson/Lovelock, "Intro" 11), the anthropology implicit in the Adam and Eve relationship and explicit in the passages from his later prose works discussed earlier show

that this is precisely what he did believe later on. This, *Paradise Lost* implies, lay at the heart of the failed Revolution: Milton's anthropological scepticism is at odds with his political idealism. "Blame for failure lies not in the aims – which were God's, and remain right – but in the English people. [. . .] Political failure was ultimately moral failure" (Hill 1977, 350).

What becomes evident in *Paradise Lost* is not so much just a partisan's disappointment in the collapse of the English Revolution but a deeply pessimistic assessment of the ambitious and unreasonable side of "human nature." To Milton, this seemed manifest in the inability of his compatriots to handle the "sharp and double edge" of "Liberty" ("Character of the Long Parliament" 448; see previous section). Anthropologically and with reference to his general understanding of human rational and moral capabilities, the failure of the Revolution is dramatized in Adam and Eve and in Eden: Who are they but "the people"? The following passage, which Milner calls "almost certainly one of the most important in the poem" (163), uses the analogy of the body and the state to subtly blend the political and anthropological judgements on the "upstart passions" usurping the government from "reason," resulting in the loss of freedom:

> Since thy original lapse, true liberty
> Is lost, which always with right reason dwells
> Twinned, and from her hath no dividual being:
> Reason in man obscured, or not obeyed,
> Immediately inordinate desires
> And upstart passions catch the government
> From reason, and to servitude reduce
> Man till then free. Therefore since he permits
> Within himself unworthy powers to reign
> Over free reason, God, in judgement just,
> Subjects him from without to violent lords;
> Who oft as undeservedly enthral
> His outward freedom: tyranny must be,
> Though to the tyrant thereby no excuse.
> Yet sometimes nations will decline so low
> From virtue, which is reason, that no wrong,
> But justice, and some fatal curse annexed
> Deprives them of their outward liberty,
> Their inward lost.
>
> (XII, 83–101)

Milner reads this passage as follows:

> the responsibility for the Restoration rests neither with the Stuarts nor with those Independents who had failed to provide adequate political guarantees against the possibility of a Restoration, but rather with that English nation which had declined so low from virtue that it no longer deserved any fate other than that of tyranny.[38]

What is crucial to my argument here is the way in which the passage allows us to see the transition from what Berlin calls "the positive conception of liberty" as "rational self-direction" – Milton's "true liberty [. . .] which always with right reason dwells" (XII, 83f.) – to Rousseau's conception according to which those in error must be forced to be free by those who (allegedly) know better (see previous section).

Moreover, the passage closely corresponds to one in the "Second Defence of the English People" of 1654 highlighting a nation's ability to "rule and govern itself" rather than giving in to "its own lusts," a precondition for any form of political liberty: "By the customary judgement and, so to speak, just retaliation of God, it happens that a nation which cannot rule and govern itself, but has delivered itself into slavery to its own lusts, is enslaved also to other masters whom it does not choose" (684).[39]

The fundamental problem of liberty as staged in *Paradise Lost*, then, is the problem of "licence" and "liberty" – as discussed in Plato's *Republic* (359C) already – or the alleged inability of the masses responsibly to use their freedom and to subdue their senses and their passions by means of reason. The dialectic of licence and liberty in Milton's social thought finds one of its earliest and most memorable expressions in Sonnet XII (1645/46), in which Milton responds to the attacks against his liberal divorce pamphlets of 1643–1645. Here, he complains about the "hogs"

> That bawl for freedom in their senseless mood,
> And still revolt when truth would set them free.
> License[40] they mean when they cry liberty;
> For who loves that must first be wise and good (ll. 8–12).[41]

Only the "wise" and the "good," Milton maintains, can justly claim liberty. Conversely, the argument implicitly but unmistakably continues, the unruly mob has no right to liberty.

In the *History of Britain*, Milton similarly argues:

> liberty hath a sharp and double edge, fit only to be handled by just and virtuous men; to bad and dissolute, it becomes a mischief unwieldy in their own hands: neither is it completely given, but by them who have the happy skill to know what is grievance and unjust to a people, and how to remove it wisely; what good laws are wanting, and how to frame them substantially, that good men may enjoy the freedom which they merit, and the bad the curb which they need.
>
> *("Character of the Long Parliament" 448; see previous section)*[42]

Milton's understanding of the necessarily different degrees of freedom permissible to different sets of people is virtually indistinguishable from the arguments Edmund Burke advanced over a hundred years later in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and the "Letter to a Member of the National Assembly of France," which can be seen as a summary of Burke's anthropology and the necessity for restrictions of freedom he derives from it:

> Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites – in proportion as their soundness and sobriety of understanding is above their vanity and presumption, – in proportion as they are more disposed to listen to the counsels of the wise and good, in preference to the flattery of knaves. Society cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.
>
> *(Burke 1989, 332; for a discussion, see Gassenmeier/Gurr)*

Unlikely allies that Burke and Milton seem to be, Milton, we may argue, would have fully subscribed to this view of the connection between people's ability to control their senses and rein in their passions on the one hand and the amount of freedom they merit on the other. What connects Milton to Burke, then, is the conflation of political and mental hierarchies: It is precisely in their inability to control the senses and the passions by subjecting them to reason that, according to this view, the majority of people reveal their inability to handle freedom. For Burke, this is the justification for a conservative ideology that does not trust people's reason: "We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small" (183). For

Milton, this failure exemplified in the Fall of Adam and Eve explains the failure of the people in the English Revolution. Behind both Milton's and Burke's conceptions, of course, there lurks a far older tradition: Their consistent conflation of political and psycho-physical hierarchies as well as the notion that the subordination of the senses to reason by analogy requires the subordination of the unreasonable herd of society to the wise and the good is indebted to a long tradition of thought in terms of the body politic that goes back to Plato.[43]

Paradise Lost thus develops an essentially pessimistic anthropology: Adam and Eve – "the people" in Eden – are unable to control their passions by means of reason. The consistent conflation of mental and political hierarchies then serves to establish a connection between a hierarchy of the human faculties and political systems, with republicanism requiring an ability to use one's reason. The connection between the liberty individuals deserve and their ability to behave rationally and responsibly is again made explicit in "The Readie and Easie Way" of 1660, written while Milton was also at work on *Paradise Lost*:

> More just it is doubtless, if it come to force, that a less number compel a greater to retain, which can be no wrong to them, their liberty, then that a greater number for the pleasure of their baseness, compel a less most injuriously to be their fellow slaves. They who seek nothing but their own just liberty, have always right to win it and to keep it, whenever they have power, be the voices never so numerous that oppose it.
>
> *(455)*

Here, of course, we come remarkably close to Rousseau's notorious distinction between the idealized "*volonté generale*" and the empirical "*volonté de tous*," which, if it is misguided, must be corrected according to the notorious passage in the *Social Contract* (1762) discussed earlier: "whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be forced by his whole body to do so. This means nothing but that he will be forced to be free" (I, VII).[44]

This, of course, is the point at which the potential elitist authoritarianism (or at least the rule of the knowledgeable few) – arising from the conflation of reason and liberty – Isaiah Berlin spoke of begins. *Paradise Lost* is thus a crucial text in my argument that the long shadow of Plato even influences thinkers who appear originally to have had high hopes for humanity: With Milton, the entire tradition of some 2,000 years of development from Athens and Rome, the notion of the two concepts of liberty, a negative one of liberty as the absence of interference by another and the positive one of rational self-direction with its potential for authoritarianism, illiberalism

or at least for scepticism about democracy – all of this is condensed and can be traced *in nuce*.

Entr'acte 2: "Human Nature" and the Body Politic Analogy in the French Revolution Debates and in Wordsworth's *Prelude*

Before turning to Shelley's Reform essay, the early 1790s "revolution controversy" (Butler) the French Revolution sparked in England provides a crucial context. It has been called "one of the most important political debates in Western history" (Sinding 78), with Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine as the most important exponents of the conservative and the liberal sides, respectively. This divide, as Sinding has pointed out, relied on radically different interpretations of the body politic analogy, a "bifurcation of cognitive vision" (99) that has much to teach us about polarization today (see the opening section of the present chapter). Rather than discuss the controversy in detail, I only need it as a foil for my reading of Shelley's Reform essay as arguably one of the most striking discussions of central problems of liberalism. I will here briefly discuss Burke's use of the body politic analogy (unsurprisingly, Paine "explicitly rejects traditional versions of the Body Politic metaphor," Sinding 93[45]). I then turn to Wordsworth's account of his initial enthusiasm for the French Revolution and his later turn to Burkean conservatism.[46]

In a highly complex passage on the body politic Sinding curiously does not discuss, Burke comments on the need for external restrictions on the "passions" of both "individuals" and of the "mass and body," invoking the classic conservative understanding of the body politic analogy:

> Society requires not only that the passions of individuals should be subjected, but that even in the mass and body, as well as in the individuals, the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection. This can only be done *by a power out of themselves*, and not, in the exercise of its function, subject to that will and to those passions which it is its office to bridle and subdue.
>
> *(Burke 151, italics original; for similar passage with a less explicit invocation of the "body politic," see previous section)*

It is important to note that, throughout the *Reflections*, Burke makes explicit the connection – familiar from Plato but central also to Rousseau, Milton and other key exponents of the body politic analogy – between assessments of human nature and political convictions. He does so, not least, by praising "the great legislators of antiquity" for basing the political

systems they designed on a thorough knowledge of "human nature." In fact, the notion of sorting humans into different "classes" and of "plac[ing] them in such situations" as their moral and intellectual disposition "might qualify them to fill" is closely indebted to Plato's notion of a correspondence between the mental composition of individuals and their belonging to one of the classes making up the order of the state and has been central to conservative thought, both in its fully formulated sense since Burke but also in a conservative tradition *avant la lettre* – one, to which, as we will see with Shelley, even the most unlikely thinkers have been drawn in the shadow of Plato:

> The legislators who framed the antient republics knew that [. . .] they were obliged to study human nature. [. . .] From hence they thought themselves obliged to dispose their citizens into such classes, and to place them in such situations in the state, as their peculiar habits might qualify them to fill, and to allot to them such appropriated privileges as might secure to them what their specific occasions required. [. . .] It is for this reason that Montesquieu observed very justly that in their classification of the citizens the great legislators of antiquity made the greatest display of their powers, and even soared above themselves.
>
> *(Burke 299f.; for the proximity of this conception to Milton's, see previous section)*

I here briefly turn to Wordsworth's *Prelude* as arguably the central *poetic* exploration of these issues in the period of the French Revolution, pointing out his highly illuminating way of conflating, at times even equating, the higher and lower faculties within his own "twofold frame of body and of mind" (XI, 169) with the body politic – and his own psychomachia with the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary struggle of the 1790s. In successive versions of the *Prelude*, these conceptions show growing proximity to Burke, who, in an insertion from 1832, is apostrophized as "genius of Burke" (1850, VII, 512).

Writing about key moments of intellectual and spiritual insights he calls "spots of time" (XI, 257),[47] and the mindset necessary to achieving them, Wordsworth makes a heightened awareness of the hierarchy of the faculties central to these moments:

> This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
> Among those passages of life in which
> We have had deepest feeling that the mind
> Is lord and master, and that outward sense
> Is but the obedient servant of her will.
>
> (XI, 268–272)

In a way that is crucial to my argument, this conception is again formulated in the political terminology of leadership and subservience. The exposition of this hierarchy of the faculties in the political terminology of a master-servant relationship will become highly significant for an account of Wordsworth's changing positions on the French Revolution in the early 1790s, which threw him into a profound intellectual and creative crisis. Speaking of his time in France in 1791, Wordsworth recounts his initial enthusiasm for the Revolution[48]: "[I] thus did soon/Become a patriot—and my heart was all/Given to the people, and my love was theirs" (IX, 123ff.). Because of his enthusiasm for the goals of the Revolution, he is willing to accept, even endorse its excesses and, engaging with the counter-revolutionary topos of accusing all revolutionaries of base and licentious motives, subordinates even such qualms to the insight "[t]hat throwing off oppression must be work/As well of licence as of liberty" (X, 746f.), as he admits, invoking Milton's opposition of "license" vs. "liberty."

Given the alienation from "nature," the "reasonings false" (883) which made him accept as necessary the excesses of the Revolution, and the close connection of such aberrations with a perversion of the hierarchy of mind and senses, it is not surprising that Wordsworth later associates his initial enthusiasm for the Revolution with a momentous inversion of the rightful internal hierarchies in moments when "the mind/Is lord and master, and that outward sense/Is but the obedient servant of her will" (XI, 270–272). Now, by contrast:

> 'twas a transport of the outward sense [. . .]
> Still craving [. . .] wider empire for the sight,
> Proud of its own endowments, [I] rejoiced
> To lay the inner faculties asleep.
> (XI, 188ff.)

The political terminology in which Wordsworth here once again renders this inversion is even stronger and applied more consistently in the following passage, in which "the eye" (171), rightfully a mere slave to the mind, is seen as having arrogated the position of "master" (171) and "despotic[ally]" (173) dominates the mind:

> The state to which I now allude was one
> In which the eye was master of the heart,
> When that which is in every stage of life
> The most despotic of our senses gained
> Such strength in me as often held my mind
> In absolute dominion
> (XI, 170ff.)

But the fusion of the internal order of the faculties with the body politic is not only achieved by transferring political metaphors of domination and subjection to the anatomy of the "twofold frame of body and of mind" (XI, 169). This metaphorical transition also occurs in the opposite direction: Wordsworth describes his revolutionary political speculations and the radical questioning of all traditions and institutions in terms of a vivisection and applies the medical and anatomical terminology to the political realm:

> I took the knife in hand,
> And, stopping not at parts less sensitive,
> Endeavoured with my best of skill to probe
> The living body of society
> Even to the heart. I pushed without remorse
> My speculations forward, yea, set foot
> On Nature's holiest places.
> (X, 872ff.)

The new hierarchy of the faculties, outlined in the political terms of a master-slave relationship, in remarkable metaphorical consistency becomes apparent as a deliberate inversion or "revolution" – in its etymological sense of a "turning upside down" – of the natural order of the faculties. And in the account of his reaction to Britain's declaration of war upon idealized revolutionary France, Wordsworth indeed applies the term "revolution" to his own frame of mind:

> [When] now the strength of Britain was put forth
> In league with the confederated host;
> Not in my single self alone I found,
> But in the minds of all ingenuous youth
> Change and subversion from this hour. No shock
> Given to my moral nature had I known
> Down to that very moment [. . .] that might be named
> A revolution, save at this one time
> (X, 229ff.; see also X, 136, "Inly I revolved")

Later, having turned away from the Revolution, Wordsworth early in book XII describes his regained state of moral stability as well as poetic sensibility and productivity in terms reminiscent of the "natural graciousness of mind" (XI, 46) – the original hierarchy of the faculties in which "the intellectual eye" (57) is reinstated as the guide and "instructor" (58) and the "feelings" (61) again become uppermost in judgements "of what was excellent and right" (63):

> Thus moderated, thus composed, [. . .]
> Again I took the intellectual eye
> For my instructor [. . .]
> Knowledge was given accordingly: my trust
> Was firmer in the feelings which had stood
> The test of such a trial, clearer far
> My sense of what was excellent and right
> (XII, 53–63)

Wordsworth, too, can thus be shown to equate times of political stability with a period when the mind is "lord and master" and times of political upheaval with times of moral and intellectual "revolution."

The Prelude thus lends itself to exemplifying the quintessential "conservative" Romantic interpretation of the body politic: With repeated allusions to Milton, Wordsworth's conception is closely in keeping with Burke's interpretation of the body politic and, as with Milton and Burke, centrally hinges on the conflation of the conservative anthropological and political convictions the body politic analogy between the individual and the state suggests. Versions of *The Prelude* from 1832 onwards even explicitly invoked the "genius of Burke" (1850, VII, 512; see previous section). As we will see, it is just this suggestive conflation of conceptions of human nature with political convictions and of mental with political hierarchies in the vein of Plato and Rousseau that will lead even a radically progressive thinker like Shelley into unexpected political contortions.

Aporias of Liberalism and Political Reform in Shelley's "A Philosophical View of Reform" (1819)

Shelley's essay "A Philosophical View of Reform," written in outraged response to the Peterloo Massacre against peaceful protesters for political reform in England, was abandoned by its author early in 1820. It remained a fragment and was only published in 1920.[49] Moreover, it remains significantly vague (and even literally leaves a gap) at precisely the point when it addresses the question of how to achieve the needed reforms. Nonetheless, the essay and especially the corresponding poems of 1819 have been influential texts in the history of European socialism and of labour movements, and several commentators have even spoken of the Reform essay as "the most advanced work of political theory of the age" (Cameron 1974, 149).[50] I have attempted to account for the fragmentary nature of the text elsewhere;[51] here, it is exactly this vagueness, specifically about the questions of whether to counter oppression by means of passive resistance or by revolutionary violence, that I wish to address.

I must begin with an overview of the essay itself and of the problems it proposes to solve. In the "Introduction," the first of three sections, Shelley surveys the development of liberty in world history from ancient Greece to the England of his own time; in the chapter entitled "On the Sentiment of the Necessity of Change," he argues the need for political and social reform in post-Napoleonic Britain and makes a good number of very reasonable proposals such as enlarging the suffrage, abolishing tithes, parliamentary reform, reducing the national debt, freedom of religion, etc. Difficulties only arise in the section entitled "Probable Means," in which Shelley attempts to chart a likely path to achieving these reforms. Here, he uneasily hovers between a call for passive resistance and a realization that revolutionary violence may be necessary.

Throughout the essay, there are passages which seem filled with high hopes for imminent change:

> The literature of England, an energetic development of which has ever followed or preceded a great and free development of the national will,[52] has arisen, as it were, from a new birth.
>
> *(19)*[53]

It is in a similarly optimistic vein that Shelley repeatedly calls for passive resistance in the hope that the tyrants will not be able to uphold for long a system of oppression in the face of a passively resisting multitude prepared to "receive with unshrinking bosoms the bayonets of the charging battalions":

> [I]f the tyrants command their troops to fire upon them or cut them down unless they disperse, [the true patriot] will exhort them peaceably to risque the danger, and to expect without resistance the onset of the cavalry, and wait with folded arms the event of the fire of the artillery and receive with unshrinking bosoms the bayonets of the charging battalions. [. . .] the soldiers are men and Englishmen, and it is not to be believed that they would massacre an unresisting multitude of their countrymen drawn up in unarmed array before them.
>
> *(48f.)*

This is the tone and tenor predominant in much of the *Reform* essay. But despite the high hopes, there are passages in which Shelley comes to realise that peaceful passive resistance may no longer be an option:

> It is possible that the period of conciliation is past, and that after having played with the confidence and cheated the expectations of the people,

> their passions will be too little under discipline to allow them to wait the slow, gradual and certain operation of such a Reform as we can imagine the constituted authorities to concede.
>
> *(46)*

Reform, it seems, may no longer be possible. And after the somewhat stubborn and logically inconsequential assertion that "[i]f the Houses of Parliament obstinately and perpetually refuse to concede any reform to the people, my vote is for universal suffrage and equal representation" (47), Shelley launches into a tortuous line of reasoning that ultimately leads him to the realization that violent "struggle must ensue":

> My vote is – but, it is asked, how shall this be accomplished [. . .]? This question I would answer by another. [. . .] When the majority in any nation arrive at a conviction that it is their duty and their interest to divest the minority of a power employed to their disadvantage; and the minority are sufficiently mistaken as to believe that their superiority is tenable, a struggle must ensue.
>
> *(47)*

While, in a number of passages throughout the essay, he maintains that nonviolent protest is the appropriate and promising means to achieve the necessary reforms, he here acknowledges that this is no longer an option under the prevailing political circumstances. The clearest recognition that revolutionary violence is inevitable, however, occurs in the following brief passage: "For so dear is power that the tyrants themselves neither then, nor now, nor ever, left or leave a path to freedom but through their own blood" (6). But even advocacy of revolutionary violence is recognized to be an untenable position, for reforms achieved by means of violence, Shelley acknowledges, are only attained at the price of their immediate self-cancellation: They cannot be made to last. If the republic Shelley hopes for and is trying to promote is brought about by means of violence, it risks being an unstable one destined for failure: "A Republic, however just in its principle and glorious in its object, would through violence and sudden change which must attend it, incur a great risk of being as rapid in its decline as in its growth" (41).

What lies behind Shelley's hovering between passive resistance and the call for revolution,[54] more precisely, what lies behind his quick insistence that revolution cannot responsibly be claimed as an option, is a profound despair in view of an anthropological scepticism that is uncomfortably hinted at throughout the essay: Shelley apparently came to believe that the masses were neither prepared nor able to carry out a revolution. But

there is an even more problematic thought behind it: The masses, Shelley appears to have believed, would not be able to handle the liberty a revolution might bring. This is Shelley again, arguing by historical analogy – here with both the English Revolution of the mid-seventeenth century and the French Revolution – that a revolution would lead to uncontrollable violence and could not be a means of achieving the desired liberties: "The authors of both [the English and the French] Revolutions proposed a greater and more glorious object than the degraded passions of their countrymen permitted them to attain" (15). Similarly, he argues that "the poor [. . .] by means of that degraded condition [. . .] are sufficiently incapable of discerning their own genuine and permanent advantage" (21). This notion of the inability of the people to know what is best for them is, of course, directly in line with the tradition central to this chapter, the tradition from Plato via Rousseau (both mentioned approvingly in Shelley's essay; see my epigraph) to recent anti-democratic thought in Brennan and others.

It becomes painfully clear in the course of Shelley's treatise that this hovering between a call for passive resistance throughout the better part of the text and the acknowledgement that violence may be inevitable cannot be an ingenious double strategy, superficially claiming to warn the masses against violence while obliquely showing it to be the only solution. Rather, it is the result of a fundamental anthropological and political problem that may well have been impossible to solve under the prevailing conditions: In the process of penning the essay, Shelley must have come to understand, quite against his own deeply held "liberal" persuasions, that neither passive resistance nor violence under the circumstances were possible means of bringing about and of securing the desired reforms.[55]

What Shelley has unwillingly succeeded in making clear in a number of laborious and conflictive argumentative circles in the essay (and in the obvious contradictions and evasions in the poetry of the same time; see Gurr 2017) is that, first, he sees no hope for gradual and peaceful reform. Secondly, he seems to have come to understand that revolutionary violence is inevitable. But he has made it equally clear that a revolution could only bring about its own decline and could only end in disaster. There is, Shelley has shown at this point in the essay, no solution, for there is no responsible or even feasible means of achieving and securing the desired liberties.

It is virtually on the last page of the essay that this dilemma once more becomes glaringly obvious. This is Shelley again, without any abbreviations or omissions on my part (a look at the facsimile of the manuscript is highly illuminating here).[56] The hyphen ending in the void, the incomplete

sentence and the anguished blank space (just over two pages in the manuscript!) are all original:

> These brief considerations suffice to show that the true friend of mankind and of his country would hesitate before he recommended measures which tend to bring down so heavy a calamity as war –
>
> I imagine however that before the English Nation shall arrive at that point of moral and political degradation now occupied by the Chinese, it will be necessary to appeal to an exertion of physical strength. If the madness of parties admits no other mode of determining the question at issue,
>
> When the people shall have obtained, by whatever means, the victory over their oppressors and when persons appointed by them shall have taken their seats in the Representative Assembly of the nation, and assumed control of public affairs according to constitutional rules, there will remain the great task of accommodating all that can be preserved of antient forms with the improvements of the knowledge of a more enlightened age, in legislation, jurisprudence, government and religious and academical institutions.
>
> *(54; omission marks original)*[57]

The solution to Shelley's fundamental question – how to achieve the necessary reforms – remains undiscovered; it lies precisely in the unfinished sentence at the end of the second paragraph and in the gap which Shelley here leaves in the manuscript. After which he happily goes to list all the wonderful changes to be made once "the people shall have obtained, *by whatever means*, the victory over their oppressors" (my italics). Here, in the section "Probable Means," the entire point of which is to delineate ways of achieving "the victory over their oppressors," the evasive "by whatever means" at this crucial moment is the ultimate admission of defeat. Half a page later, after another highly significant reflection on the tendency for bloody revenge in the uneducated masses – another argument against revolution – the essay breaks off.

Rarely has the *aporia* of an argumentative endeavour stared one in the face more openly. It is hard to see why even the landmark 2013 *Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley* remains so noncommittal on this point: "Shelley for unknown reasons never carried the work to completion" (Scrivener 171). There is, it seems, no need to resort to external reasons to explain why the text had to remain incomplete. Fear of not finding a publisher for his essay, as the standard explanation has it,[58] can hardly have made him give up the project: Many of Shelley's texts – including "The

Masque of Anarchy" (only published in 1832) – remained unpublished in his lifetime. The blatant contradictions and the unresolved ambivalence about revolutionary violence are sufficient to explain why Shelley abandoned the essay.

As far as the critical fate of Shelley's text is concerned, it seems that it is, not least, this specific type of ambiguity which has allowed it to be read in more than one way and which may account for its remarkable – if belated – recognition as "the most advanced work of political theory of the age" (Cameron 1974, 149). It may be important to note that Shelley's essay (as well as early scholarly work by Shelley's then few defenders, such as Peck) was published at a time when his critical standing was far from secure. Broader interest in – and frequently sympathy with – the *Reform* essay and its *prima facie* progressive politics only arose at a time when Shelley's role as a major Romantic poet and thinker had become virtually unassailable (for a history of Shelley's reputation and especially his detractors in the early twentieth century, see Reiman/Freistat). Upon publication in 1920, the essay, together with Shelley's poetry written at the same time (especially "The Masque of Anarchy" and "England in 1819"), became extremely important for the British labour movement.

Shelley's harshest critics thus did not even engage with the essay. T.S. Eliot and other generally conservative despisers of Shelley would most likely have read his hovering between the call for passive resistance and for revolutionary violence and his evasiveness at crucial points of the essay as evidence of his intellectual immaturity. Thus, while Eliot does grant Shelley "poetic gifts [. . .] of the first order" (86), he complains that Shelley never put these powers to the service of more intelligent political ideas:

> The ideas of Shelley seem to me always to be ideas of adolescence [. . .] And an enthusiasm for Shelley seems to me also to be an affair of adolescence. [. . .] I do not mean that Shelley had a metaphysical or philosophical mind; his mind was in some ways a very confused one: he was able to be at once and with the same enthusiasm an eighteenth-century rationalist and a cloudy Platonist.
>
> *(81f.)*

This is clearly unfair – but not entirely inaccurate. The hovering between enlightenment rationalism and cloudy Platonism, between astonishing optimism about the development of liberty in many European countries and surprisingly critical remarks about the degree of political maturity in the English population of his time or between radical democratic commitment and a latently anti-democratic form of republicanism is indeed contradictory. It is, I argue, not least a result of Shelley's dyed-in-the-wool

Platonism in evidence in the Reform essay: "Morals and politics can only be considered as portions of the same science, with relation to a system of such absolute perfection as Plato and Rousseau and other reasoners have asserted" (70).

Though as a radical in the tradition of Paine and Godwin, Shelley rejected the organic analogy of the body politic idea and its overwhelmingly conservative associations, he was Platonist enough to take over the notion of an elective affinity between individual and collective sensibility, education and responsibility on the one hand and the political system suited to these predispositions on the other hand: From the opening paragraphs onwards and throughout the essay, Shelley juxtaposes systems of "domination and imposture" on the one hand and of "liberty and equality" on the other (2, see also 27), thus echoing republican notions of liberty as "non-interference" and "non-domination" (see Berlin; Pettit 1997) as well as the "positive liberty" notion of self-directed rationality. Shelley, as arguably the most unlikely exponent, can thus be shown to exemplify the uneasy oscillations between "an ethical doctrine of individual responsibility and individual self-perfection" and the temptation to some thinkers of "an authoritarian state obedient to the directives of an élite of Platonic guardians" (20) that Berlin has drawn attention to.

Conclusion: The History of Ideas, Historical Anthropology and Literary Negotiations of Liberalism and Its Discontents

Let me sum up my discussion of these texts and attempt a brief retrospective synthesis of the kind of approach this implies and of what it might accomplish: What we can observe with Milton is the way in which the latently anti-democratic tendencies of classical republicanism come to the fore when the anthropological convictions of an elitist rationalist are spelled out and unfolded in the terms of a Platonic body politic analogy that is strangely at odds with Milton's revolutionary republicanism. What we can see with Shelley is again how, in Isaiah Berlin's terms, any political outlook crucially hinges on anthropological assumptions about the ability and willingness of humans to act responsibly. Moreover, Shelley allows us to see *in nuce* how even radical thinkers who adopt Plato's body politic notion of a correspondence between the individual and the state sometimes cannot help also buying into the conservative implications the body politic analogy is impregnated with.

What does this mean for the kind of approach I propose for this type of history of ideas *cum* presentifying literary analysis? One issue with a traditional form of the history of ideas, in Macksey's formulation is that it "traces certain 'unit-ideas' as they find expression in a wide range of

cultural fields from philosophic systems to literature, the other arts, the sciences, and social thought" (Macksey 1084) but that it is frequently less concerned with the contexts and functions of any specific *use* of such a unit idea. There is the additional problem that there is a "bias toward the continuous narrative [of these central ideas] at the expense of the originality of any given formulation" (Macksey 1089). This frequently means that if literary texts are discussed, they are tapped into below their potential: They are frequently studied merely as discursive contributions to a debate rather than as aesthetic objects. My point is not so much to use literary texts to decode a culture – an aim that almost inevitably leads to deprivileging the aesthetic (the work of the "Cambridge School" and especially of Pocock and Skinner is the notable exemption and exemplary for the kind of intellectual history attuned to both contexts and language). My point throughout this book is to study the ways in which literary texts participate in that debate. Here – though this will play more of a role in other chapters (see particularly Chapters 2 and 5) than in this one – aesthetic qualities, strategies of persuasion, questions of perspective, etc., are of vital importance. And it is the central competence of literary scholars that is needed here, rather than their questionable competence as *dilettanti* historians.

Rather than aiming at completeness of mentioning all formulations of a thought, my conception of a history of ideas follows it in a small number of key texts, seeks to do justice to the aesthetic dimension of the texts discussed and *does* look at the functionalization of these ideas in a given political context. This approach also largely avoids problems of periodization because it is not concerned with claiming any given text as "representative of its age" but with doing justice to the individual text and its sources, functions and influence.

In order to avoid the overly academic assumption that there is always necessarily one continuing stream of tradition of a central "unit-idea" through books, I find useful Mandelbaum's proposition to distinguish between "continuing ideas" and "recurrent ideas," "which human beings are apt to entertain on many different occasions, quite independently of whether or not others previously entertained them" (Mandelbaum 38). This cautious distinction might prevent one from tracing influences and seeing continuities where there are none. In our case, however, given the overwhelming influence Plato's *Republic* has had through the centuries, it seems incontestable that there is an unbroken tradition here and that, in Mandelbaum's terms, the "body politic" is a "continuing idea."

I propose a combination of the history of ideas and of literary anthropology,[59] with literary anthropology understood as the analysis of literature in the field of tension between theological, philosophical, scientific,

political and sociological discourses and their concomitant, frequently rivalling – if often tacit and implicit – anthropological assumptions. What I am thinking of under the heading of "literary anthropology" is not the study of literature as an anthropological necessity in the sense of the fictive and the imaginary as anthropological categories as proposed by Iser but rather, as a history of literary attempts at a philosophical anthropology:

> In contrast to philosophy (and more so than it is occasionally willing to admit to itself), literary studies has inherent affinities with anthropology. [. . .] [The subjects of literature] are precisely the finitude of existence, the fallibilities of the self, the fissures and ruptures of identity, the fleeting forms of happiness, the lusts and horrors of desire, pain, loneliness and death. [. . .] In this sense, literature "is" anthropology (not exclusively, but it is always that, too).
>
> *(Riedel 101)*[60]

What I suggest is thus a kind of historical anthropology at one remove, through the additional filter of literature, as the archive of explorations of anthropological assumptions and their functionalization in, among others, political and philosophical discourses. One such historical genealogy worth tracing is that of political liberalism, republicanism and democracy as they are negotiated in a sequence of texts – not monolithically but with contradictions, ruptures, questions and doubts, etc. These literary negotiations can be shown to reveal key issues in liberal and republican thinking, issues which continue to inform political debates to the present day. Here, the inquiry into the "knowledge *of* literature" (see Hörisch; my italics) or into the strategies of producing knowledge *in* literature may be especially relevant: What are the specific achievements of literature and of literary texts as a unique form of generating, storing, transmitting and mediating knowledge? (see also Fluck; Gymnich/Nünning; Glomb/Horlacher; Felski; Gurr 2013). It has been argued that literary texts represent knowledge – or create it in the first place – in ways fundamentally different from discursive, expository texts. In which ways do literary (and maybe especially poetic) texts function differently from discursive texts? Literature may not provide solutions, but it does allow us to historicize debates, providing unique insights into *historical* negotiations of these issues. Such an approach, if it shows an awareness of questions of form, of strategies of representation, of narrative and metaphorical patterns, can, I suggest, make a significant contribution to historicizing, contextualizing and thus, to understanding and, hopefully, also to rationalizing key contemporary debates.

Notes

1 For the traditions of republicanism and liberalism, see also Appleby 1–34 as well as, of course, the lifetime work of J.G.A. Pocock (esp. 1975) and Quentin Skinner (esp. 1998); see also Pettit 2012; for a recent defence of "classical" liberalism against charges from the left and the right, see Fukuyama.

2 I am grateful to Ulrich Willems for pointing me to Manow and Brennan and for an extremely helpful discussion of a draft of this chapter, a discussion which has prevented me from a number of misguided assumptions.

3 Original: "Was damals als Lösung erschien, das Repräsentationsprinzip [the reference is to the notion that representative forms of democracy where devised to limit and contain the influence of the majority of the population], ist aus Sicht der Populisten heute das Problem, nämlich nichts als Kaschierung blanker Elitenherrschaft [. . .] Ist die demokratische Inklusion mehr oder weniger vollständig gewährt, gewinnt eine andere Lösungsmöglichkeit an Bedeutung: die Depolitisierung von Entscheidungsfragen, ihre Herausnahme aus dem Bereich demokratischer Verfügung: durch Verrechtlichung, durch Konstitutionalisierung, durch Delegation an nichtmajoritäre Institutionen etc. – und durch Globalisierung bzw. Europäisierung (durch die Internationalisierung des Rechts und der Wirtschaft; siehe unten Abschnitt II.2). Lässt sich in der vollständig demokratisierten Demokratie nicht mehr einschränken, *wer* mitentscheidet, dann lässt sich zumindest beschränken, *was* demokratisch zu entscheiden ist – das ist die grundlegende Dialektik von Demokratisierung und Entdemokratisierung der Demokratie. Der Populismus taucht episodisch an den Bruchlinien auf, die die Verschiebungen zwischen diesen beiden Prozessen erzeugen" (Manow 42f.).

4 For a third influential conception, "liberty as non-domination," see Pettit 1997, 22f. and 51–79. This conception of liberty is introduced using the case of the slave, whose master happens to be of a "kindly and non-interfering disposition" (22). Pettit here persuasively argues that not being interfered with is not a sufficient criterion for calling the slave "free." From this, Pettit develops the notion of "liberty as non-domination."

5 Original: "quiconque refusera d'obéir à la volonté générale y sera contraint par tout le corps: ce qui ne signifie autre chose sinon qu'on le forcera d'être libre."

6 I am aware that the authoritarian reading of Rousseau in the wake of Talmon's *Origins of Authoritarian Democracy* is just one possible reading, and a highly contested one at that, though it seems hard to dismiss entirely, given such passages. Berlin, too, appears to see Rousseau at least partly in this light, as is evident throughout the "Two Concepts of Liberty" essay. For a reading of this passage defending Rousseau against the charge of authoritarianism, see Bellah, especially 277–279.

7 A further key debate originating in the eighteenth century is that on the limits of tolerance. This, too, is a debate deeply rooted in anthropological concerns of the eighteenth century and one that centrally revolves around conceptions of "human nature" and the concomitant models of how a society should be organized in order to make sure "the unruly do not take over." This is a debate carried out in anthropological writing and centrally also concerns what might be called "the dilemma of liberalism." This might be traced in Voltaire, Rousseau, Sterne, Goethe, Burke and Wordsworth via German debates about the need for democracy to defend itself against its enemies at the end of the Weimar Republic and after the experience of National Socialism, e.g., in Kelsen and Sternberger, all the way to the notion of the "muscular democracy" ("wehrhafte

Demokratie") and the twentieth-century debates over how to deal with political extremism in pluralist democracies. I discuss this tradition in some detail in Gurr 1999.

8 This part of the chapter reuses material from the Plato chapter in Gurr 2003.

9 In 581C, the three types of people are summarily called "the lover of wisdom, the lover of victory and the lover of gain": "φιλόσοφος, φιλόνικος, φιλοκερδες."

10 As Apelt points out in his annotations to the Phaedrus, the basic understanding of the soul here is the same as in the Republic (123, n. 53).

11 See, for instance, 435 D–436 B; 440 E–441 B; 504 A–504 D; 580 D–581 E.

12 In a highly interesting comparison of the *Republic* with Bunyan's *Holy War* of 1682, Coleridge noted: "The perfect frame of a man is the perfect frame of a state: and in the light of this idea we must read Plato's *Republic*" (62f.). In an annotation to Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Coleridge has the further interesting critical remarks: "Plato's *Republic* is [. . .] a description of an individual, all of whose faculties are in their proper subordination and inter-dependence; and this it is assumed may be the prototype of the state as one great individual. But there is this sophism in it, that it is forgotten that the human faculties, indeed, are parts and not separate things; but that you could never get chiefs who were wholly reason, ministers who were wholly understanding, soldiers all wrath, labourers all concupiscence, and so on through the rest. Each partakes of, and interferes with, all the others," quoted in *Lay Sermons*, 63n.

13 Apelt V, 449, n.46: "Die ganze Republik wird von dem Parallelismus zwischen Staat und Seelenleben beherrscht. Den drei Ständen, d.i. dem Lehr- oder Herrscherstand, dem Wehrstand und dem Nährstand entsprechen in der Seele λόγος, θυμός und επιθυμία."

14 A related passage discussed the distinction between license and liberty, a distinction later central, for instance, to Milton. Here, Glaucon argues that "if we grant to each, the just and the unjust, licence and power to do whatever he pleases, and then accompany them in imagination and see whither his desire will conduct each. We should then catch the just man in the very act of resorting to the same conduct as the unjust man because of the self-advantage which every creature by its nature pursues as a good, while by the convention of law it is forcibly diverted to paying honor to 'equality' " (*Republic* 359C).

15 The correspondence between the body politic and the human body or the human faculties is also invoked in the multiple classical versions of the fable in which the members of the body rebel against the allegedly idle and parasitic belly or, in some variants, against the head. The most important version of this fable occurs in Plutarch's "Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus." Here, Menenius Agrippa uses it to appease the rebellious citizens by showing them the importance of the belly to the body and by pointing out the corresponding importance of political authorities to the body politic. (313–368). For versions in which the members rebel against the head rather than the belly, see Peil 17, 144 *et passim*. A related fable with a comparable political application is that of the serpent whose tail claimed authority over the head. The ensuing death of the snake easily serves as an argument to advocate the submission of the body politic under the "head" of state. In Plutarch, who takes it from Aesop, this fable occurs in "Agis and Kleomenes."

16 I am here only concerned with establishing a context for Milton's use of the body politic metaphor. This is not the place for a debate on whether this passage in Hobbes is a blueprint for functional differentiation in the state or whether Hobbes's account in *Leviathan* results in a rationale for despotism, in Trevor-Roper's pithy assessment: "The axiom, fear; the method, logic; the

conclusion, despotism." This is widely cited, but I have not been able to trace it in Trevor-Roper's work itself. I here cite it from Gottlieb 41.

17 The section on the *Rump Songs* reuses material from the *Rump Songs* chapter in Gurr 2003.

18 For the original publication history of the collection, which was reprinted once in 1874, see Brooks, who also gives an index of titles and of first lines, indicates authorship (where known) and supplies sources and other appearances of these poems as broadsides or in collections.

19 On December 6, 1648, the army under Colonel Pride had surrounded the House of Commons, arrested some 45 of originally about 470 members and excluded about a hundred largely Presbyterian members. Many more members then withdrew from parliament without being directly forced, so the House was ultimately reduced to some 210 members (see Worden 1974, 23). This remainder of the parliament, then, was referred to as "the Rump," providing Royalists with opportunities for a wealth of sarcastic and bawdy conflations of "Rump" as this remaining parliament and "Rump" as a body part.

20 See *Rump*, "To the Reader," second inside page without pagination, "Now if you ask who nam'd it Rump, know 'twas so stil'd in an honest Sheet of Paper (call'd The Bloody Rump) written before the Tryal of our late Soveraigne of Glorious Memory [. . .] but the word obtain'd not universal notice till it flew from the mouth of General Major Brown at a Publick Assembly in the daies of Richard Cromwell."

21 See Plutarch. For the history of this fable in literary tradition, see Peil.

22 In 1660, L'Estrange published "No Blind Guides" in response to Milton. The year of publication may be said to speak volumes as to political opportunism. For more on the royalist attacks on Milton in 1660, see Hamilton 101–117.

23 See *Rump*, I, 242–244. For the attribution of this poem, "Loyalty confin'd," to L'Estrange, see Brooks, 295. This poem, dating from 1647 or 1649, in fact has one stanza about the natural obedience of the subjects to the king derived from the "body politic" analogy. The subjects are here called upon sympathetically to share the sufferings of the king: "Now not to suffer, shews no Loyal heart,/ When Kings want ease, Subjects must bear a part," *Rump*, I, 244.

24 There are, it is true, critical uses of the body politic analogy: An example of the revolutionary anti-prelacy rhetoric of the early 1640s is afforded by Milton's *Of Reformation Touching Church-Discipline in England* (1641). In the context of the general attack against episcopacy, which was also hotly debated in parliament in February 1641, Milton here speaks of the "noysom, and diseased tumor of Prelacie" (598) and uses a variation of the body politic analogy to expose the prelacy as a monstrous unwanted growth: "Upon a time the Body summon'd all the Members to meet in the Guild for the common good [. . .] the head by right takes the first seat, and next to it a huge and monstrous Wen little lesse then the Head it selfe, growing to it by a narrower excrescency" (583). A "wise and learned Philosopher" then discovers the wen as a "swolne Tumor" containing "no good thing [. . .] but a heape of hard, and loathsome uncleanness," "a foul disfigurement and burden" that should be "cut off" (583f.).

25 This part of the chapter reuses material from the Milton chapter in Gurr 2003 and from Gurr 2016.

26 I take my cues from interpretations such as those developed by Christopher Hill and Andrew Milner, who both read *Paradise Lost* (like *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*) as centrally concerned with the sense of utter defeat of the revolutionary cause after the Restoration of 1660 (Hill 1977, 1984; Milner).

27 For this as "a fairly straightforward account of Aristotelian faculty psychology," see Moshenska 24, n. 8.
28 See also *Paradise Lost* III, 176–177, VII, 546 (Raphael admonishes Adam to "govern well thy appetite" and to "take heed lest Passion sway/Thy Judgment to do aught, which else free Will/Would not admit" [VIII, 635–37]), IX, 351–356; for these passages, see also Walker §2, § 25, who, however, discusses them purely as referring to the human faculties and does not comment on the body politic metaphor or on political implications here.
29 Further evidence of Milton's awareness of these dangers is to be found in the following passage from the 1654 *Second Defence*, which may already be taken as a veiled reference to the abuse of power by the revolutionary leaders that had long been blatant: "If, having done with war, you neglect the arts of peace, if warfare is your peace and liberty, war your only virtue, your supreme glory, you will find [. . .] that peace itself is your greatest enemy [. . .] and what you thought liberty will prove to be your servitude. [. . .] Unless you expel avarice, ambition, and luxury from your minds [. . .] you will find at home and within that tyrant who, you believed was to be sought abroad and in the field. [. . .] In fact, many tyrants, impossible to endure, will from day to day hatch from your very vitals" ("Second Defence," in: *Complete Prose Works*, IV, part I, 680f.).
30 Lewalski 2002, 214f.; see also 228 *et passim* for the correspondence between inner liberty and political liberty; for the connection between individual and state, see also Worden 320f., 392 *et passim*.
31 For Milton's view of the people, see also Hammond. As Sharon Achinstein appropriately summarized Hammond's argument in a review: "If there is a Miltonic theory of the people, it is that, as Hammond argues, Milton maintained from very early on the view that the political form of a commonwealth was to be fit to the ethical qualities and disposition of its inhabitants; therefore, an unfit people deserved bad governments" (E263). In *Paradise Lost*, the connection is established for instance in VI, 176; IX, 351ff; XII, 83ff.
32 For the ways in which actors at critical historical junctures model their behaviour on "scripts" established in comparable previous situations, see Baker/Edelstein in the Introduction to their suggestively titled collection *Scripting Revolution: A Historical Approach to the Comparative Study of Revolutions*. Established templates such as the "body politic analogy" and its concomitant anthropological and political assessments can surely also function as "scripts" in the conceptualization of ongoing developments as well as a guideline for action. For the notion of "scripts," see also Buchenau/Gurr.
33 For a detailed discussion, see Wittreich 1987; for a brief but insightful discussion, see Lewalski 2002, 232–234 as well as Norbrook 480–484.
34 For this contrast in the relationship of Adam and Eve, see Hill 1977, 128f., 376f.
35 For a detailed discussion of the distinction between the angelic and the human sense of vision (both physical sight and spiritual insight), see Gabel.
36 See book I, chapter XI of *De Doctrina Christiana*.
37 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–II, Q. 165, A. 2, quoted and translated in Chambers, "The Falls of Adam and Eve" 128; Chambers also refers to Augustine, De Trinitate, XII, 12–13, and Philo Judaeus, *De opificio mundi*; see Chambers, 128.
38 Milner 164; see also Lewalski, who argues that this passage "accounts for the Stuart Restoration and for absolute monarchy wherever it exists: inner servility leads to deprivation of outward freedom [. . .] political liberty depends on inner

liberty, which is the product of reason and virtue" (2002, 228); see also Hill's brief if insightful comments (1977, 382f.).

39 This passage is also cited by Lewalski (2002, 215), who does not, however, emphasize Milton's increasing pessimism about the people's ability to restrain themselves but rather, his continuing efforts to "prod, goad, and educate his countrymen" (214).

40 As for the political implications of "license," in "The Readie and Easy Way," Milton polemicizes against "a licentious and unbridl'd democratie" (55–57), which, of course, is pure Plato. In the same passage, he speaks of "inordinate desires" (the same phrase as in *Paradise Lost* XII, 87); for a discussion of the parallel, see Dzelzainis, who explains this term in *The Readie and Easie Way* as "authentically Machiavellian usage, 'inordinate' being, in this context, an English rendition of one of Machiavelli's favourite words, 'straordinari'; that is, outside or beyond the ordini or normal social and political 'orders' " (243). The parallelism with *Paradise Lost* suggests otherwise: "catch the government from reason" suggests the Platonic body politic analogy as at least another possible source.

41 See also *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* of January 1649. Milton here writes: "For indeed none can love freedom heartily, but good men; the rest love not freedom, but license; which never hath more scope or more indulgence than under Tyrants" (185).

42 For two accounts of Milton's exclusionary and divisive rhetoric, see Dzelzainis and Foxley. Foxley's assessment that "Milton's rhetoric was in danger of fracturing rather than building up the citizen body" (40) appears to me significantly to understate the degree to which Milton regarded the population as so inherently different in terms of moral and intellectual capabilities – to him the foundation of any right to liberty and citizenship – that he hardly conceived of the population as one body in the first place; rather, in Platonic terms, his distinction between "the good" and "the bad" is too close to Plato anyway to allow for a unified citizen body in any meaningful sense. Dzelzainis speaks of the "anti-democratic tenor of Milton's fear and loathing of the people" (240) and argues that "[t]he dark underside of Milton's politics of virtue is the politics of exclusion" (258). While it is hard to disagree with this, I would stress a different intellectual lineage here. I strongly disagree with Dzelzainis's conclusion that "[t]he Aristotelian principle of differential rationality – as the soul is to the body so masters are to slaves and husbands to wives – might plausibly be said to inform virtually all of Milton's social and political thought." Too consistent are the echoes of Plato and the body politic analogy.

43 For a discussion of the classical and medieval tradition behind such thought, see Gurr 2003, 21–43.

44 Original: "quiconque refusera d'obéir à la volonté générale y sera contraint par tout le corps: ce qui ne signifie autre chose sinon qu'on le forcera d'être libre."

45 As Sinding notes, Paine "proposes a new version: 'A nation,' he writes, 'is not a body, the figure of which is to be represented by the human body; but is like a body contained within a circle, having a common center, in which every radius meets; and that center is formed by representation' " (Sinding 93; the reference is to Paine 1995, 233). The passage occurs in Paine's 1792 *The Rights of Man, Part the Second*. Not only is *The Rights of Man* in its entirety subtitled *Being an Answer to Mr Burke's Attack on the French Revolution*, but the passage in question, too, is a direct response to Burke, who is explicitly referred to in the next paragraph. Sinding's comparative discussion of Burke and Paine makes productive use of a cognitive metaphor and cognitive narratology approach.

46 The section on Wordsworth reuses material from the Wordsworth chapter in Gurr 2003.
47 It is important to note the theological overtones in Wordsworth's diction: the "spots of time" not only have a "renovating" effect on the mind (XI, 259) but they also lead to moral elevation and redeem us when we have "fallen" (XI, 268).
48 For more detailed accounts of Wordsworth's changing views on the French Revolution, see also Bode; Gassenmeier.
49 "A Philosophical View of Reform" was first published by Oxford University Press in 1920, edited by T.W. Rolleston. For the history of Shelley's manuscript until 1920, see, for example, Peck as well as the documentation of composition and publication history in the edition by Ingpen and Peck. All references with page numbers indicated parenthetically in the text will be to this edition.
50 Cantor 42, calls it "the most significant and substantive essay on economic matters produced by any of the English Romantics"; see also Cameron 1973, 10; Hoagwood; Foot 1984, 1990; King-Hele 143.
51 This section builds on my much more detailed readings of Shelley's *Reform* essay and the accompanying poetry in Gurr 2007, 2015 and 2017 and reuses material from these earlier essays. Since these engage in some detail with previous discussions of the "contradictions" in the essay and with explanations of why Shelley abandoned the essay, the discussion is less fully referenced here.
52 Given the centrality of abstract conceptions of a "general will" to potentially authoritarian conceptions of liberty discussed earlier, Shelley's invocation of a "national will" might already make one pause.
53 See also the Preface to *The Revolt of Islam*, where Shelley writes that "[M]ankind appear to me to be emerging from their trance. I am aware, methinks, of a slow, gradual, silent change" (34).
54 It is plausible, of course, to argue that some of the ambivalence in the *Reform* essay may be due to Shelley's insight that reform was only possible if reform forces did not neutralise and obstruct each other, which may have induced attempts at harmonizing the demands of moderate and radical reformers. But this is hardly enough to account for the key conceptual problems of the treatise.
55 A letter written nine days before his death in its resigned and defeatist note supports my reading: "England appears to be in a desperate condition. [. . .] I once thought to study these affairs & write or act in them – I am glad that my good genius said *refrain*. I see little public virtue, & I foresee that the contest will be one of blood & gold" (to Horace Smith, 29 Jun. 1822; *Letters* 2: 442).
56 A facsimile version of the entire manuscript is available here: https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/b387e403-fbd8-7545-e040-e00a180628e8.
57 David Duff draws attention to this dilemma in Shelley's thought in general and in the Reform treatise in particular: "This, as has often been pointed out, was a dilemma that Shelley never fully resolved. Even in 'A Philosophical View of Reform' (1819), his most considered treatment of the topic, he leaves a vacancy – literally a gap in the manuscript – at the crucial point at which he turns to the question of how the people are to obtain 'the victory over their oppressors' which will free them from 'moral and political degradation' " (Duff 110). Foot (1984, 189) also remarks upon this gap in Shelley's text. Neither Duff nor Foot, it seems, recognize the centrality of this problem to Shelley's argument, and they certainly do not point it out as a potential reason for the fragmentary nature of the text. See also Foot (1990), 5, where he argues that "the pamphlet is marked throughout with contradictions"; see also Cameron 1974, 350. But even Foot glosses over the central aporia in Shelley's argument: "the pamphlet breaks off,

leaving two blank pages which Shelley obviously planned to fill in later, perhaps when he had more closely worked out the complex relationship between reform and revolution." Foot further obscures the fundamental problems in the essay when he writes: "*The Philosophical View of Reform* was ready for its reluctant publisher in 1820" Foot 1990, 7. See also McNiece 90: "The first problem for Shelley, as for every other reformer, was how to persuade Parliament to reform itself when the member-ship of the House of Commons was for the most part dedicated to and profiting by the perpetuation of the old order." Interestingly, McNiece closely echoes Shelley's crucial crux apparently without recognizing it as a fundamental problem: "Once the people have won their cause, by whatever means, and have 'assumed the control of public affairs according to constitutional rules'" (92). White similarly fails to see this central problem as a potential reason for Shelley to abandon the work: "In the incomplete nature of Shelley's essay it is impossible to state the steps by which these changes were to be realized," White (1947), II, 147. White discusses "A Philosophical View of Reform" on pages 144–151. Dawson (1980), 5 et passim, also comments on this dilemma in Shelley's thoughts and quotes an enlightening passage from Hobsbawm's remarks on millenarian hopes: "millenarian movements share a fundamental vagueness about the actual way in which the new society will be brought about," Hobsbawm (1971), 57f.

58 See, for instance, the "Editorial Notes" by Ingpen and Peck 332; Foot 1990, 1, 4. See also Foot 1984, *passim*; Cameron 1974, 128.

59 For an introduction to other conceptions of historical anthropology as an approach in literary studies, see the twin pieces by Röcke and Benthien. These two chapters have pointed me to a number of the works in anthropology referred to in this section of my chapter. For enlightening discussions, see also Riedel; van Dülmen.

60 Original: "Anders als die Philosophie (und mehr, als sie es sich zuweilen eingestehen will) ist die Literaturwissenschaft von sich aus anthropologieaffin. [. . .] [Gegenstände der Literatur] sind ja gerade das endliche Dasein, die Fallibilitäten des Ich, die Risse und Brüche der Identität, die flüchtigen Gestalten des Glücks, die Lüste und Schrecken des Begehrens, der Schmerz, die Einsamkeit, der Tod. [. . .] In diesem Sinne 'ist' Literatur Anthropologie (nicht nur, aber eben immer auch)."

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2

COMPLICATING THE "CULTURE WARS"

Rereading *The Human Stain*

Key Issues, Contexts, Reception – and Four Beginnings

This chapter discusses Philip Roth's 2000 novel, *The Human Stain*, as a prescient and remarkably differentiated exploration – directly or obliquely – of questions commonly debated under the labels of "identity politics," "political correctness" and "cancel culture," "safe spaces and education," "post-truth" and its putative roots in "cultural relativism," as well as "the canon wars." In addition to staging the debate on these issues, the novel also insightfully negotiates the polarization of American society and politics in the "culture wars" over these and related issues.

A first way of beginning a discussion of Roth's novel would be with a review discussing its "prophetic" nature: In December 2010, two years into the first Obama administration and six years before the election of Donald Trump, Volker Hage called *The Human Stain* the "unsurpassed" U.S. novel of the decade, a "crucial work of the period, one of those books that, at some temporal distance, can be esteemed more appropriately" (n.p., my translation).[1] He singled it out for the far-sighted treatment of three topics, oddly incommensurate as they may seem: (1) the threat to privacy, not least with the advent of the internet and digital communication, (2) the impact of Viagra and (3) the changing role of race in the decade that saw the election and inauguration of Barack Obama as the first African American president (Hage, n.p.). Commenting on the diagnostic function of literature, Hage here insightfully states:

> Literature can be prophetic. Not in the simplistic sense of a prognosis, but as atmospheric anticipation. Clear-sightedness has nothing to do

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> with clairvoyance; it is the ability of writers like Roth to sense societal change early on, to imagine the consequences of events, to extrapolate them into the future.
>
> *(n.p., my translation)*[2]

Often regarded as "prescient" or "prophetic," Roth's novel has frequently been hailed as the best U.S. novel of the 2000s (for its critical reception, see later).

A second way of beginning a discussion of *The Human Stain* and its negotiation of the politics of identity would be with a seemingly unrelated cli-fi novel published more than 20 years later, Stephen Markley's 2023 *The Deluge* (discussed in some detail in Chapter 5). In the early 2040s, a character here tells us, this is the ascendant perception of identity politics, including an account of its origins in the new media:

> Now all the talk is about how wrong it is to identify a person based on any nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or other imagined community. Calling someone "she," "American," "trans," "Black," or "Catholic;" is suddenly frowned upon. According to the social scientists, it's an attitude grown out of virtual reality and the masking of identity the format makes possible. In VR, people live entire lives outside of their genetic or cultural identity groups, and now this approach has stormed into the real world the way so many once-radical ideas quickly became normative. [. . .] This new ideology's most vociferous proponents argue that a collective human identity is the only way forward, that the next generation must understand how these imagined divisions, created barbarically out of thin air and handed down generation after generation, have led the human project to the brink.
>
> *(Markley 870f.)*

A third way of beginning would be with the controversy over Blake Bailey's 2021 authorized biography of Philip Roth, which, shortly after publication, was pulled from the market by its publisher Norton over allegations of sexual misconduct and rape against the biographer. In an epilogue to her review of the biography added after the scandal had broken and the biography had been taken up by another publisher, Judith Shulevitz wrote:

> The book was back on the market [with Skyhorse, which also acquired Woody Allen's autobiography when his original publisher dropped it]. But the damage was done. Bailey had dragged Roth down with him, fairly or unfairly – and that guilt by association, it seems to me, is what we still have to deal with. I can't stress emphatically enough that Roth

> was never implicated in anything like what Bailey has been accused of. So what are readers supposed to do with the news about Bailey? Should it change the way we read his biography? How about the way we read Roth?
>
> *(2021, n.p.)*[3]

One might further specify some of the questions raised by the controversy over Bailey's biography: Can we separate the artist from the work? Does it matter who speaks and what has become of the notion of the "Death of the Author"? Has it entirely lost its meaning or only in cases where the integrity of the author is in question and impinges on their work? Is the notion of "presumed innocent until proven guilty" irrelevant in cases of sexual misconduct or rape because rape charges so shockingly rarely lead to convictions in court that legally determined guilt cannot be a prerequisite for condemnation? Does it intellectually invalidate the biography if the author of the biography is a presumed rapist? Might there be other reasons not to want to buy it? Would it make a difference if the author were dead and no longer profited personally from sales of the book? What about reading it if one bought it before the scandal broke? What about borrowing it from a friend who bought it before the scandal broke – or who bought it anyway? What about quoting from it?[4]

A fourth entry point is afforded by Adrian Daub's recent critical account of the "cancel culture" debate and its alleged global triumph originating on U.S. campuses, a "transfer" Daub compellingly comments on as a "moral panic." Without discussing *The Human Stain* in detail, he points out the curious fact that Roth's novel is frequently adduced in evidence of claims of "political correctness" and "wokeness" running riot on U.S. campuses, with free speech being limited by thought and language policing (for the Roth discussion, see Daub 182–188). How, Daub rightly asks, can a novel logically be adduced to "prove" the existence of a real-world issue? What I find significantly less convincing is his somewhat literalist criticism of Roth's temporal relocation in interviews on his novel of the "real" campus episode at the heart of *The Human Stain* from the 1970s to the 1980s (in interviews) and then as an alleged cultural diagnosis of the late 1990s in his novel (see Daub 183–185). This, as well as the unquestioned suggestive association of Roth with cultural conservative Allan Bloom (187), underestimates the complexity of Roth's novel. In interesting ways, Daub here falls prey to the fallacy of not reading fiction as fiction he criticizes in others.

Controversies over identity politics and its consequences, over the dynamics of online media, over #MeToo and sexual misconduct,[5] but also over the connection between a person's personal conduct and the legitimacy of engaging with their work, over the importance of who speaks,

over the role of fiction and fictionality in such debates – there is hardly a text that better lends itself to unravelling these debates than Roth's *The Human Stain*, published in the year of a strongly polarizing and acrimoniously contested presidential election, the one that brought George W. Bush into office.

Set largely in 1998, the summer of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, and narrated by Nathan Zuckerman, *The Human Stain* is the story of Coleman Silk, an allegedly Jewish professor of classics at fictitious Athena College in Massachusetts. At almost 70, he returned to teaching in 1995 after 16 years of being a successful and ambitious dean of the faculty, having alienated many colleagues because of his uncompromising adherence to academic standards. He is forced to retire from the college in 1996, having wrongly, even absurdly, been accused of racism after referring to two constantly absent students as "spooks," which his resentful colleagues out of context take as a racist epithet for "Blacks." The group of colleagues forcing Coleman out of his job in what he perceives as a campaign of political correctness running riot is led by young French professor Delphine Roux, whom Coleman had hired during his time as dean. Coleman despises her as a careerist follower of theoretical fads, while she regards him as a rearguard conservative humanist. In the heated atmosphere surrounding his enforced resignation, his wife Iris dies of a stroke. Coleman, outraged at having been wronged and accusing the college of having killed his wife, asks his neighbour, writer Nathan Zuckerman, to write down his story. Zuckerman initially refuses, but the two become friends. In 1998, Coleman begins an affair with 34-year-old Faunia Farley, an illiterate cleaning woman at his former college with a terrible history of hardship and suffering: She was sexually abused as a child and has lived through poverty, demeaning jobs and a disastrous marriage to a traumatized and violent Vietnam veteran. She is further traumatized by having lost her two children in a housefire. Haunted by her violent ex-husband, Les, and by Delphine Roux, who believes Coleman sexually exploits a helpless woman, they begin a profound if unlikely love affair but are killed in a road accident suggested to have been deliberately caused by Les Farley. It is only at Coleman's funeral that narrator Zuckerman learns from Coleman's sister, Ernestine, that he was a very light-skinned African American who spent his adult life passing as a Jew. In intricately constructed flashbacks, the novel also tells the story of his childhood in Newark, his time as a student in 1950s New York City and his relationship with his great love, Steena Palsson, who left him when she found out that his family was Black. Determined to break free from the constraints which his ethnic origins imposed upon him in 1950s America, Coleman broke with his family and spent his life leading everyone, including his wife and children, to believe he was Jewish.

The Human Stain is the concluding novel of a loosely woven "thematic trilogy" (Roth in McGrath 8) of historical novels on three defining moments and phases in American history since World War II – McCarthyism in *I Married a Communist* (1998), the Vietnam war and the anti-Vietnam movement in *American Pastoral* (1997) and, finally, the Lewinsky affair and the attempted impeachment of Bill Clinton in *The Human Stain* (2000). With its treatment of sexuality, the tension between individual freedom and the demands of a larger community, questions of ethnic identity and the impact of historical forces on the individual, this novel brings together many of the themes of the trilogy and of Roth's work as a whole. In each of the three novels of what has come to be known as the "American Trilogy," fictitious characters find themselves caught up in recognizable and clearly delineated moments of post-1945 American history (for readings of *The Human Stain* in the context of the trilogy, see Kimmage; Kinzel). The trilogy thus "writes the individual subject into the fabric of history" (Royal 2005, 186): From the very beginning, with the raging indictment of an America indulging in "a piety binge, a purity binge" (2) during the Lewinsky affair, the fictitious story of Coleman Silk is inscribed into the historical context of the puritanical fanaticism and hypocrisy of the hunt for Clinton. Coleman's story, then, assumes significance as a fable about the moral and intellectual state of America as a whole.

In his essay "Writing American Fiction" (1961), Roth had stated that reality frequently outdoes fiction in incredible events and cruel twists of fate and that the deceit, hypocrisy and outrageous stupidity individuals as well as groups are capable of in reality are frequently beyond anything a novelist could plausibly get away with. In his fiction, he engages with just that reality, and it is a curious tribute to his qualities as an uncanny diagnostician of American life that not only does *The Human Stain* read as though it were taken straight from life – though subtle metafictional ploys prevent the careful reader from falling into the realism trap – but also that the Clinton-Lewinsky affair to any reader of Roth uncannily felt as though he might have scripted it.

Despite a number of less than enthusiastic reviews and some scholarly criticism (e.g., Shechner 2007), *The Human Stain* won Roth his second PEN/Faulkner award, the British W.H. Smith award for best book of the year and the French Prix Medici for the best foreign book of the year. It quickly established itself as a contemporary classic: There are few texts in recent literary fiction which have received more scholarly attention within only a few years of being published.[6]

Critical opinion on the political positions of the novel with regard to questions of identity politics, campus culture and the literary canon is surprisingly divided. Especially early reviewers read it as a rant against

"political correctness": In this vein, Parini argued that "Roth uses the campus setting as a way to vent his rage against political correctness" (n.p.), while Moore stated that "[t]he book indulges in the sort of tirade against political correctness that is far drearier and more intellectually constricted than political correctness itself" (n.p.). Other readings understood *The Human Stain* as an attack primarily against the right. Thus, Boxwell speaks of "an angered response to the moral crusade of forces arrayed on the political and religious right engaged in a counterrevolutionary coup against the 1960s" (22).

While the predominant reading appears to understand the novel as an attack against "political correctness," I here build on more balanced readings and seek to show that Roth's novel, in fact, contains precisely what Moore finds lacking: "Roth, usually fond of both sides of an argument, fails to extend understanding toward – and only makes fun of – the possible discomfort of minorities or women in settings like Athena" (n.p.). The fact that it is – with equal forcefulness – claimed as being directed against the left and against the right might already be taken as evidence of its even-handedness.[7] To be sure, "even-handedness" is not inherently a virtue; with regard to, say, racism, slavery or the Holocaust, there can be no even-handedness.[8] In highly polarized contexts such as the U.S. culture wars and U.S. politics generally, however, even if a critic's own political, intellectual and ethical sympathies are clearly on one side, one might not want to all too quickly dismiss entirely the values of a sizeable share of the population; here, an attempt at understanding the other side or at least seriously entertaining the notion that they, too, might not just be evil or narrow-minded clearly seems imperative. In this situation, even-handedness, in the sense, say, of an offer of a conversation about these issues, is clearly a virtue.

Seen in connection with the other novels of the trilogy, *The Human Stain* uncomfortably hints at disturbing parallels and continuities – from the liberating spirit of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, which escalated into terrorist violence in the wake of some anti-Vietnam protests, to "political correctness" taken to extremes in the 1990s. While *I Married a Communist* engaged with the right-wing radicalism and intolerance of the McCarthy era and *American Pastoral* with left-wing radicalism and its occasionally murderous consequences in anti-Vietnam terrorism, *The Human Stain* brings together both forms of blind and hypocritical intolerance[9] – "the malevolent puritanism with which you will be tarred and feathered" (76) – and reveals that the right-wing attacks against Clinton and the left-wing form of rampant political correctness that undoes Coleman Silk both spring from the same source, "America's oldest communal passion, historically perhaps its most treacherous and subversive

pleasure: the ecstasy of sanctimony" (2), the impulse Hawthorne (quoted in the novel) called "the persecuting spirit" in its most self-righteous form. *Les extrèmes se touchent*. Here lies a central irony of the novel: Coleman Silk, who passes for white to escape the racist stereotypes of a society in which he would never have been hired as a Black Classics professor in the 1950s, is forced from his job over spurious allegations of racism against two Black students. The scandal over Clinton's "incontinent carnality" (3) in the White House forms the backdrop to Coleman's affair with Faunia, and the ritual of pseudo-purification that costs Coleman his job is the same that nearly cost Clinton his with the inquisitorial Puritanism of Kenneth Starr. The parallels between Coleman and Clinton, implicit throughout the novel, are made explicit when Coleman muses: "Here in America either it's Faunia Farley or it's Monica Lewinsky! The luxury of these lives disquieted so by the inappropriate comportment of Clinton and Silk!" (154; see also 2, 344). What the novel appears to be surprisingly blind to in criticizing only the attacks on Clinton and Silk is the problem of sexual relations in constellations with a significant power differential – a limitation made all the more apparent by the #MeToo movement 17 years later.

With its drastic attack on intolerant radicalism of *any* persuasion, Roth's novel thus shies away from simplistic sermonizing on behalf of either side:

> It was the summer [of 1998] in America when the nausea returned, [. . .] when the smallness of people was simply crushing, when some kind of demon had been unleashed in the nation and, on both sides, people wondered "Why are we so crazy?"
>
> *(3)*

To be more precise, however, one would rather have wished for the self-critical questioning implied in "why are *we* so crazy" (my italics), where the problem, one might argue, was and remains the polarization that only ever believes the other side to be "so crazy."

The Debate on Identity Politics

Roth's central theme in much of his fiction is the tension between the self-realization of an individual and the competing claims of the family or a larger community (see also Parrish 2007), a tension that frequently yields enlightening reflections on the central American themes of self-reliance, individuality and personal freedom. In most of Roth's novels, the individual struggles to break away from the Jewish community; here, it is the struggle between the Black community and the individual Coleman Silk. What, the novel asks, ultimately defines identity? Is it nature or nurture? Is it a

matter of choice or of origins? Is it self-constructed or imposed by others? What would be the more courageous decision, to live as a Black man in an openly racist society – and the novel consistently makes clear that 1950s America, when Coleman makes his decision, was deeply racist (see esp. 102–106, 120; this is not to deny it still is today!) – or to deny one's roots and to cut off all family ties to pass as white?[10]

It is important to note here, however, that passing as Jewish in 1946 was still not to be equated with passing as generally "white" because there were still restrictions on the number of Jewish students at many colleges (86f.) and anti-Semitism was widespread in U.S. academia (it became shockingly obvious in 2023 to what devastating extent this is still the case!). There is a further irony in the fact that Coleman as an African American passes as a Jew – Zuckerman refers to Coleman's identity as an "amalgam of the most unalike of America's historic undesirables" (132) and thus also ironically comments on the "supposed strife between African-Americans and Jews [. . .] [an] animosity that developed between blacks and Jews in America after the civil rights movement" (Kaplan 2005a: 184).

Coleman's repudiation of his past and his invention of a self – "To become a new being. [. . .] The drama that underlies America's story" (342) – explicitly links Coleman to the classic American theme of self-invention and self-realization[11]:

> He was Coleman, the greatest of the great *pioneers* of the I. [. . .] Not the tyranny of the we and its we-talk and everything that the we wants to pile on your head. Never for him the tyranny of the we that is dying to suck you in, the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral *we* with its insidious *E pluribus unum*. [. . .] Instead the raw *I* with all its agility. [. . .] The passionate struggle for singularity.
>
> *(108, see also 120, 183)*

Similarly, in his apologetic eulogy during Coleman's funeral, Coleman's African American colleague Herb Keble – ironically without knowing his real story – refers to Coleman as an "American individualist par excellence" (311, see also 334). In one sense, this antagonism against the "we" (108) justifies Coleman's behaviour as a heroic act of self-reliance in the great American tradition, and if Coleman found it necessary to pass, that may say at least as much about the society in which he lives as it does about himself. As one reviewer appropriately asked, "Would a Black Coleman Silk have ever been hired to teach Classics at Athena College in the 1950s?" (Tierney 168).

The Human Stain, thus, is on one level the classic American story of self-realization and transcendence of the limitations of one's origin – "the

pursuit of happiness" – but it is also the story of how, through "the return of the repressed," one's own history ultimately proves inescapable.

> [A]ccording to the logic of *The Human Stain*, racial reconciliation can only be achieved by eschewing identity politics. By arguing that racial reconciliation relies on jettisoning the group identity associated with "identity politics," many of Roth's characters take a neoconservative argument against "political correctness" and transform it into a classical liberal argument about the powers of self-fashioning.
>
> *(Kaplan 2005a, 173)*[12]

Here, however, I would like to argue that the novel can also be read as a remarkably insightful and ambivalent negotiation of identity politics. Contrary to what might be expected in the light of readings discussing the novel as a rant against "leftist" campus culture, I will argue that, in rather complex ways, it anticipates reservations formulated by Mark Lilla, Martha Nussbaum, Walter Benn Michaels, Henry Louis Gates Jr., John McWhorter and other – broadly speaking – leftist intellectuals. Questioning the connection between politically committed scholarship and the correction of "real-world injustice," Gates self-critically remarks:

> As writers, teachers and intellectuals, most of us would like to claim greater efficacy for our labors than we're entitled to. [. . .] [I]t is sometimes necessary to remind ourselves of the distance from the classroom to the streets. [. . .] Academic critics write essays, "readings" of literature, where the bad guys (for example, racism or patriarchy) lose, where the forces of oppression are subverted by the boundless powers of irony and allegory that no prison can contain [. . .] we pay homage to the marginalized and demonized, and it feels almost as if we've righted a real-world injustice.
>
> *(19)*

In a related vein, Hayes has commented on Roth's "merciless satire of the hermeneutics of suspicion" and has critically highlighted the intellectual and political fallacy of assuming a causal linkage between "representation in creative literature" and "democratic participation":

> Roth's satire, caustic though it may be, is carefully judged. It is aimed not at the ideal of democratic representativeness itself but at the overliteral interpretation of the ideal. [. . .] *The Human Stain* suggests that the attempt to link the process of representation in creative literature to the promotion of democratic participation can be very misleading.
>
> *(231f., 234)*[13]

Even more centrally, however, the novel appears to provide a take on the critique of identity politics formulated by Mark Lilla in the wake of the 2016 presidential elections, a critique first formulated in a *New York Times* essay in November 2016 and then in his 2017 polemical book-length essay, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*. Lilla's self-professed progressive critique is in keeping with previous criticism of identity politics as (**1**) misleadingly short-circuiting *textual* and *democratic* representation of minorities; (**2**) dramatically overstating the effects of language use on real-world politics, thus neglecting concrete campaigning and political work in favour of ineffectual symbolic politics, "leav[ing], those groups it professes to care about more vulnerable than they otherwise would be" (Lilla 2017, 12); (**3**) neglecting questions of class at the expense of questions of gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity; and (**4**) fragmenting potential progressive alliances into identity-based interest-groups, or worse, self-obsessed individuals. My concern here is *not* to evaluate the adequacy of these critical diagnoses; I am here interested in the ways in which a literary text can shed light on the debate or can help initiate a conversation about these issues.

Writing only a few days after the 2016 presidential election, Lilla made sure to clarify he is not critiquing identity politics from a conservative, or right-wing, perspective: "It is a truism that America has become a more diverse country. It is also a beautiful thing to watch. [. . .] It's an extraordinary success story" (n.p.). But he also argued that it was one of the "lessons of the recent presidential election campaign and its repugnant outcome [. . .] that the age of identity liberalism must be brought to an end" (n.p.):

> [T]he fixation on diversity in our schools and in the press has produced a generation of liberals and progressives narcissistically unaware of conditions outside their self-defined groups, and indifferent to the task of reaching out to Americans in every walk of life. [. . .] By the time they reach college many assume that diversity discourse exhausts political discourse, and have shockingly little to say about such perennial questions as class, war, the economy and the common good.
>
> *(Lilla 2016, paragraphs 4–5)*

The notion that identity politics ultimately segments the population into different identity-based interest groups and that this leads to a loss of shared perspectives and to the inability to pursue common goals, a division that ultimately plays into the hands of the right,[14] is one that has long been held against identity politics. Lilla, too, argued in his 2016 *NYT* essay:

> Hillary Clinton was at her best and most uplifting when she spoke about American interests in world affairs and how they relate to our

> understanding of democracy. But when it came to life at home, she tended [to] slip into the rhetoric of diversity, calling out explicitly to African-American, Latino, L.G.B.T. and women voters at every stop. This was a strategic mistake. If you are going to mention groups in America, you had better mention all of them. If you don't, those left out will notice and feel excluded. Which, as the data show, was exactly what happened. [. . .] Fully two-thirds of white voters without college degrees voted for Donald Trump.
>
> *(n.p., paragraph 3)*

One of the consequences of identity politics' neglect of "class"[15] at the expense of gender and sexuality (Lilla 2017, 93 and especially Michaels) combined with the perception of "liberalism" as "a creed professed by educated urban elites cut off from the rest of the country" is that it leads to resentment at feeling neglected. Thus, liberalism "leaves so many Americans indifferent if not hostile today" (Lilla 2017, 10).

It is in the depiction of Lester Farley and his resentment at being left behind and treated unfairly by "the government" (66, 69, 72, 213, 247, 355) that the issue of class and resentment is being negotiated in the novel, resentment that Coleman's lawyer Nelson Primus pithily summarizes as follows: "These are people whose fundamental feeling about life is that they have been fucked over unfairly right down the line" (80). In the novel, Lester ventilates his resentment in hateful tirades against the "high-and-mighty Jew professor" (71; also 256), various Asian ethnic groups (69, 215), "that draft dodger sleeping in the White House" (213) and his general misogyny.

Lilla polemically argues and Roth's novel at least suggests that identity politics, by alienating what still seems the majority of nonacademics with moralizing and excessively rigid linguistic policing, provokes counter-reactions and right-wing intolerance and thus furthers societal polarization. Moreover, the language of identity politics is a marker of distinction for what in *The Human Stain* is called a "well-mannered gang of elitist egalitarians who hide their ambition behind high-minded ideals" (80), a marker of distinction that suggests a form of condescending classism one is otherwise so vehemently opposed to.[16] The epithet does not become wrong just because it's Coleman's snobbish lawyer, Nelson Primus, who says this; rather, this is further evidence of the novel's complex play with positions and perspectives. Theirs is precisely the kind of "progressive" arrogance Lilla criticizes the U.S. democrats for; those thus snubbed as the "deplorables" in Hillary Clinton's notorious phrase overwhelmingly voted for Trump in 2016. Thus, as a non-college-educated white harbouring resentment against a government – really or allegedly – ignoring his concerns, with a susceptibility (or at least indifference) to racism, sexism

and extreme nationalism, Lester Farley could be seen as a study in the making of a Trump voter.

Negotiating "Political Correctness," "Cancel Culture" and "Safe Spaces": *The Human Stain* and the "Coddling of the American Mind" Debate

Lilla somewhat indiscriminately brings together identity politics and the campus culture notions of "microaggressions," "trigger warnings" and "safe spaces"[17] when he accuses "identity liberalism" of

> concocting inoffensive euphemisms to describe social reality, protecting young ears and eyes already accustomed to slasher films from any disturbing encounter with alternative viewpoints. [. . .] Scapegoats – today conservative politicians – are duly designated and run off campus in a purging ritual. Propositions become pure or impure, not true or false. And not only propositions but simple words. Left identitarians [. . .] pars[e] every conversation for immodest locutions and rapping the knuckles of those who inadvertently use them.
>
> *(Lilla 2017, 14, 91)*

This, Lilla repeatedly insists, is in effect a depoliticizing pseudo-politics that, while it is unhelpful to the causes it seeks to promote, is also intellectually limiting to students because it prevents them from engaging with uncomfortable and potentially provocative positions. In their widely debated 2015 article, "The Coddling of the American Mind" (the kernel of a 2018 book of the same title), Lukianoff and Haidt similarly argued that "[i]f students graduate believing that they can learn nothing from people they dislike or from those with whom they disagree, we will have done them a great intellectual disservice" (n.p.).

In a train of thought attributed to Coleman, he reflects on, in remarkably similar terms, just this combination of narrow-minded moralizing and lack of intellectual adventurousness:

> Appropriate. The current code word for reining in most any deviation from the wholesome guidelines and thereby making everybody "comfortable." [. . .] he could teach "Appropriate Behavior in Classical Greek Drama," a course that would be over before it began. [. . .] coercions of propriety. The tyranny of propriety. [. . .] It's as though not even the most basic level of imaginative thought had been admitted into consciousness to cause the slight disturbance. A century of destruction

> unlike any other [was drawing to a close] and here they are up in arms about Faunia Farley. Here in America either it's Faunia Farley or it's Monica Lewinsky! The luxury of these lives disquieted so by the inappropriate comportment of Clinton and Silk!
>
> *(152–154)*

By connecting moral outrage at both Clinton and Silk – though ignoring the power differential in both relationships in a way only possible before #MeToo – the passage once more hints at the fact that censoriousness and Hawthorne's "persecuting spirit" are to be found on the left and the right ("appropriate," of course, also captures left-wing as well as right-wing narrow-minded propriety).[18]

The novel thus once more complicates the attribution of "political correctness" – or, today, "cancel culture" – as being a leftist obsession. Thus, it has long been established that both have been used by the right as a campaigning term for allegedly excessive leftist language-policing:[19] "The phrase 'political correctness' is used rhetorically by the Right to describe leftist ideas such as multiculturalism and feminism that they do not agree with and as a stigmatizing term" (Barnard 121).

Moreover, attempts at censoring opinions, both in the form of seeking to have academics fired and of banning or censoring books, occur both on the left and on the right: "Of the 471 incidents we found of attempts to get professors fired, about 164 of them (35%) were from the right" (Haidt and Lukianoff), while attempts at banning books – especially on LGBTQIA+ subjects, on sexuality and sexual health, on racism or on death and suicide – are even more prevalent on the right (see PEN; ALA).

What further contributes to the political even-handedness of the novel is an ambivalence in the portrayal of Coleman: While he sometimes seems a rather likeable common-sense liberal humanist against the modish careerism of Delphine Roux, he elsewhere appears as the unpleasant mouthpiece of cultural conservatism in the vein of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* when he speaks of contemporary students as "incredibly badly educated" and "far and away the dumbest generation in American history" (191f.; for parallels see Kinzel 164–167). What are we to make, for instance, of the following passage (the debate continues for several pages)?

> His difficulties with Delphine Roux had begun the first semester he was back in the classroom, when one of his students [. . .] went to her, as department chair, to complain about the Euripides plays in Coleman's

> Greek tragedy course [. . .] the student, Elena Mitnick, found them "degrading to women." "So what shall I do to accommodate Miss Mitnick? Strike Euripides from my reading list?" "Not at all. Clearly everything depends on how you teach Euripides." [. . .] "Miss Mitnick's misreading of those two plays," he was telling her, "is so grounded in narrow, parochial ideological concerns that it does not lend itself to correction. [. . .] I've been reading and thinking about these plays all my life." "But never from Elena's feminist perspective." "[Our students have] been incredibly badly educated. [. . .] Providing the most naive of readers with a feminist perspective on Euripides is one of the best ways you could devise to close down their thinking."
>
> *(184, 191, 192)*

The position Coleman formulates here is the fairly common one that to evaluate the cultural production of the past by applying the ethical criteria of the present is not only anachronistic, it is also a fairly undemanding intellectual pursuit that proceeds largely by unreflectively responding to individual words without engaging with the complexity of a text.[20] Although the novel thus again raises questions rather than simply taking sides – Coleman is too complex and ambivalent a character to lend himself to any simplistic manipulation of sympathy and a straightforward propagation of any specific position – Coleman's objections to a specific form of engaging (or refusing to do so) with potentially provocative subjects appear to foreshadow Lilla's critique:

> [Progressive academics once] imagined raucous, no-holds-barred debates over big ideas, not a roomful of students looking suspiciously at one another. They imagined being provocative and forcing students to defend their positions, not getting emails from deans suggesting they come in for a little talk.
>
> *(2017, 92)*

"Knowledges" and "Epistemologies" – or "Post-Truth" and "Alternative Facts"

Roth's novel thus serves to connect the present-day debate about "post-truth" (and the role of online media[21] in this phenomenon) with a debate raging at the time Roth wrote *The Human Stain*, namely, the debate about theoretical physicist Alan Sokal's hoax article[22] spoofing the – real or alleged – disregard for facts and scientific evidence in some branches of the humanities and social sciences. In the article revealing his hoax and

commenting on his motivation for writing and submitting the hoax article, Sokal stated:

> [M]y concern over the spread of subjectivist thinking is both intellectual and political. Intellectually, the problem with such doctrines is that they are false. [. . .] There *is* a real world; its properties are *not* merely social constructions; facts and evidence *do* matter. [. . .] Politically, I'm angered because most (though not all) of this silliness is emanating from the self-proclaimed Left. [. . .] I'm a leftist too. [. . .] But I'm a leftist (and feminist) *because* of evidence and logic, not in spite of it. Why should the right wing be allowed to monopolize the intellectual high ground? [E]pistemic relativism [. . .] undermines the already fragile prospects for progressive social critique. Theorizing about "the social construction of reality" won't help us find an effective treatment for AIDS or devise strategies for preventing global warming. Nor can we combat false ideas in history, sociology, economics and politics if we reject the notions of truth and falsity.
>
> *(1996b, final paragraphs; italics original)*

This is not far from Lilla's claim a good 20 years later:

> [With identity politics], classroom conversations that once might have begun *I think A, and here is my argument*, now take the form *Speaking as an X, I am offended that you claim B*. [. . .] It means that there is no impartial space for dialogue. White men have one "epistemology," black women have another. So what remains to be said?
>
> *(Lilla 2017, 90)*[23]

Finally, in a 2018 essay, Katie Kelaidis similarly criticized the intellectually problematic nature of this specific type of relativism and its susceptibility to political exploitation by the right:

> The influence of this [epistemic] relativism on the Left is quite clear. It has nurtured the disastrous notion that a person's identity and tribal membership cards determine the ability of a reader to understand and respond to a text, undermining our shared humanity and our shared stake in the uniquely human property of reason. But the Right has not been immune, either. There too, logic and reason have been the chief victims, as the intellectual conservatism of yore has given way to an emotive traditionalist populism – identity politics marketed to a new chauvinistic audience.
>
> *(Kelaidis n.p.; I owe the reference to Kelaidis's essay to Koschorke 479)*

While it seems simplistically unfair, as some have concluded from such observations, to argue that poststructuralism helped pave the way for Trump[24] and thus to chalk it all up to the left, some things might give us pause: The notorious debate about "alternative facts" in the early days of the Trump administration with Sean Spicer and Kellyanne Conway as Trump's mouthpieces does come to mind. Trump's blatant disregard for reason, facts and evidence – together with his anti-scientific streak of climate change denial – has made some on the left who, before Trump, only spoke of "knowledges" and "epistemologies" in the plural, rediscover the value of scientific evidence. Here, too, the novel points forward to current debates about the pitfalls of constructivism and the downsides of regarding scientific knowledge as mere construction and just one of a range of "knowledges"; in this vein, conservatives (where they do not try to ban the teaching of evolutionary biology altogether) have similarly claimed evolutionary science to be just another account to be taught (if at all) next to Creationism.

Interestingly, Ernestine, in the long discussion with Zuckerman after Coleman's funeral, closely associates identity politics in education, a decline in academic standards and epistemic relativism when she concludes:

> What happened to Coleman with that word "spooks" is all a part of the same enormous failure. In my parents' day and well into yours and mine, it used to be the person who fell short. Now it's the discipline. Reading the classics is too difficult, therefore it's the classics that are to blame. Today the student asserts his incapacity as a privilege. I can't learn it, so there is something wrong with it. And there is something especially wrong with the bad teacher who wants to teach it. There are no more criteria, Mr. Zuckerman, only opinions.
>
> *(330f.; see my discussion of Ernestine's role later)*

Perspective, Intertextuality, Ambiguity, Reflexivity, or: Reading Fiction as Fiction

Though one would like to think it superfluous to point out that literary form – narrative perspective, questions of chronology, the difference between a character's voice and authorial voice – matters, some current discussions make the reminder seem worthwhile. This may especially be the case with *The Human Stain*. Thus, the chronology of the novel is central to how it "works": When Zuckerman begins to write his book, Coleman and Faunia are already dead, and the text is cast as Zuckerman's retrospective attempt to reconstruct Coleman's life and downfall. Zuckerman knows about Coleman's family origins but initially lets us share his own

and everyone else's original perspective and leads us astray by first telling us that Coleman Silk was Jewish. The complexity of Coleman's identity in the novel is highlighted by the fact that he is thus introduced as a Jew before we learn about his real origins in a flashback after more than one fourth of the novel (85ff.). Furthermore, we learn about Coleman Silk's secret long before we know how Nathan Zuckerman finds out about it.

Even before the revealing flashback to his childhood and youth, however, there are hints at Coleman's African American origins, but they only assume significance in retrospect, upon rereading. These hints are particularly frequent just before the beginning of the flashback (6, 11, 15f., 45, 79, 81, 82, 84). Arguably the most interesting of these hints occurs when Zuckerman describes Coleman's appearance with its "tightly coiled, short-clipped hair" and the "light yellowish skin pigmentation" which gives him "something of the ambiguous aura of the pale blacks who are sometimes taken for white" (15f.).

A further hint, occurring immediately before the flashback, is to be found in Coleman's argument with his lawyer, Nelson Primus, who advises him to end his relationship with Faunia. Infuriated, Coleman tells him: "I never again want to [. . .] see your smug fucking lily-white face" (81), and Primus wonders about this curious expression. This might, in Freudian terms, be called "the return of the repressed," and it is this seemingly pointless insult to his lawyer which reveals, before we even know Coleman is Black, that his perception of life and of people's chances in life is shaped by his being African American. One's roots, the past and history, it seems, are inescapable; and the American ideals of self-realization and constant reinvention of the self come at a high price. The full significance of Coleman's locution, however, only becomes apparent much later. When Coleman tells his mother he is going to withhold his family history from his wife-to-be, Iris, and deny his family, his brother, Walter, tells him never "to show [his] lily-white face around [the] house again" (145).

In contrast to critics who have regarded the narrative revelation of Coleman's real past as a weakness of the novel (see, for instance, Kinzel 190f.), I maintain that the complexity and challenging ambiguity of the novel is due to precisely this intricate narrative structure of first introducing Coleman as Jew, then slowly and by layers revealing his origins and only finally (316ff.) telling us how Zuckerman at Coleman's funeral came to find out the truth about his friend.

The foregrounding of Zuckerman's attempts to reconstruct Coleman's life and his thoughts – as well as those of other key characters, Faunia, Delphine Roux, Les Farley – leads to a fascinating layering of narrative personae, reflecting consciousnesses and focalising instances. In one passage, for instance, the author Philip Roth has his narrator, Zuckerman,

imagine what Coleman might have believed Faunia was thinking about her life and her past (see 164f.).

Zuckerman thus constructs a number of powerful passages of largely free indirect speech in which he gives us insights into Coleman's view of the "spooks" incident, of the parallels between Clinton's case and his own or of his relationship with Faunia or with his daughter Lisa (151–164). Similarly constructed passages of free indirect speech simulate Les's perceptions of his experience in Vietnam and his rage and frustration in his present life (64–74). Delphine Roux's perspective on the "spooks" affair, on Coleman's relationship with Faunia and on her own desires, experiences with men and her feelings of repulsion as well as attraction for Coleman Silk are similarly rendered in long passages of free indirect speech (259–283, see also 193–201). One of these is the ultimately farcical passage in which she formulates a personal ad for the *New York Review of Books* looking for a partner and ends up accidentally mailing it to her entire department (259–277). The partner she seeks, it becomes clear here, is exactly Coleman Silk. Finally, there are a number of such passages of free indirect speech which reconstruct Faunia's thoughts (165–169, 225–247).

Thus, although Zuckerman himself knows about Coleman when he begins to write the book, he attempts to recreate for the reader his own lack of knowledge while hinting at Coleman's secret all along. Even after the revelation, the novel maintains a double perspective in that Zuckerman recreates and shares with the reader his original perspective of not knowing. This allows for fascinating reflections in passages about times with Coleman when Zuckerman himself did not know yet, while we as readers have already been told about Coleman's secret. A key passage of the novel brings together many of its key themes, concerns and narrative devices:

> I sat on the grass, astonished, unable to account for what I was thinking: he has a secret. [. . .] How do I reach that conclusion? Why a secret? [S]omewhere there's a blank in him too, a blotting out, an excision, though of what I can't begin to guess [. . .] can't even know, really, if I am making sense with this hunch or fancifully registering my ignorance of another human being. Only some three months later, when I learned the secret and began this book [. . .] did I understand the underpinning of the pact between them: he had told her his whole story. [. . .] How do I know she knew? I don't. [. . .] Now that they're dead, nobody can know. For better or worse, I can only do what everyone does who thinks that they know. I imagine. I am forced to imagine. It happens to be what I do for a living. It is my job. It's now all I do.
>
> *(213, see also 63, 208f., 321, 326, 333, 337, 338, 339 et passim)*

These fundamental limitations on what can be known about another human being in general apply to all characters in the novel and their thoughts about one another. In this vein, Zuckerman also frequently speculates whether Coleman ever told Faunia his secret (326, 337, 340f.), and even his assumption that Les Farley killed them by forcing them off the road remains an assumption (256f., 350, 354).

Zuckerman thus constantly foregrounds the fact that his narrative is to a large extent based on imagination and that his history of Coleman's life and particularly of his last months is at least as much construction as it is reconstruction. The novel is, therefore, fundamentally also concerned with what can ever be known about another human being and with the importance of narrative imagination in reconstructing a life (see also Safer 224 and Royal 2006).

Thus, criticism accusing Roth of presumptuously arrogating the right to imagine, as a white writer, the life of a Black man passing as white overlooks the fact that the problematic nature of such an attempt is made explicit on a metanarrative level through the mediating figure of Roth's narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, and thus becomes a central topic of the novel itself. Indeed, the novel is not least cast as Zuckerman's exploration of the problematic nature of reconstructing an identity, of imagining a life, with frequent meditations on how much will always remain unknowable about other people: "What we know is that [. . .] nobody knows anything" (208f.); "there really is no bottom to what is not known" (315). In this context, it is important to draw attention to the fact that Roth already revealed an acute awareness of the problems inherent in the attempt to narrate a life in his *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography*, where he had his own literary creation Zuckerman counter "Roth's" own account with a 30-page concluding discussion of just such problems.

This problematic nature of Zuckerman's reconstruction and the deliberate misleading of the reader for some 85 pages, however, does not justify an assessment of Zuckerman as an unreliable narrator. Like in much recent fiction, conventions which indicate unreliable narration no longer serve the purpose of pointing out that the narrator as such is unreliable and deviates from the truth. Rather, conventions traditionally associated with an unreliable narrator are increasingly to be perceived as a *reliable* and appropriate rendering of the highly problematic status of "truth" and "adequate representation" given the cognitive, epistemological and ontological uncertainties associated with postmodernism (see Zerweck 136; see also Nünning). Roth's novel in particular poignantly reveals that the limitations of knowledge about another human being are intrinsic and fundamental. This is not, to be sure, the same as stating that truth and reality do not exist; the extent to which one can ever know the truth may be an issue.

Moreover, *The Human Stain* appears as an unobtrusively and yet consistently self-reflexive novel: In addition to the numerous references to the writing of *The Human Stain* by Nathan Zuckerman (13, 25, 204, 213, 304, 337, 344, 350, 353, 356, 360), and his reflections on what one can know about another human being, Roth occasionally uses or alludes to characters from his own previous novels – quite apart from Zuckerman, of course (5: *The Ghost Writer*; 295: *Sabbath's Theatre*). Furthermore, there is a multiplicity of passages concerned with careful reading – Coleman and Nathan reading Delphine's vicious letter (39f.), the reading from *Julius Caesar* at the funeral of Coleman's father (106f.), Coleman's reading of Steena Paulson's love letter (112ff.) and his reading of her farewell letter (126). Finally, the power of words and language also manifests itself in the fact that one word – "spooks" – proves to undo Coleman. The novel thus frequently and self-consciously foregrounds the writing and – careful – reading of narratives. That narrative is even an existential activity that it lends meaning to a life and works against oblivion is highlighted by Zuckerman when he writes about the initial impulse to set down Coleman's story on the evening after his funeral:

> [S]tanding in the falling darkness beside the uneven earth mound roughly heaped over Coleman's coffin, I was completely seized by his story, by its end and by its beginning, and then and there, I began this book. [. . .] And that is how all this began: by my standing alone in a darkening graveyard and entering into professional competition with death.
>
> *(337f.)*

A further textual strategy central to an understanding of the poetics and politics of the novel is the use it makes of intertextuality. Thus, the sustained intertextual engagement with classical Greek drama (18, 63, 125, 127, 151, 170, 179, 184, 210 *et passim*) more than suggests that one can read *The Human Stain* as the tragedy of Coleman Silk, who brings about his own downfall because the origins he seeks to repress come back to haunt him (on *The Human Stain* as a tragedy see also Kinzel, 173–197, 200–204 *et passim*; Rankine; Bakewell). Bakewell even reads the novel as being inversely modelled on *Oedipus Rex*, a frame of reference already established through the novel's highly apposite motto from this classical tragedy of identity and self-discovery: Like Oedipus, Coleman attempts to escape his family and his roots, which nonetheless prove inescapable (Bakewell 30, 32 *et passim*). Coleman, however, is aware of what he is doing, while Oedipus is not. In addition to the motto, the setting, "Athena College," invites speculations on classical analogies. Even the function of the chorus as commenting on the action is replicated in the novel: The

group of anonymous men Coleman overhears as they drastically comment on the Clinton-Lewinsky affair (148–151) is even explicitly called a "chorus" (151). Finally, the division into five chapters, too, may be read as a reference to the tragic genre. In addition to Greek tragedy, references to Homer's *Iliad* abound (4f., 63, 232, 335), inviting one to see Coleman's rage upon his enforced resignation and the death of his wife in the light of the rage of Achilles, his favourite literary character. Finally, Zuckerman compares Coleman's forceful and ruthless act of severing all ties to his family with the "savagery of *The Iliad*" (335).

> A more immediate context within which to consider *The Human Stain*'s use of Homer, however, is that of the 1990s "culture wars." While Roth had always been an allusive writer, allusiveness became a kind of moral (or even political) project in works such *The Human Stain* or *Exit Ghost*, demanding that the reader undertake a literary education in the direct defiance of the declared "end of the literary era."
>
> *(Boddy 58)*

Even beyond its engagement with classical drama, *The Human Stain* is fraught with intertextual references and allusions to the Bible (61), the story of Eloisa and Abelard (2f.) Chaucer (92), Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (92, 107, 140), *Othello* (151), Swift (19), Keats (27, 32, 212, 354), Dickens (92), Balzac and Stendhal (42), political theorists such Bakunin and Kropotkin (128), literary theorists Kristeva and Sollers (200) or Czech writer Milan Kundera (200, 261). Silk's late-in-life love for Faunia is repeatedly linked to Aschenbach's infatuation with Tadzio in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (51, 64, 171). Finally, with references to Hawthorne (2, 44, 310 *et passim*), Melville and Thoreau (310, 360), Mark Twain (128), Dos Passos (148), Sinclair Lewis (153), James Baldwin (154) or American cultural critics such as Mencken (153) or Allan Bloom (192), the novel can also be read as an engagement with the canon of American literature and some of its classic themes (for intertextuality in the novel, see also Leonard).

Especially Nathaniel Hawthorne is a strong presence in *The Human Stain*. On the second page of the novel already, writing about the hysteria around the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, Zuckerman chastises "America's oldest communal passion, historically perhaps its most treacherous and subversive pleasure: the ecstasy of sanctimony" (2). Explicitly linking these two outbreaks of narrow-minded intolerance, he here quotes Hawthorne's description of "the persecuting spirit" of early Puritanism from the "Custom House" introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne 15). At Coleman's funeral, Herb Keble associates Coleman's individualism and his "resistance to the coercions of a censorious community" with the

tradition of "Hawthorne, Melville, and Thoreau" (310). Most tellingly, perhaps, *The Scarlet Letter* is invoked in the context of the accusations against Coleman:

> Only a label is required. The label is the motive. The label is the evidence. [. . .] First a racist and now a misogynist. It is too late in the century to call him a Communist, though that is the way it used to be done. *(290; see also 84)*

Just as Hawthorne's Hester Prynne with her scarlet letter "A" comes to stand not just for "adultery," "angel" or "able" but also for "America" itself, the continuity here established from the inquisitorial spirit at the heart of *The Scarlet Letter* via the anti-Communist witch-hunt of the 1950s to the narrow-minded intolerance that persecuted Clinton and Coleman once again makes clear how closely the text links the private and the political, how Coleman's fate virtually comes to stand for America. Here, too, in directly linking the "leftist" campaign against Coleman to the right-wing, anti-Communist persecution of the 1950s, the novel is remarkably even-handed. Shechner pithily comments on the role of Hawthorne and the "persecuting spirit" for U.S. culture and for the novel's New England setting in particular: "This is Hawthorne country, where every community has a volunteer accusation department the way others have their volunteer fire departments" (2007, 153).[25]

In addition to the role of *The Scarlet Letter* as a key intertext, Hawthorne and Melville and their friendship in the 1850s are associated with the Berkshires as the setting of this novel, and Zuckerman draws attention to the fact that "Hawthorne [. . .] in the 1860s, lived not many miles from my door" (2). In the crucial "The Minister in a Maze" chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, the narrator remarks: "No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true" (Hawthorne 260). This, it seems, is also true of Coleman Silk. Shechner even refers to *The Human Stain* as a "moral romance, a *Scarlet Letter* about race" (2003: 188; for Hawthorne's presence in *The Human Stain*, see also Posnock 2001: 87, 99 *et passim*).

A further strong presence is Ralph Ellison. In one sense, *The Human Stain* can even be read as a rewriting of Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, Ellison being one of Roth's frequently acknowledged intellectual and creative role models. The "spooks incident" so central to the novel – Roth spoke of it as "the core of the book. There is no novel without it. There is no Coleman Silk without it" (2012, n.p.) – the incident which triggers Coleman's tragic downfall, appears to allude to the celebrated opening of *The Invisible Man*: "I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those that haunted Edgar

Allen Poe. [. . .] I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (3). I am also, the implication goes, a "spook" in the sense of "African American" (see Parrish 2005: 215). The different implications of the term "spooks" and of invisibility in this passage are explored in Roth's novel and are frequently invoked in individual passages (6, 84f., 158 *et passim*). Coleman, thus, in a sense becomes another "invisible" man, passing as white in a predominantly white society where to be Black would always have meant being visibly "different" (for Roth's indebtedness to Ellison, see also Parrish 2004, Kinzel 186ff.). Moreover, as Hayes has pointed out, "*The Human Stain* takes great pains to be representative of canonical African American achievements in the arts through its extensive portrayal of jazz music" (233). But Hayes also points to Freedman's crucial insight that "in each case on closer inspection the music turns out to be a melange of inter-racial appropriations, blending together George Gershwin and Roy Eldridge, African American traditions with Jewish klezmer" (Hayes 233) and reads this a "de-essentialising" strategy (234).

As Posnock (2006: 234) has shown, even the tableau of the final eight lines of the novel – Les Farley seated on his bucket, fishing through the ice on an isolated lake – alludes to, at least, Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby,* Thoreau's *Walden*, Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* and Melville's *Moby Dick*, some of the central texts in the canon of American literature. This telling intertextual collage and the novel as a whole significantly end with the symbolically fraught word "America." These generalizing implications are underscored by the large number of highly symbolic locations and sites of memory in the novel – traditional New England with all its historical associations generally, the Berkshires and their link with Hawthorne more specifically, "magic, mythical West Point" (101), the Vietnam Veterans Memorial or Greenwich Village in New York City and its associations of an intellectually open, diverse and multiethnic America. One might even want to extend the analogy to imply that, just as Coleman is living a lie, America is living a lie by denying and betraying its origins in genocidal westward expansion and as a society of slaveholders. Individual identity and national identity are frequently associated throughout the novel and thus virtually become inseparable.

Commenting on its sustained engagement with the politics of canon formation, Hayes reads the novel as being in line with attempts by "a number of thinkers including Charles Altieri, Richard Rorty and Harold Bloom" to "move beyond both neoconservatism and the hermeneutics of suspicion" in the canon debate (234):

> Roth has never directly affiliated himself with any of the major positions in the canon debate, and critics have struggled to define the nature of his intervention. Was Roth taking a neo-conservative stance in the manner

> of Bellow? That is what Kasia Boddy concluded, aligning both Roth and his protagonist Coleman Silk with "popular conservative defences of the traditional canon, such as in Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*." But others positioned the novel quite differently. Stuart Jeffries emphasised the connection between Roth and another very different Bloom – Harold rather than Allan – connecting the Nietzschean tone of *The Western Canon* (1994) with Roth's own attack on academic *ressentiment*. In contrast, Jonathan Freedman's emphasis on the intricate ways in which *The Human Stain* explores the relationship between literature and cultural hybridity seemed to make Roth's novel resonate more closely with Homi Bhabha than Harold Bloom.
>
> *(Hayes 226)*

Many of the central issues of the novel and many of its strategies of staging the debate come together in the discussions between Zuckerman and Coleman's sister, Ernestine, after their encounter at his funeral. Here, lamenting "political correctness" in academia, a decline of standards in education generally, and criticizing the institution of Black History Month, Ernestine appears to express the kind of reactionary cultural conservatism Roth has often been accused of ventilating in *The Human Stain*:

> Sounds from what you've told me [about Coleman's resignation over the "spooks" incident] that anything is possible in a college today. Sounds like the people there forgot what it is to teach. Sounds like what they do is closer to buffoonery. [. . .] One has to be so terribly frightened of every word one uses? What ever happened to the First Amendment. [. . .] In East Orange High they stopped long ago reading the old classics. They haven't even heard of *Moby-Dick*, much less read it. Youngsters were coming to me the year I retired, telling me that for Black History Month they would only read a biography of a black by a black. What difference, I would ask them, if it's a black author or it's a white author? I'm impatient with Black History Month altogether.
>
> *(328f.)*

Sánchez Canales, citing this passage, refers to Ernestine Silk as "one of Roth's mouthpieces" (125). This is too simple and too simple in several ways: On the one hand, Ernestine also gives a vivid account of racism and segregation in the New Jersey school system after World War II (322–324); on the other hand, her position is undercut or at least questioned. As Scherr has pointed out, crucial factual inaccuracies in her account of the

death of Charles Drew undermine a straightforward understanding of her role as Roth's mere "mouthpiece":

> "Dr. Charles Drew," she told me, "discovered how to prevent blood from clotting so it could be banked. Then he was injured in an automobile accident, and the hospital that was nearest would not take colored, and he died by bleeding to death."
>
> *(328f.)*

However, as Scherr points out, this account is at least biased if not downright counterfactual. In turn, however, his claim that Roth uses the historical inaccuracies in her account "as weapons in his arsenal for ridiculing 'political correctness' and African American's naive distortions of the truth," that he "[laughs] at Ernestine's exasperating insistence on her 'politically incorrect' position while she simultaneously expounds politically correct dogma" (95) and that the novel thus deliberately discredits her positions on these matters seems to me to be short-sighted yet again: Rather than simplistically taking sides for or against any specific position in debates on identity politics, "political correctness," questions of representation and canon formation or of the politics of memory and commemoration, Roth's novel stages the debate by having various positions voiced in a complex layering of perspectives that may or may not be undercut or relativized in the process.

Conclusion

Published midway between the first outbreak of the academic culture wars of the 1980s and the current debates about identity politics, "cancel culture" or "post-truth," Roth's novel explores these issues, not in the form of lessons to be taken home but of questions raised, ambiguities pointed out and trade-offs made explicit: The potentially problematic consequences of ideologically motivated epistemological relativism, the arguably self-limiting rhetoric of diversity liberalism and its real or alleged inability to confront directly some of the key issues of our times and also, in the story of Coleman Silk, the danger lurking behind such discourses. How quickly does criticism turn into fierce ideological debate, and how quickly can reasonable criticism be misread as deeply problematic reactionary last-ditch defences of white male privilege? When does appropriate questioning of allegedly sacred "truths" turn into epistemic relativism and disregard for scientific evidence? How justified is the reproach that "Identity [politics] is Reaganism for Lefties" (Lilla 2017, 95) and that it has neglected questions

of class, thus playing into the hands of the right by allowing it to exploit resentment at having been left behind? How do we adequately balance the needs of the individual vs. responsibilities towards a collective? How can education address pressing issues of racism and gender inequality without only preaching comforting truths and confirming what we think we know already? How provocative can or should education in the humanities be – inherently, occasionally, accidentally, preferably not at all? Is it enough to say that to teach a text does not mean accepting its premises or implications ("Clearly everything depends on how you teach Euripides," 184)?

At a crucial moment in U.S. politics (in the year of the hotly contested 2000 elections), *The Human Stain* negotiated these issues with remarkable subtlety. Roth's novel, I have argued, is both far more balanced *and* more nuanced than some of its critics have taken it to be (and, one suspects with at least some of them, it's not the subtlety they found appealing). What Hayes has argued about the novel's take on the canon debate – "Roth's response to the political questions raised by the debate as a whole is in fact much more nuanced than has generally been recognized" (227) – can thus in fact be observed for a range of other issues too.

On some issues, however, the novel does appear to take a clear stance – not discursively but performatively.[26] By virtue of being the provocative novel that it is, the novel "performs" a critique of demands that literature provide a "safe space": If literature itself, literary studies or academia generally is to be a "safe space" in the sense that the objects of discussion must not be provocative to anyone, the novel, if not discursively, then performatively, appears to suggest that we might as well shut down the humanities departments altogether.

Similarly, while it problematizes the possibility of Zuckerman's ever appropriately reconstructing Coleman's life with all its complex entanglements and motivations, it applies these reflections far more fundamentally to the reconstruction of *any* life and thus goes far beyond the rather narrow discussion about the legitimacy of even trying to reconstruct or narrate the life of someone with a different ethnicity. The novel thus appears as an impassioned and compelling plea for the fundamental artistic liberty of doing so as a *raison d'être* of fiction. Thus, while, for society at large, it may not be one of the most pressing issues that identity politics in its strong form calls into question some of the foundations of how literature, theatre and the arts in general "work", it *is* an issue for literary studies:

> [F]undamental preconditions of aesthetic production come under pressure if it is doubted that person A can put themselves in the position of figure B (imagination) or can perform their role (theatre) and that the distance between actor and role can nonetheless be maintained

> (autonomy of fiction). If agreement about the legitimacy of this distance no longer exists, if each and every one may only play themselves or narrate themselves or if the representation of someone else falls back on the person representing [i.e., if what one says or does while representing another person is attributed to oneself], then art can ultimately only proceed in the form of auto-documentation – and that frequently means: in narcissistically self-centred ways – and without being allowed to claim the precious good of the liberty of fiction.
>
> *(Koschorke 476)*[27]

Or: What kind of literature is still possible if a playwright (or director or actor) writing (or directing or performing) a play, say, on neo-Nazi youths cannot have them use the kind of drastically racist language that would be in character without being taken to task for it?

Finally, *The Human Stain* can also be used to explore the function of literature in cultural diagnosis. Arguably, the novel's engagement with the Clinton-Lewinsky affair (especially 2f.) is more enlightening than many more sustained scholarly discussions could ever be (148). One of the anonymous men overheard by Coleman attributes a diagnostic function to the Lewinsky affair: "[T]his girl has revealed more about America than anybody since Dos Passos. *She* stuck a thermometer up the *country's* ass. Monica's *U.S.A.*" (148, italics original). Similarly, Roth's trilogy as a vast narrative attempt at cultural diagnosis has itself been compared to Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy. Without having to be too apologetic about the uses of literature and of literary scholarship, anyone trying to highlight the crucial function of literature in cultural self-reflection will find a compelling example in *The Human Stain*.

Such subtlety, however, is lost on those who read fiction merely to find confirmation of their own positions (see Daub's critique of attempts at using *The Human Stain* to "prove" cancel culture is a problem on U.S. campuses): Literature, it cannot be emphasized often enough, makes things more complex rather than simpler. Texts themselves can, in remarkably subtle ways, negotiate key issues and convey insights into a debate, but just handing people a novel does not necessarily convey these insights. I have no desire to promote anything like an arcane knowledge that literary scholars can uniquely claim for themselves, but it does take some analytical toolkit and an awareness of how fiction "works" to point out functions of literary texts in understanding and initiating public debates.[28] That at least some of those whom literary and cultural studies scholars should be concerned to bring back into the debate are not necessarily willing to engage in conversation about controversial novels on race and campus culture in America is another matter: While attempts at using literary texts as conversation

starters in public debates do have to negotiate the "preaching to the choir" problem, my discussion of climate change fiction in Chapter 5 will show that we cannot simply assume that those who *do* read novels don't need to be reminded of how fiction works.[29]

Notes

1 Original: "ein Schlüsselwerk der Epoche, eines jener Bücher, die mit zeitlichem Abstand noch besser zu würdigen sind."
2 Original: "Literatur kann prophetisch sein. Nicht im plumpen Sinn einer Prognose, sondern als atmosphärische Vorwegnahme. Hellsichtigkeit hat nichts mit Hellseherei zu tun. Es ist die Fähigkeit von Schriftstellern wie Roth, gesellschaftlichen Wandel früh zu erspüren, sich die späteren Auswirkungen von Ereignissen vorstellen, sie in die Zukunft verlängern zu können."
3 In her recent *Monsters: A Fan's Dilemma* (2023), Lederer interestingly uses the notion of the "stain," the "spreading, creeping, wine-dark, inevitable" (50) blemish on the reputation of an artist or writer thus accused. Applying this notion to Michael Jackson, she speaks of the notion of the stain as "especially poignant" with regard to Jackson's skin colour. Though she does not comment on Roth, the image of the stain is highly suggestive in our context. I owe the reference to Lederer's book to Shulevitz's review (2023).
4 For insightful discussions of whether and how still to engage with the work of artists known or alleged to have engaged in sexual misconduct or who have voiced opinions held to be problematic or untenable, see Daub; Dederer; Matthes; Domainko et al. or the essay by Kipnis.
5 It is important to disentangle the layers here: Although Roth has often been accused of misogyny, he has – unlike his biographer, Bailey, and his own protagonist, Coleman Silk – never been accused of any sexual misconduct or sexual violence.
6 In the MLA database, for the first five years after publication (2001–2005), there are 23 entries on the novel, while for the five years from 2017 to 2021, there are 22 entries. By comparison with the other novels in the trilogy, for *American Pastoral* (1997), there are nine entries for the first five years (1998–2002) and 19 entries for the period of 2017–2021, while for *I Married a Communist (*1998), there are two entries for the first five years (1999–2003) and five entries for the period of 2017–2021. These are the figures for the three novels as "primary subject work" in a search conducted on March 3, 2023.
7 For discussions of *The Human Stain* in the context of "political correctness" and the culture wars, see also Anténe, Barnard, Boxwell, Godfrey, Kimmage, Medin, Moore, Morgan, Parrish 2004, Romano, Sánchez Canales.
8 Moreover, to argue that, in the logic of the novel, the extremes meet, emphatically does not mean to suggest that the left and the right are indistinguishable ethically or to anachronistically align Roth with the kind of relativism we saw with Trump after the Charlottesville murder, when he claimed that there were good people and bad people on both sides; it is emphatically not that. The specific moral fervour and the "persecuting spirit" in some strands on the left and on the right are the same.
9 For this parallelism, see also Barnard; Boxwell 123; Franco 90; Holroyd 63; Medin 85; Morgan 118; Posnock 2006, xvii; Taylor n.p.; Safer 211f.

10 The motif of "passing" is, of course, by no means unique to Roth's novel but is frequent in American literature and was a particularly common theme of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance. As classic examples of the theme one might cite James Weldon Johnson's novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929) or Claude McKay's story "Near-White" (1931). More recently, Ralph Ellison's posthumously published *Juneteenth* (1999) is also concerned with passing and has been seen as a potential influence (for parallels, see also Parrish 2004: 440, Rankine 105f., Kinzel 162f.).

11 The attempt to escape one's family and a powerful desire for self-realization, beyond their ambivalent relationship of attraction and repulsion, strongly connects Coleman Silk and Delphine Roux. The reflection on the desire to "construct [her]self outside the orthodoxy of [her] family's given" (273) Zuckerman imputes to her with hardly any changes also applies to Coleman: "I will go to America and be the author of my life, she says; I will construct myself outside the orthodoxy of my family's given. I will fight against the given, impassioned subjectivity carried to the limit, individualism at its best – and she winds up instead in a drama beyond her control. She winds up as the author of nothing. There is the drive to master things, and the thing that is mastered is oneself" (273). For a detailed discussion of symbolism, telling names and suggestive contrasts and parallels between Coleman and Delphine Roux, Delphine and Lester Farley, Delphine Roux and Faunia Farley, Steena Palsson and Faunia and even between Coleman and the hand-raised crow at the Audubon Society, see Gurr 2008.

12 In another essay, Kaplan reads the novel as "imagin[ing] a postracial consciousness where the limiting identitarian strictures that feed racism can be abolished" (2005b, 126).

13 Hayes quotes Guillory's still insightful diagnosis from his 1993 *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* of " 'a confusion between representation in the political sense – the relation of a representative to a community – and representation in the rather different sense of the relation between an image and what the image represents.' The collapse of the former into the latter, he argued, 'has had the unfortunate effect of allowing the participants in the "symbolic struggle" over representation in the canon to overestimate the political effects of this struggle, at the same time that the participants have remained relatively blind to the social and institutional conditions of symbolic struggles.' " (232).

14 Identity politics, Lilla has argued, "[does] not challenge the fundamental principle of Reaganism. It reinforced that principle: individualism. Identity politics on the left [. . .] ha[s] given way to a pseudo-politics of self-regard and increasingly narrow and exclusionary self-definition that is now cultivated in our colleges and universities. [. . .] Identity is Reaganism for lefties" (2017, 9f., 95). As for the susceptibility of identity politics to be appropriated by the right, Lilla has argued that "Liberals should bear in mind that the first identity movement in American politics was the Ku Klux Klan, which still exists. Those who play the identity game should be prepared to lose it" (Lilla 2016; see also Koschorke 471).

15 As German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz influentially argued, the new "class society" of "late modernity" is not exclusively or even primarily one of economic means but primarily one of "lifestyles," cultural preferences and unevenly distributed "cultural capital" (Reckwitz 2017, 275f.).

16 See Lilla's critique of educated urban elites in the U.S. as frequently showing towards uneducated rural Americans a condescension they would brand as unacceptable if shown towards people from the Global South (2017, 116).

17 To be sure, there is a connection, which Schaible conveniently outlines as follows, rightly drawing attention to the fact that the phenomenon is older and in fact only becomes apparent when it challenges previous norms and assumptions of "normality": "This is why the impression arises that this is a generational phenomenon, because societal change comes to be felt primarily with the young. Therefore, the charge of 'cancel culture' is so closely tied to identity politics – understood as a policy that puts belonging to a group at the centre. Identity politics has also been around for ages, it just did not go by that name as long as it affected the material demands of groups (it was then called politics of interest) or as long as it was identity politics of normality. Every appeal to tradition, to religion or culture, every barbecue ad addressed to men is identity politics of normality" (Schaible n.p., my translation). The original reads: "Deshalb entsteht der Eindruck, es handle sich um ein Generationenphänomen, weil gesellschaftlicher Wandel überdurchschnittlich unter Jungen durchschlägt. Und deshalb hängt der Vorwurf der Ächtungskultur so eng zusammen mit dem der Identitätspolitik – verstanden als Politik, die Gruppenzugehörigkeit in den Mittelpunkt stellt. Auch Identitätspolitik gibt es schon ewig, nur wurde sie nicht so genannt, solange sie materielle Anliegen von Gruppen betraf (dann hieß sie Interessenpolitik) oder solange sie Identitätspolitik der Normalität war. Jeder Appell an Tradition, Religion und Kultur, jede Grillwerbung für Männer ist Identitätspolitik der Normalität."

18 In this vein, Morgan points to the inverse parallelism between Coleman Silk and Murray Ringold in *I Married a Communist* in that Ringold is forced out of his teaching job "from the opposite side" (118). Like *I Married a Communist* with its depiction of Murray Ringold as a committed leftist-activist teacher who clearly advanced the value of education to disadvantaged students, the depiction of Coleman's sister, Ernestine, and his daughter, Lisa, with their commitment to education in *The Human Stain* clearly does highlight the importance of the educational system to pluralist democracies (see also Hayes 232f.).

19 As has also been frequently shown, "cancel culture," in the form denounced by the right, is often a fiction; it happens less often than is commonly claimed, and those who have indeed been disinvited from festivals, conferences, podiums – allegedly cancelled or silenced, as the right has it – have frequently been interviewed and have had their say elsewhere, frequently with at least as much (or more) publicity than the event originally cancelled would in all likelihood have had (for an illuminating discussion of this mechanism, see Daub).

20 As has also been argued in the longstanding debate over whether *Huckleberry Finn* is racist or critical of racism, rather than, by reflex, responding to individual words or even to problematic assessments in a text, it is usually worth looking at who voices problematic opinions – a character does not necessarily voice the opinions of an author – and how such perspectives are relativized in a text. This, it cannot be stated clearly enough, often amounts to no longer understanding how fiction works (see my discussion in the Conclusion to this chapter).

21 The role of online media in polarization, in the emergence of epistemic bubbles and in the dynamics of conflicts has often been pointed out (for a persuasive if somewhat schematic account of how the dynamics of social media [which is not U.S.-specific] fuels the increasing polarization specific to the U.S. and how this leads to increasingly unproductive debates, see Lukianoff and Haidt 2021).

The change brought about by online media and their escalation and scandalization dynamics, too, is insightfully addressed in the novel when it refers to "the most diabolical of art-forms, the on-line art form, because of its anonymity. [. . .] the germs of malice where unleashed, and where Coleman's conduct was concerned, there was no absurdity out of which someone wasn't going to try to make indignant sense. An epidemic had broken out in Athena" (291). Interestingly, the novel also comments on the consequences of anonymity on social media, on the "semper aliquid haeret" of online character assassination in an online post spreading lies about Coleman's abusive behaviour towards Faunia: "How can one possibly roll back all these lies? Even if you demonstrate something's a lie, in a place like Athena, once it's out there, it stays" (293).

22 In his article "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," Sokal combined real out-of-context quotations from a number of intellectual luminaries of the twentieth century (from Heisenberg to Derrida) and used them to suggest radical political implications. In his revelation article, he summarized his "approach" in the hoax article as follows: "The fundamental silliness of my article lies [. . .] in the dubiousness of its central thesis and of the 'reasoning' adduced to support it. Basically, I claim that quantum gravity – the still-speculative theory of space and time on scales of a millionth of a billionth of a billionth of a billionth of a centimeter – has profound *political* implications (which, of course, are 'progressive')" (Sokal 1996b, paragraph 10).

23 Koschorke comments on a curious turn away from a long-held progressive dogma in current debates: "while the 1960s/1970s proclaimed the 'death of the author' as an instance of authority over the text, today the most embittered debates are conducted over who, with what justification, may write or speak about who, who may translate whom, who may imagine themselves into which group of the population or may even claim authority to speak for it. The question 'who speaks?' that Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault had declared obsolete, has – even disregarding the content of a given utterance – become the decisive criterion for admission to public discourse" (Koschorke 470, my translation). The original reads: "während in den 1960er/1970er Jahren der 'Tod des Autors' als Instanz von Textherrschaft proklamiert wurde, führt man heute die erbittertsten Debatten darüber, wer mit welcher Berechtigung für oder über wen sprechen und schreiben, wer wen übersetzen, wer sich in welche Bevölkerungsgruppe hineinimaginieren oder gar die Wortführerschaft für sie beanspruchen darf. Die Frage »Wer spricht?«, die Roland Barthes und Michel Foucault für obsolet erklärt hatten, ist – sogar unter Absehung vom Inhalt der getätigten Aussage – zum entscheidenden Zulassungskriterium des öffentlichen Diskurses geworden."

24 Eva Geulen similarly maintains that "[a]rguments which hold, for example, Michel Foucault or Bruno Latour directly responsible for the problems of our post-factual age, certainly distort the interaction between intra-academic and extra-academic developments to the benefit of the former. The notion that a few books have changed the global political situation is absurd overconfidence on the part of dwellers in the ivory tower" (Geulen n.p.). The original reads: "Überlegungen jedenfalls, die beispielsweise Michel Foucault oder Bruno Latour geradewegs verantwortlich machen für die Nöte unseres post-faktischen Zeitalters, verzeichnen die Interaktionen zwischen innerakademischen und außerakademischen Entwicklungen zugunsten ersterer. Die Vorstellung, dass ein paar Bücher die weltpolitische Lage verändert haben, ist eine abwegige Selbstüberschätzung von Elfenbeinturmbewohnern."

25 Commenting on the role of *The Scarlet Letter* as a foil for his understanding of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, Roth in an interview stated: "In 1998 you had the illusion that you were suddenly able to know this huge, unknowable country, to catch a glimpse of its moral core. What was being enacted on the public stage seemed to have the concentrated power of a great work of literature. The work I'm thinking of is *The Scarlet Letter*."

26 This, to be sure, is not inconsistent with my critique of mining a novel for arguments for or against a certain position: I am not using the point of view of one character but the "performance" of the novel itself.

27 The original reads: "fundamentale Voraussetzungen ästhetischer Produktion [geraten] unter Druck, wenn in Zweifel gezogen wird, dass sich eine Person A in eine Figur B hineinversetzen (*Imagination*) oder deren Rolle aufführen kann (*Theater*) und dass dabei gleichwohl der Abstand zwischen Akteur und Rolle gewahrt bleibt (*Autonomie der Fiktion*). Wenn es über die Legitimität dieser Differenz kein Einverständnis mehr gibt, wenn jede und jeder einzig sich selbst spielen beziehungsweise erzählen darf oder wenn die Darstellung eines anderen auf die darstellende Person zurückfällt, dann kann Kunst in letzter Konsequenz nur autodokumentarisch verfahren – und das heißt vielfach: in ihrer Selbstzentriertheit narzisstisch –, ohne sich noch auf das kostbare Gut einer Freiheit der Fiktion berufen zu dürfen."

28 It may be worth relating this to the more general phenomenon of a widespread questioning of expertise, as with debates during the COVID pandemic, when the status of scientific expertise came under attack, or, in climate change denialism, of the rejection of overwhelming scientific evidence on climate change.

29 This chapter reuses material from my earlier introductory essay on Roth's novel (Gurr 2008). A much shorter version of this chapter first appeared in Gurr 2023.

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3

AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL? NEIL YOUNG'S EXPLORATIONS OF GENOCIDE, RACISM AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF "AMERICA"

Introduction: Young and Debates over Remembering Genocide, Slavery and Racism

Commenting on acrimonious U.S. debates over historical memory, philosopher Susan Neiman argues:

> One thing we've learned is the deep connection between present racist violence and our ignorance of past histories of it. [. . .] Democratic discussion of the values we want present in the hearts of our cities is not merely symbolic; it's crucial for systemic change. There isn't a single recipe, which is a good place to start. [. . .] Community discussion of how to grasp and untangle the knotty mess of our histories is the only way to learn. [. . .] [U]nlike other nations, America claims to be founded on a set of ideals. Historians have long worked to show how far American realities diverged from American ideals.
>
> *(384–386, 388)*

Writing in June 2020 and thus only weeks after the murder of George Floyd, Neiman here brings together my key concerns in this chapter: The importance of adequate remembering for the present, the debate over what to remember about the past and how to commemorate a history of genocide, slavery and racist violence, as well as the tension between foundational American ideals and political realities. More specifically, I here engage with the debate over how central genocide, slavery and deep-seated racism are to U.S. history, or, phrased differently, over just how far apart

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ideal and reality have been and continue to be in the U.S. The work of Neil Young and its reception, I here argue, take us to the core of this debate. Moreover, the music of an icon like Young, who has fans across the political spectrum, may be an occasion for conversation for people who otherwise have little to say to each other.

Commenting on a version of "Pocahontas" (discussed later), arguably the Neil Young song most directly engaging with the genocide of Native Americans, youtube.com user @pamripley6839 engages with a number of previous user comments: "Stop the bad comments these things happened a long time ago..it is a classic song and will be for eternity like all of Neil's songs" [sic] (pamripley n.p.). By suggesting that this "classic song" should be appreciated without regard for its central thematic concern, arguably even that its theme is at most merely incidental to the song itself, and by dismissively stating that "these things happened a long time ago," the user by implication argues that "these things" are merely incidental to American history, if not negligible entirely.

In an April 2006 post on Young's album *Living With War*, blogger Reality-Based Educator raises a related question. Commenting on the album's drastic indictment of George W. Bush "for misleading our country into war" (in the notorious "Let's Impeach the President" song), the post neatly distinguishes between "an attack on America" and "an attack on George W. Bush," arguing that the album only amounts to the latter:

> [T]his new Neil Young album doesn't sound like an attack on America. It sounds like an attack on George W. Bush. An attack on George W. Bush isn't the same thing as an attack on America, is it? I mean, after all, the recording session wrapped with an a cappella version of America the Beautiful. You can't get any more patriotic than that, can you?
>
> *(Reality-Based Educator, n.p.)*

The question, of course, is whether the clear distinction between "beautiful America" on the one hand and her "ugly side" on the other hand, a distinction that Young himself appears to make in his 2006 song "Looking for a Leader," is tenable at all.[1]

Young has repeatedly engaged with visions and revisions of "America" during a career now spanning almost 60 years: He has released over 60 albums and is generally regarded as one of the most important North American rock musicians, second only to Bob Dylan. Thus, given the frequently almost unlimited openness and ambivalence of his lyrics, critics have taken their cue from Langdon Winner's review of *After the Gold Rush* and have referred to Young as "the Kafka of rock music" (qtd. in Reents 87). Young has been living in the U.S. for almost his entire career without ever giving

up his Canadian citizenship and only additionally took up U.S. citizenship in 2020. This has occasionally led disparagers to question his legitimacy as a critic of U.S. politics. Young's visions and revisions of "America" and his take on U.S. politics and on key debates in the U.S. are, therefore, inseparable from his role as a Canadian-born "Inoutsider"[2] to the U.S. In this vein, in an article on the occasion of Young's 60th birthday in 2005, Winkler wrote:

> He may have been Canadian, but in his songs, Neil Young celebrated the American myths like no one else. He performed in fringe shirt and with a cowboy hat, but always remained an "Indian of the heart" and constantly beleaguered his new fellow citizens with the reproach that they murdered the true Americans, the Native Americans.
>
> *(n.p.)*[3]

In this chapter, I survey selected engagements with genocide and racism in Young's songwriting, focussing on three key stages and moments: First, his engagement with racism, genocide and the war in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s; second, in the longest section, I then discuss his 2006 album, *Living With War*, ostensibly an album attacking the Bush administration for the war in Iraq and one that, superficially, appears to uphold the distinction between "beautiful America" on the one hand and her "ugly side" on the other hand. As I will show here, the album uses a number of textual and musical strategies to dismantle the distinction. Finally, I briefly discuss Young's songwriting since the 2010s and especially the amalgamation of his previous concern with the memory of genocide and racism with his more recent environmental concerns and his increasingly drastic criticism of corporate capitalism. Thus, having surveyed key stages of his career, I conclude by pointing out just *how* systematically Young blurs the distinction between "America the Beautiful" on the one and its "ugly side" on the other hand by repeatedly showing "America" to be built on genocide and racism. I thus also suggest a reading of Young's work as a dismantling of the "American Ideology" from within.

Neil Young and the "American Ideology"

In trying to conceptualize the position of a rock musician in relation to the mainstream[4] – especially a musician identified as a protest singer for long stretches of his career – we can draw on Sacvan Bercovitch's notion of the "American Ideology." Although Bercovitch's take on ideology in U.S. culture and literature was far from uncontroversial from the start, it still seems to me to be an important account of a key cultural mechanism. Discussing the intricate entanglement of protest, subversion and radical

criticism on the one with affirmation and, ultimately, uncritical apology of the system on the other hand – a field of tension fundamental to American literature and culture since the American Renaissance and to popular culture in particular – Bercovitch discusses the "restraining power" and absorptive capacity of what he calls the "American Ideology." Bercovitch thus seeks to do justice to the fact that many of the central "canonical" texts of American literature have been subversive texts which radically position themselves against the mainstream, against societal consensus. The ideological construct "America," he argues, seeks "to absorb the spirit of protest for social ends" (1986b, 645). It thus manages to transform even radical dissent into a form of consensus. This pre-emption of oppositional voices works "by *drawing out* protest, *encouraging* the contrast between utopia and the status quo." Bercovitch thus explains "the enormous conservative, restraining power in the alliance between utopia and ideology" (1986a, 433; emphasis original).

What is important here is the role of utopianism: Utopian thinking, though originally critical because it provides a positive counterfoil to present realities, ultimately strengthens the established system because it does not question it fundamentally but merely points out where reality falls short of the ideal:

> [T]he dominant culture adopts utopia for its own purposes. [. . .] So molded, ritualized, and controlled, utopianism [serves] to diffuse or deflect dissent, or actually to transmute it into a vehicle of socialization. Indeed, it is not too much to see this as ideology's chief weapon. Ideology represses alternative or oppositional forms when they arise. But it seeks first of all to preempt them, and it does so most effectively by *drawing out* protest, by actively *encouraging* the contrast between utopia and the status quo. The method is as old as ideology itself. [. . .] And the immemorial response of ideology, what we might call its instinctive defense, has been to redefine protest in terms of the system, as a complaint about shortcomings from the ideal. [. . .] To that end, ideology seeks to focus attention on the distance between vision and fact, theory and practice. [. . .] Hence the enormous conservative, restraining power in the alliance between utopia and ideology.
>
> *(1986b, 644; emphasis in original)*

It thus turns out to be the central quality of the "American Ideology" that it is able to transmute any form of criticism into a form of consensus stabilizing the system and its underlying ideology by declaring criticism to be part of the hegemonic discourse. Criticism thus only ever appears merely as criticism of symptoms, not as criticism of the system.[5]

What is of particular interest here are the options available to writers, musicians and other artists which allow them to undercut this mechanism – be it a refusal to be commodified or be it a way of exposing as illusionary the neat distinction between a "good" and an "evil America."

"Southern Man" and "Pocahontas": Racism and Genocide in Young's Songs from the 1960s and 1970s

Young's first exploration of the ambivalence of American mythologies dates back to the 1960s: As early as 1967 in "Broken Arrow," Young had gone in search of the roots of the American ideology and, in an almost surrealist combination of obliquely personal references blended with extremely open and multilayered imagery, explored American mythemes. This song, in what Reents calls "a clairvoyant and nostalgic vision of America" (47; my translation), hints at the fact that the constitutive myth of the frontier and the westward expansion was inseparable from the genocide of Native Americans.[6] This ambivalence about America has remained fundamental through all of Young's musical engagements with America and throughout his political wavering.

Almost as early came the first engagement with the U.S. history of slavery and racism in songs such as "Southern Man" (*After the Gold Rush*, 1970) and "Alabama" (*Harvest*, 1972). "Southern Man," republished in 2020 in the context of the BLM protests and possibly Young's most lasting exploration of slavery and racism, engages with religious hypocrisy in justifications of racism, with the Ku Klux Klan and its cross-burning and with the legacy of slavery in racist exploitation of Black workers in farming the highly symbolic crops of cotton and tobacco. However, the song also appears to suggest that, though it may be unbearably slow in coming, change is ultimately inevitable.

One of Young's most celebrated and commercially successful albums is the 1979 *Rust Never Sleeps*, on which the two sides of America are once more a central theme. The album contains such classics as "My My, Hey Hey (Out of the Blue) and "My My, Hey Hey (Into the Black)," two versions of the same song, acoustic and electric, impressively framing the album, "Thrasher," "Pocahontas" and "Powderfinger." After earlier attempts in "Broken Arrow" (1967) and the blatant and textually unsubtle, though musically powerful, "Cortez the Killer" on *Zuma* (1975), "Pocahontas" is one of Young's most powerful engagements with the origins of American mythology and a drastic representation of the genocide of Native Americans.

Here again, the mass-murder of Native Americans is inseparably linked to American history and appears as a central element rather than as an accident. In a discussion of 1970s Western movies, J. Hoberman has

persuasively linked this insight of the 1970s with the war in Vietnam: "The revelation of American atrocities in Vietnam only reinforced the argument that the slaughter of Native Americans was less the distortion than the essence of the white man's wars" (Hoberman 90).[7] But as Adelt persuasively shows, "Pocahontas" is also a comment on the "commodification of Native American culture" (169), ambiguously both "deconstructing and perpetuating white fantasies of Indianness" (169). As he argues, the last few lines of the song show how "counterculture and capitalism and Indianness and whiteness are inextricably linked: 'And maybe Marlon Brando/Will be there by the fire/We'll sit and talk of Hollywood/And the good things there for hire/Like the Astrodome and the first tepee/Marlon Brando, Pocahontas and me' " (169).[8] It is throughout the entire album with its deeply introspective and at the same time culturally diagnostic songs such as "Pocahontas" or "Thrasher," his swan song both to the stagnant idealism of Crosby, Stills & Nash and to an America lost, that Young once more captures, in a musically most appealing form, the ambivalence of "America."[9]

"The rockets' red glare": Young's Protest against the War in Iraq, or "America the Beautiful"?

One of Young's most sustained engagements with America and arguably his most controversial album ever was the 2006 *Living With War*,[10] protesting against the war in Iraq and against the Bush administration responsible for "misleading our country into war" ("Let's Impeach the President"). By this time, Young already had a history of critically commenting on U.S. military involvement abroad: For instance, the three opening tracks on his 1987 album, *Life*, "Mideast Vacation," "Long Walk Home" and "Around the World," already critically referred to the then recent attacks against Libya in April 1986 and generally deplored questionable U.S. military involvement.[11] When *Living With War* was released to significant media attention in 2006, most critics understood the album only the way it was marketed, namely, as an anti-Bush album neatly distinguishing between the "good America" under the Star-Spangled Banner and the "bad America" under Bush. In this vein, Stephan Glietsch wrote in his review: "*Living With War* is not an indictment, it is a declaration of war – uttered from the position of the patriot, because of course Bush must go so 'beautiful America' can live" (94, my translation[12]). But rather than positing a putative "ideal America" against which Bush's America is marked off as temporarily falling short, the album can be shown to provide a radical – if indirect – critique of the system rather than a mere critique of symptoms.[13] The ambivalence about America fundamental to so much of Young's work is central to this album too.[14]

The lyrics frequently cite then current news and invoke iconic images from the war in Iraq. In this vein, the song "Shock and Awe" in its title already sarcastically references the cynically named bombing offensive in the opening phase of the war. But it also comments on Bush's rather embarrassing propaganda landing on an aircraft carrier and his overconfident speech under the banner "Mission Accomplished" (May 1, 2003) after the taking of Baghdad.

In addition to references to flag-draped coffins brought home in planes and to the scarred children in Iraqi hospitals, the lyrics on *Living With War* also comment on the government's failure to adequately respond to the Katrina disaster in August 2005 and on the Bush administration's entanglement with big business and its religious hypocrisy, but the war in Iraq is *the* major theme. Several critics have commented on this as Young's return home to the anti-Vietnam protest of the late 1960s and early 1970s (see Fricke; Sandall).

The title song "Living With War," along with unobjectionable do-gooder "vow[s] to never kill again" and to "try to remember peace," also powerfully if subtly links the current war with the core American mytheme of the conquest of the west. The "tidal wave" in which the west can be said to have been overrun, turning it into a "mass grave" (largely for Native Americans) and the iconic "smoking guns,"[15] of course, recall a number of Young's earlier songs connecting the myth of the west and the conquest of America generally with the genocide, such as "Broken Arrow," "Cortez the Killer" or "Pocahontas." However, these lines can also be understood as a reference to what is arguably Young's most sustained engagement with the American mythology of the west and the frontier, his work on the soundtrack to Jim Jarmusch's 1995 anti-Western *Dead Man*, a film radically subversive of the American ideology and one equally radical in portraying the westward expansion as fundamentally based on genocide (see Gurr 2007b, 2009b). This soundtrack, which Young improvised on electric guitar to a screening of the film, has frequently been celebrated as one of the most moving and most impressive soundtracks of the 1990s (see Marcus).

But in the context of the present album and the indictment of the Bush administration, the "tidal wave" also recalls the disaster of hurricane Katrina; the "mass grave" is hard not to read as a reference to the war in Iraq, while the "smoking gun" was a stock phrase in the build-up to the war, when leading members of the Bush administration (Rice, Rumsfeld and Bush himself) frequently used the tag dramatically to argue for an invasion by stating that "we cannot wait for the final proof – the smoking gun – that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud" (Bush, speech on October 7, 2002). But the inextricable connection of the war in Iraq

with core symbols of "America" in the same song is also effected in the following lines:

> The rockets' red glare
> Bombs bursting in air
> Give proof through the night
> That our flag is still there

With minor changes, these are, of course, lines from the national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner." If we take into account that the album consistently references widely known images from the war in Iraq, these lines – significantly changed to the present tense, whereas in the anthem, they occur in the past tense – take on a meaning radically subversive of any notion of an idealized America under the "Star-Spangled Banner," itself hardly an expression of a call for peace. This cannot be emphasized enough: Throughout the entire album, the war in Iraq is harshly criticized as an enormous crime incompatible with the ideals symbolized by the national anthem and the flag it celebrates; and here, the anthem virtually appears as an uncannily appropriate soundtrack to just that war! If the national anthem closely accompanies key images from the war nights over Baghdad, this more than suggests that, rather than being a *betrayal* of the ideals connected to the anthem and the flag implied by the title, the war is actually fought in the *name* of the flag and the anthem, rather than in opposition to it. Given this fundamental critique in the album's title song, even some of the other apparently so straightforward and affirmative passages of the album suddenly appear in a new light. If the hymn of the "Star-Spangled Banner" itself is so radically questioned, what remains of the star-spangled banner itself? And in the name of which "red, white and blue" flag is the nation to be reunited, as "Lookin' for a Leader" requires in so seemingly naïve a way? Once doubt has been sown, it sprouts everywhere.

One might, therefore, also wonder what to make of the feely a cappella version of "America the Beautiful" that the album ends with. The choir sings – with far more abandon and tremolo than musical persuasiveness – the first stanza of this alternative national anthem:

> O beautiful for spacious skies,
> For amber waves of grain,
> For purple mountain majesties
> Above the fruited plain
> America. America.
> God shed his grace on thee,
> And crown thy good with brotherhood

> From sea to shining sea.

From here on, the choir only hums, but most Americans will know how the lyrics continue, for instance, in the third stanza:

> O beautiful for heroes prov'd
> In liberating strife,
> Who more than self their country loved,
> And mercy more than life.

If even the alternative national anthem, which so peacefully praises the beauty of American landscapes, goes on to celebrate heroic self-sacrifice for one's country – even if this stanza is only hummed – the distinction between peaceful and bellicose America becomes even harder to uphold.

How is this conclusion to the album to be understood? Most critics take this ending seriously, do not see any signals of irony and speak of a deeply moving, highly impressive conception of an alternative "beautiful America" as distinct from "evil America" under George W. Bush. In this vein, David Fricke writes in the American *Rolling Stone*:

> [A]t the end of the album, Young lets America speak for itself, in the choir's Sunday-prayer-meeting delivery of "America the Beautiful." There is no irony, anger or guitars, just faith and a final warning that until we truly live up to the perfection in the final verse – "Brotherhood/From sea to shining sea" – no one has the right to say, "Mission accomplished."
>
> *(n.p.)*[16]

Given the subversion of central American icons and mythemes discussed earlier, however, this "America the Beautiful" can also be understood as mere sarcasm or, at the very least, a swan song. It may not be entirely irrelevant that the choir of some 100 voices does sing rather more accurately elsewhere on the album (e.g., on "Looking for a Leader," "After the Garden" or "Let's Impeach the President"). Again, I am not asking whether Young "means" this or whether he is serious about this alternative anthem. The answer may well be "yes." But this is not about authorial – or performative – intentions but about options for interpretation. Having noted the subversion of the "American Ideology" and the radical questioning of any neat distinction between "America the Beautiful" and "America under Bush," how might different listeners understand this conclusion to the album?

Even if one might not want to read this version of "America the Beautiful" as a "singshattering"[17] comparable to Jimi Hendrix's legendary

musical deconstruction of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at Woodstock, doubts remain as to whether George W. Bush is really the only shadow on "beautiful America." And given the numerous references to Woodstock and the anti-Vietnam protests on the *Living With War* album, "Hendrix" and "Woodstock" are by no means far-fetched associations.[18] If one acknowledges the radical way in which the album – and especially its title piece – undermines, questions and deconstructs central elements of the "American Ideology," and if one takes seriously the doubts the album raises about "unquestionable" icons such as the flag and the anthem, as well as the national myths and ideologies connected to them, a reading of the album as consistently deconstructive and radically subversive is hard to dismiss as implausible.

Given these subversive implications of the album, the concluding a cappella version of "America the Beautiful" might appear as a swan song to any belief in the good and beautiful America. The fact that this radical deconstruction of fundamental American mythemes comes across in a subtly coded form, whereas the concrete and topical criticism of the Bush administration could not be harsher and more direct, is hardly a compelling argument against such a reading: We must pose the question of how far an album that is predominantly a topical anti-Bush album could have gone with a fundamental critique of the idea of "America" without losing sight of its principal aim of arousing protest against the more immediate, topical targets.

On the surface, with the established terms and concepts from the repertory of American myths (for an accessible survey, see Paul; see also Buchenau) and beliefs – freedom, unity, truth, justice – the album consistently invokes the convictions, the rhetoric and the pathos of the civil rights movement and thus appears to affirm the need to realize core American ideals without questioning the ideals or their origins themselves. At a closer look, however, it becomes clear that the distinction between "America the Beautiful" and bellicose, imperialist America may be hard to uphold: The war of aggression in Iraq, Young appears to suggest, is waged precisely in the name of the flag and the anthem that allegedly stand for the unsullied ideal.

Neil Young since the 2010s: Capitalism, Environmental Destruction, Genocide, Racism, Dark "Americana" – or "Shut the Whole System Down"

The years since 2010 have seen Young extend the range of his often fundamental criticism, which now, in addition to his continued criticism of the treatment of Native Americans and his repeated indictment of racism, frequently includes environmental concerns. He has continued to question

idealistic conceptions of U.S. history, and his image of "America" has hardly become brighter over time. Thus, on *Americana*, his 2012 collection mostly of American folk classics – including "Oh! Susanna," "Clementine," "Tom Dula" [sic], "Gallows Pole," "Travel On," "This Land Is Your Land" or "Wayfarin' Stranger" – Young noted:

> Every one of these songs has verses that have been ignored. And those are the key verses, those are the things that make these songs live. They're a little heavy for kindergarteners to be singing. The originals are much darker, there's more protest in them — the other verses in "This Land Is Your Land" are very timely, or in "Clementine," the verses are so dark. Almost every one has to do with people getting killed, with life-or-death struggles. You don't hear much about that; they've been made into something much more light. So I moved them away from that gentler interpretation. With new melodies and arrangements, we could use the folk process to invoke the original meanings for this generation.
>
> *(quoted in https://classicrockreview.wordpress.com/category/neil-young-americana)*

Young's more recent albums frequently bring together several of his recurring concerns. His 2015 concept album, *The Monsanto Years*, for instance, couples environmental concerns with criticism of capitalism and "big money" and, continuing his longstanding engagement in Farm Aid, support for small farmers. His activism here is not free from nostalgic invocations of the family-run little farm of the good old days ("The Monsanto Years") or of allegedly healthier small-town America ("Big Box"). Even more broadly, his 2016 "Indian Givers," a protest song against an oil pipeline through sacred territory of the Standing Rock Sioux in North Dakota, combines environmentalism, criticism of "big money" and indictment of violence against Native Americans.

Arguably just as critical of U.S. foundations, Young's 2019 song "Shut it Down"[19] (on the *Colorado* album) suggests that capitalism and environmental protection are incompatible and insistently stresses the need "to shut the whole system down." But the Trump years also saw Young return to earlier indictments of systemic racism in the U.S., not least in new recordings of older songs. Thus, in 2020, he published a new version of "Looking for a Leader" from the 2006 *Living With War* album. Here, instead of attacking Bush, he called for Trump to be voted out,[20] not least because of his wall-building, anti-immigration policies and racist indifference to the Black Lives Matter protests. Finally, a few days after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, Young posted his 1970 anti-racist classic "Southern Man" on his website, accompanied by a comment

recontextualizing it within the "Black Lives Matter" protests after Floyd's murder:

> Here's me as an old guy singin' his 50-year-old song that was written after countless years of racism in the USA. And look at us today! This has been going on for way too long. It's not just "Southern Man" now. It's everywhere across the USA. It's time for real change, new laws, new rules for policing.
>
> *(Neil Young, quoted in Ehrlich)*

Conclusion: Young's Visions and Revisions of "America"

In one of the most perceptive assessments of his songwriting, Reents links Young's volatility[21] and "Janus-faced" nature as an artist to the ambivalence and "Janus-faced" nature of America, which he so persistently – if often indirectly – explores in his songs:

> The Janus-faced nature, which the audience has long recognized as Neil Young's main characteristic, was at the same time the one feature that most interested him about America and which, in his songs, he captured with a rare intuition that is hardly apparent in his interview comments. The mythical past, which could be glorified or demonized, he maps into the present and vice versa. Through the surface of modern life, taking place on the highway or in bars, the Indian world shines through. The loss of innocence has always been present in the form of violence and sexuality, but this did not prevent him from searching for an Edenic place or state of being. This is probably what Franz Schöler meant when he remarked that "Young is in search of a lost paradise America, but all he finds on this quest is a nightmare world."
>
> *(Reents 167, my translation)*[22]

One of the recurring ways in which Young uncovers this nightmare world is the return to what Todorov has called *The Conquest of America*, whether of North America or Latin America. In songs such as "Broken Arrow" (1967), "Cortez the Killer" (1975), "Pocahontas" (1977), "Goin' Home" (2002), "Living with War" (2006) or on the *Dead Man* soundtrack (1996), Young has looked back at this conquest and the concomitant mass-murder of Native Americans and has revealed one of the core mythemes of "America," the idea of manifest destiny and the westward expansion, to have been based on genocide. That some of his allegedly uncritical patriotic songs – "Rockin' in the Free World" is the prime example – also criticize *contemporary* America as anything but Edenic, should have become clear

in my earlier survey. Even in a lot of his seemingly most quirky private lyrics, Young combines the private with the political, producing songs that are often – again frequently obliquely – somehow culturally representative, as in the subliminal correspondence of his personal crisis in the "Ditch Trilogy" with the cultural and political crisis of Watergate and Vietnam.

As I have argued, this is precisely what *Living With War* succeeded in doing by linking present-day evils to the American original sin of the genocide of Native Americans. Although it remains primarily a topical album merely protesting against the Bush administration, the sometimes highly ambivalent lyrics at least allow for this more fundamentally subversive reading. By radically deconstructing central American mythemes, this album, like some of Young's other engagements with the American Ideology, eludes complicity with the mainstream – or does it? Ultimately, one might say, as an aesthetic object, composed of music and lyrics, it is possible for a song or record to be radically subversive and entirely to elude Bercovitch's trap of becoming complicit in serving the American Ideology. As a cultural product, dependent upon mechanisms of production, dissemination and consumption, it is inescapably part of the system.

Thus, the central distinction essential to the functioning of the "American Ideology," that between unassailable fundamental assumptions of "good America" on the one hand and the deviations from the ideal measured against them on the other hand, is consistently undermined. The simplistic distinction between a peaceful and a bellicose, a good and an evil America, which Maik Brüggemeyer, like many other critics, understands as fully upheld on *Living With War*, appears to me to be untenable:

> Of course Neil Young is naïve. [His] America is that of the farmers and the Indians, of communities and families, of buffaloes, of endless plains, of model trains, of freedom and of love. It is the America of "America the Beautiful," not the bellicose, heroic one of "The Star-Spangled Banner." And this paradisaical America has to be defended – against external enemies, but also against internal dangers.
>
> *(104)*[23]

This is far too simple a reading – both for the *Living with War* album and for Neil Young generally. Rather, Franz Schöler's assessment of the early Neil Young can be shown to be central to Young generally: "Young is in search of a lost paradise America, but all he finds on this quest is a nightmare world" (qtd. in Reents 167).[24]

In conclusion, I here tentatively argue, Young's remarkably broad fan base across the political spectrum as well as the ambiguity and ambivalence of his visions of "America" may make his often compelling music an

occasion for conversation between people who find themselves on opposite sides with regard to the issues discussed here – and who might otherwise have alarmingly little common ground for dialogue.[25]

Notes

1 The original rights holder did not grant permission to quote the lyrics of any Neil Young song. Apart from cases where the lyrics are in the public domain (as in the case of Young's version of "America the Beautiful," for instance), the chapter therefore has to do without quotations from the lyrics. This is somewhat inconvenient, but as readers will be aware, lyrics are widely available on the web.

2 I owe the term to Claudia Perner's 2013 dissertation "US-American Inoutside Perspectives in Globalized Anglophone Literatures." Published: https://duepublico2.uni-due.de/receive/duepublico_mods_00031698. Perner, in turn, develops the notion further from Nnaemeka 86.

3 Original: "Er mochte Kanadier sein, in seinen Songs verstand Neil Young die amerikanischen Mythen wie kein anderer zu feiern. Er trat im Fransenhemd und mit Cowboy-Hut auf, blieb aber immer Herzensindianer und bedrängte seine neuen Mitbürger ständig mit dem Vorwurf, dass sie die wahren Amerikaner, die indianischen Ureinwohner, umgebracht hätten." Similarly, Fricke has argued that "it is an indictment of the sorry state of open debate in this country – and its rock & roll – that the most direct, public and inspiring challenge to the Bush presidency this year has been made by a sixty-year-old Canadian-born singer-songwriter" (Fricke n.p.).

4 The issue of "subversion vs. containment," of course, has been widely discussed. In the context of visions and revisions of America, however, Bercovitch's discussion still seems to me to be illuminating.

5 The related phenomenon of the absorption and commodification of dissent is, of course, ubiquitous in popular culture; see the reference to Young's *This Note's for You* and its history on MTV in fn21.

6 For "Broken Arrow," see McDonough 223–26 and Reents 46f. Their discussion of "Broken Arrow" lends itself to a comparison of what, for very different reasons, are probably the two best biographies of Young. McDonough's is far richer in biographical detail and in intimate knowledge of group dynamics and individuals in Young's surroundings, but the self-indulgent revelling in such intimate knowledge and the braggart tone of the book frequently obscures cultural analysis; Reents is far subtler here, though his book is less of a mine of biographical snippets. McDonough provides sound bites from Young and many details on the recording and on immediate biographical contexts but hardly provides a meaningful discussion, while Reents persuasively shows how Young here and elsewhere blends the personal and the culturally representative.

7 Also commenting on the connection between Young's songwriting and public discourse in a highly perceptive essay on Young's 1970s albums, Adelt appropriately speaks of a "narcissistic realization of the credo that the personal is the political" in Young's musical production of this period (163). The reference is to the so-called "ditch trilogy" of *Time Fades Away* (1973), *On the Beach* (1974) and *Tonight's the Night* (1975), which deliberately resisted pleasant consumption after the commercial success of *Harvest* in 1972. In the liner notes to *Decade* in 1977, Young himself commented on the iconic "Heart of Gold"

from *Harvest*: "This song put me in the middle of the road. Travelling there soon became a bore so I headed for the ditch." Adelt persuasively argues that the insecurity and sense of personal crisis that Young revealed in the "ditch trilogy" might have rung true because it was related to a similar insecurity and crisis in the public sphere: "Ironically, it might have been Young's heading for the ditch that reflected an America devastated by Vietnam and Watergate and turned Young's cries from the abyss into critical and commercial successes" (164). Adelt here overstates the commercial success of these albums (he later does state that these albums "did not sell well but were critically acclaimed" (171). Even that is truer in retrospect than it was upon release. It is appropriate to argue that Young's crisis in a sense corresponds to a public crisis and thus obliquely makes his songs yet again culturally representative.

8 The reference to Marlon Brando is to Brando's activism for Native American rights, most controversially demonstrated when he sent the young Native American woman, Sacheen Littlefeather, to the 1973 Oscar ceremony, where she appeared in Native American dress and on his behalf declared his refusal to accept the Oscar for *The Godfather*.

9 That the album also contains some of Young's worst songwriting is another matter. "Welfare Mothers" is hardly one of his more subtle lyrical creations.

10 For a detailed discussion of this album, see Gurr 2009a.

11 Thus, "Mideast Vacation" clearly refers to U.S. involvement in Libya, but also to an inconsistent history of relations with Khaddafi. In the aftermath of 9/11, Young occasionally performed the song with a reference to bin Laden instead of Khaddafi and thus, in the vein, say, of Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, appears at least to suggest a connection between bin Laden and U.S. politics. Similarly, "Long Walk Home" from the same album suggests a continuity between Vietnam and U.S. military involvement in the Middle East and invokes the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing.

12 Original: "*Living With War* ist nicht Anklage, sondern Kampfansage – vorgebracht einmal mehr aus der Position des Patrioten heraus, denn natürlich muss Bush gehen, damit 'beautiful America' leben kann."

13 For similar readings, see Sandall and numerous other critics.

14 Far more uncritically patriotic was Young's initial reaction to 9/11 in the single "Let's Roll," a patriotic piece of hero-worship and revenge-mongering celebrating the passengers on flight 93. Although even that song has its characteristic ambiguities – a line such as "No one has the answer" undermines the song's apparent moral certainty and self-righteousness – Young's own comment that a line like "Going after Satan on the wings of a dove" could hardly be taken seriously (qtd. in Reents 286), did not help: The song was not unreasonably received as an "unbelievably dumb anthem" (Willander 17). A more obviously ambivalent comment on the stirring sentiment for revenge was Young's contribution to the "Tribute to Heroes" concert on September 21, 2001, just ten days after 9/11, during which he performed John Lennon's "Imagine" – a song that hardly lends itself to musical mobilization. During this concert, Young was also a first-row contributor to the all-star performance of "America the Beautiful" led by Willie Nelson.

15 For the close association between the "Old West" and the "smoking gun," see, for instance, the title of Agnew's popular account, *Smoking Gun – The True Story about Gunfighting in the Old West*.

16 Greenman (n.p.) wrote in the *New Yorker*: "The record closes with a churchy a-cappella version of 'America the Beautiful' that reaffirms the link between patriotism and protest. On this track, Young is nowhere to be heard, and all the

louder for it." In the *Daily Telegraph*, Sandall spoke of a "powerfully churchy rendition of 'America the Beautiful' which serves as a reminder that Young remains as besotted with his adopted country as he is unimpressed with its elected president." See also Honigmann, who does not see any sign of irony either. Glietsch, too, appears to take "America the Beautiful" seriously. In the German *Rolling Stone*, Brüggemeyer wrote: "In the end, Neil Young saunters back home along the old 'Hippie Highway' and with his friends, neighbours and relatives sings his hymn – 'America the Beautiful' " [original: "Am Ende zuckelt Neil Young über den alten 'Hippie Highway' [. . .] zurück nach Hause und singt mit seinen Freunden, Nachbarn und Verwandten seine Hymne – 'America the Beautiful' "]. Gross wrote in *DIE ZEIT*: "At the latest, it is at the end, when the choir starts a richly tremoloed '*America the Beautiful*,' that European ears will get the creeps. We know, our allies only mean well; they just have this civil religion relation with their country" (53) [original: "Spätestens zum Schluss, wo der Chor zu einem reich tremolierenden *America the Beautiful* anhebt, packt europäische Ohren das Gruseln: Man weiß, unsere Verbündeten meinen es nur gut, sie haben nun mal dieses zivilreligiöse Verhältnis zu ihrer Nation"] (53).

17 "singshatter" is Breon Mitchell's convincing translation of Grass's German verb "zersingen" in his translation of *The Tin Drum*. There, of course, Oskar literally "singshatters" glass with his high-pitched voice, but I find "singshatter" works just as well for the metaphorical *performative* "singshattering" of a piece of music.

18 Hendrix's "Star-Spangled Banner" has frequently been used by Young, not least during the 1978 "Rust" tour; it is also played on the *CSNY: Déjà Vu* film covering the 2006 "Freedom of Speech" tour featuring the *Living With War* album. For the reference to "America the Beautiful" as "that song from 9/11" on Young's 2005 album *Prairie Wind*, see Gilmour, 213.

19 In 2020, Young released an updated video to this song calling for support for the anti-COVID measures. Though the lyrics remained the same, overlaid with images of deserted squares, children with masks and relatives longingly waving to each other through glass panes, they acquired an entirely new meaning during the COVID lockdown. The song thus become more immediately topical but lost some of the fundamentally anti-capitalist implications.

20 Keeping his Canadian passport, Young only took up additional U.S. citizenship as late as 2020, arguably in order to be able to vote for Biden against Trump.

21 Young's repeated self-reinventions as an artist, his unpredictability and his oscillation between commercially successful and deliberately uncommercial music-making have been widely discussed. For a detailed discussion of such moves and for Young's complex relationship to commercial music-making, including his criticism of Woodstock as the beginning of sellout, his being sued by his record company for being too uncommercial as well as the controversy over his highly successful anti-commercial video "This Note's For You" (1988), see Gurr 2009a; for "This Note's For You," see also McDonough 618f. and Reents 225. For Young's self-fashioning, see the Luef interview: "I'm really extremely predictable; I've been doing the same thing over and over again for fifty years: that which I feel like doing at that moment" (22; my translation; see also his 2012 autobiography, *Waging Heavy Peace: A Hippie Dream*, 166 and throughout). Echard has perceptively commented on the way in which constant change became part of Young's reputation for authenticity and integrity: "When we look at Young's reception in the long term, we see that very often [the surprise at yet another change in musical style] is reabsorbed into a new stylized persona. After a while, intermusicality was no longer a destabilizing

factor but became a fixed part of Young. He was expected to surprise, and his stylistic diversity was taken as a mark of authorial integrity" (183).

22 The original reads: "Das Janusköpfige, das dem Publikum mittlerweile als Neil Youngs Hauptcharakterzug erschien, war zugleich jene Eigenschaft, die ihn an Amerika am meisten interessierte und die er in seinen Liedern mit einer Intuition erfasste, die sich in seinen Interviewäußerungen kaum mitteilt. Das mythisch Vergangene, das sich verklären oder verteufeln ließ, spiegelt er dabei in der Gegenwart und umgekehrt. Durch die Oberfläche des modernen Lebens, das sich auf den Highways und in den Bars abspielt, schimmert die indianische Welt hindurch. Den Verlust der Unschuld gab es in Form von Gewalt und Sexualität immer schon, was ihn nicht daran hinderte, einen paradiesischen Ort oder Zustand zu suchen. Dies meinte wohl auch Franz Schöler mit seiner Bemerkung, dass Neil Young 'auf der Suche nach einem verlorenen Paradies Amerila ist und bei dieser Suche nur eine Albtraumwelt findet.' "

23 Original: "Natürlich ist Neil Young naiv. [Sein] Amerika ist das der Farmer und Indianer, der Communities und Familien, der Büffel, der unendlichen Weite, der Modelleisenbahnen, der Freiheit und der Liebe. Es ist das Amerika aus 'America The Beautiful,' nicht das kriegerische, heldenhafte aus 'The Star-Spangled Banner.' Und dieses paradiesische Amerika muss verteidigt werden – gegen äußere Feinde, aber auch gegen innere Gefahren."

24 Original: "dass Young auf der Suche nach einem verlorenen Paradies Amerika ist und bei dieser Suche doch nur eine Alptraumwelt findet."

25 This chapter reuses material from Gurr 2007a and 2009a.

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4

EDWARD YOUNG'S ABYSMAL "SEA ODES"

Mercantilism, Free Trade and Globalization

Introduction: Young's Naval Lyrics

What can one reasonably do with an obscure eighteenth-century poem that has justly been forgotten because it has always been judged a complete poetic and intellectual failure – what is more, a poem by a poet who has been distinctly "out" for over a century? Does a critical engagement with such a text necessarily mean blindly rummaging in the dregs and remnants of an irrelevant past? My discussion of Young's "Sea Odes" in this chapter argues that historicizing and presentifying readings and approaches do not have to be mutually exclusive if we can trace a present-day debate to intellectual contexts of the text in question. Thus, I will show how eighteenth-century discourses of global sea trade as negotiated in Young's naval poetry – including fears of being swamped by goods produced in China – can, without being anachronistic and without claiming divinatory powers for literature, be argued to "anticipate" present-day apprehensions about economic globalization

If one wants to describe the ups and downs of being in and out of favour with critics and the reading public in terms of the stock market, then Edward Young currently surely trades as a penny stock, or if you prefer the terminology of fixed-interest securities, he is traded as the junk bond of an insolvent rogue state. In order to highlight this critical decline, I adopt the methodology W.B. Carnochan proposed in his "Swift; the Canon, the Curriculum, and the Marketplace of Scholarship" (13–21), namely, that of simply using the MLA database and checking the number of entries displayed on a given author in any period of time. I here list the number of

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entries on Young as compared with Shakespeare and Swift for the periods of 1960 to 1990 and 1991 to 2021:[1]

	Number of Entries 1960–1990	*NumNumber of Entries 1991–2021*
Shakespeare	17,390	31,310
Swift	1,691	1,585
Young	131	122

Given the ever-increasing absolute number of publications in our field, evident in the case of Shakespeare, even the stagnation in Swift's case can be seen as a relative decline in interest; the lack of interest in Young is blatantly obvious,[2] even if the decline in the number of publications is hardly relevant statistically. Young has fared very poorly indeed in recent decades, especially when compared with his fame in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. To name but one representative example: In 1758, the German poet Johann Andreas Cramer wrote about Young, "He is a genius who not only towers far above Milton, but also among humans comes closest to the spirit of David and the prophets" (qtd. in Barnstorff 29).[3]

The predominant critical disfavour is particularly evident in the case of Young's "Sea Odes."[4] These are as follows: "Ocean: An Ode" (1728), "Imperium Pelagi" (1730), "The Foreign Address" (1735) and "A Sea-Piece" (1755).[5] While the sea, and especially British trade and its naval power, are a recurring theme in Young's work – it appears as early as 1712 in the "Epistle to Lord Lansdowne" (Young 1.298, ll. 95–112) but is also present in the *Night Thoughts* of the 1740s[6] – it is predominant in the four Sea Odes.

They have never been in critical favour but rather seem to have inspired critics to dismissive sarcasm: Many of the comments on Young's odes – all the way from Croft and Johnson in the eighteenth-century via John Doran in the nineteenth century to Isabel Bliss and Harold Forster in recent decades – are among the wittier slatings and hatchet-jobs in the history of English literary criticism: In his malicious "Life of Young," written at Johnson's request for his *Lives of the English Poets* (1779–1781), Herbert Croft entirely dismisses Young's "Sea Odes." Mistaking *The Foreign Address* for his last naval lyric, Croft writes: "This poem concludes with a formal farewell to Ode, which few of Young's readers will regret" (377).[7] In John Doran's 1854 "Life of Edward Young," the "Sea Odes," "laborious triflings of mistaken genius," are singled out for particularly damning criticism: "Young thought well of his Odes; but posterity will refuse to

endorse the sentiment" (xxxvii f).[8] Also mistaking "The Foreign Address" for Young's last attempt at the naval lyric, he calls it "a long and wearying ode, in which he takes as long and wearying a farewell of the [genre], never again to torture the patience of the public with parodies upon Pindar" (vii). Among twentieth-century critics, Harold Forster in his excellent biography of Young laments "the singular depths to which he sank in his series of 'naval lyrics,' [. . .] his deplorable sea-pieces" (1986: 124, 301).

In sum, the main argument against Young's naval lyrics was one he had himself invited in his Preface "On Lyrick Poetry," in which he had warned: "[As the Ode's] subjects are sublime, its writer's genius should be so too; otherwise it becomes the meanest thing in writing, *viz*., an involuntary burlesque" (Young 1.416). Unfortunately, this is precisely what his naval lyrics did become (for a recent discussion of Young's view on "the Pindaric ode as a risk-taking genre," see Duff 137).[9]

While it is hard to defend their poetic merits, I will argue that Young's "Sea Odes" have various fascinating stories to tell, especially with regard to a history of globalization and competing trade doctrines. I will here focus on the longest of them, "Imperium Pelagi" with its 170 stanzas and its short prose Preface. Where relevant, I will point to parallels in the other texts, particularly in "Ocean: An Ode" with its accompanying "Discourse on Lyrick Poetry." "Imperium Pelagi" is a revealing document on the contemporary controversy between the older mercantilist philosophies of trade and the new doctrine of unrestrained international commerce. Secondly, the texts can be read as revealing early eighteenth-century suspicions about an earlier phase of economic globalization.[10] And finally, they afford interesting case studies of poetic theory under the "anxiety of influence" (*sensu* Bloom) and its contribution to public discourses. Making use of key notions of the theory of interdiscursivity as developed by Jürgen Link and others, this chapter provides a reading especially of "Imperium Pelagi," discussing Young's politics and aesthetics of semanticizing contemporary sea trade and relating them to present-day discussions of this topic.

"Imperium Pelagi: A Naval Lyric" (1730)

The full title of Young's second Sea Ode is "Imperium Pelagi: A Naval Lyric. Written in Imitation of Pindar's Spirit. Occasioned by his Majesty's Return, September 10th, 1729, and the succeeding Peace." In the course of 1729, George II had personally taken part in continental negotiations to avert a war. When the later Treaty of Seville, to be signed in November 1729, had substantially been negotiated, George returned to England on September 10. In order to celebrate the reopening of the Seas for British trade, Young began work on "Imperium Pelagi," which was published on

April 6, 1730 (Forster 1986: 130), when enthusiasm over the treaty had seriously abated. The ode was thus simply published too late to still fit its occasion, the return of the king.

In five "Strains," each prefaced by an "Argument," Young celebrates the new liberty of commerce and trade and elaborates on British naval supremacy, liberty and the ennobling qualities of international trade. In the short prose "Preface" and throughout the text, he repeatedly points to Pindar as his great model and prides himself on the novelty of his theme – the glory of trade – and on its treatment in rhyme. The choice of stanza pattern was far more suitable than in "Ocean: An Ode" and here does produce a number of rather impressive aural effects, though "Imperium Pelagi" is still far from a successful poem.

Young and Originality: Classical Models vs. Immediate Predecessors in Celebrating (Naval) Trade

Although "Imperium Pelagi" and the other naval lyrics reveal a strong interest in classical models, and although two of them are accompanied by more or less extensive poetological prefaces and treatises placing them in the tradition of classical and neoclassical poetry, this is hardly the dominant influence on them. Throughout the texts, Young frequently, almost obsessively, highlights the originality of his theme and his imitation of classical models.[11] The preface to "Imperium Pelagi," for instance, which is concerned with defending the relevance, poetic dignity and originality of his theme, is permeated with notions of originality and poetic rivalry:

> This Ode, I humbly conceive, is an original, though it professes imitation. No man can be like Pindar by imitating any of his particular works. [. . .] The genius and spirit of such great men must be collected from the whole. [. . .] Pindar is an original; and *he* must be so, too, who would be like Pindar in that which is his greatest praise. Nothing so unlike as a close copy and a noble original. [. . .] Trade is a very noble subject in itself, more proper than any for an Englishman, and particularly at this juncture. We have more specimens of good writing in every province than in the sublime. [. . .] I was willing to make an attempt where I had fewest rivals.
>
> *(Young 2.1f.)*

The theme of rivalry with Greek and Roman poetry also occurs in the "Ode to the King" prefixed to "Ocean: An Ode":

> Great monarch, bow
> Thy beaming brow:

To thee I strike the sounding lyre,
With proud design
In verse to shine,
To rival Greek and Roman fire.
(stanza 4)

This theme of rivalry with the ancients is frequently coupled with claims to absolute originality among the moderns as far as the choice of his subject matter – the great benefits of trade – is concerned. It is in "The Close" to "Imperium Pelagi" that Young once more repeats the claim to originality in poetically treating the subject of trade:

Thou art the Briton's noblest theme;
Why, then, unsung?
("The Close," 2.1–2)[12]

A final example out of many more[13] occurs in the "Discourse on Lyrick Poetry": "My subject is, in its own principle, noble; most proper for an Englishman; never more proper than on this occasion; and (what is strange) hitherto unsung" (Young 1.419). What is interesting here is the way in which Young's text deflects attention from contemporary models and influences by pointing to ancient models and rivals. Quite in contrast to what he so insistently claims, trade is by no means so innovative a theme in English poetry. Rather, British naval power and the benefits of trade and global expansion are celebrated in a multitude of poems ranging all the way from the several versions of Denham's *Cooper's Hill* (1642, 1655, 1668) via Dryden's *Annus Mirabilis* (1667), Tickell's *On the Prospect of Peace* (1712) to Pope's *Windsor Forest* (1713).[14]

Writing of London and the Thames as the centre of British trade, Denham already enthuses about the "blessings" of trade, which "[f]inds wealth where 'tis, bestows it where it wants," and celebrates London as "the world's exchange" (179, 185, 188). Brown speaks of a "global vision of prosperity, exchange, and political stability" in *Cooper's Hill*, centred on London and with the Thames as its access to global trade (110). For Dryden, too, "the sea is the medium of economic and political expansion," of a "global 'emporium,'" a "benevolent system of commerce" (111). Brown cites further comparable passages from Tickell and Pope and even speaks of an expansionist philosophy of global trade as virtually "a commonplace in British poetry in the first half of the eighteenth century" (113).

What, then, about Young's claim to absolute originality and his frequent references to Pindar as his great model? Pindar, I would provocatively argue, is a mere smokescreen diverting attention from the more immediate sources also celebrating naval trade; and all the forced and continual

insistence on originality is little more than whistling in the dark. The real models and rivals are his direct English predecessors – though in more successful poetic form. One may even want to read this as an indication that the "Anxiety of Influence" Bloom postulated for Romantic and post-Romantic writers was at work even in the early eighteenth century.[15]

"Knotted discourses": Mercantilism, Free Trade and Globalization

In her enlightening discussion of Young's "Imperium Pelagi" in this tradition, Brown states that "Young echoes the commonplace contemporary notion that trade benefits the world by distributing goods and uniting people in its shared cause" (116). She even writes that "The story [of naval power and trade] collectively told here [in the poems from *Cooper's Hill* to 'Imperium Pelagi'] takes on the transforming power of capitalist economic expansion, attempting to understand its nature and to project its effects" (118). Brown brilliantly summarizes her findings as follows:

> The story of torrents and oceans tells us as much as it told its contemporary audience. It tells us how the distinctively modern experience of global economic expansion was understood at a time of dramatic and explosive growth. It demonstrates the intimacy of that experience with the material conditions of contemporary life, and it shows us how a culture might grasp the complexities and explore the contradictions of a historical transformation imaginatively, even as it clings to a simple, celebratory, or apologetic rationalization.
>
> *(120)*

What Brown does not remark on, though she perceptively speaks of the "tensions and contradictions of this cultural fable's implications" (119), is the tension between different conceptions of trade – mercantilism vs. free trade – in the poem. What she also fails to see are the subtle hints at fears that global naval trade may be threatening to Britain's economic power and, ultimately, its naval dominance and thus signs of suspicions against the potentially detrimental effects of global sea trade during an earlier stage of economic globalization.

All in all, these poems are an expression of imperialism and confidence in British naval superiority, a spirit close to Thomson's *Rule Britannia*. Trade, like war, is a matter of power and of British superiority and that is the dominant theme of all the odes.[16] But while the general drift of "Imperium Pelagi," like that of Young's other naval lyrics, is thus fairly clear, there are a number of contradictory discourses at work in these texts:

There appears to be a constant clash between a benevolently inclusivist discourse of celebrating trade as being liberating and enlightening for all and a proto-nationalist discourse of naval power that regards trade as competitive and even celebrates war and British naval power.

Without entirely adopting the methodology, my analysis of these contradictory discourses takes its cue from the theory of interdiscursivity and the related method of analysis as developed by Jürgen Link, Ursula Link-Heer, Rolf Parr and others.[17] Link and Link-Heer introduce their concept as follows:

> We suggest calling any historically specific "discursive formation" in Foucault's sense a "specialized discourse" and then designating all interfering, connecting, integrating etc. cross-relations between several specialized discourses "interdiscursive."
>
> *(92)*[18]

Literature, of course, thus features as an "interdiscourse" *par excellence*. What I do not agree with is the authors' assumption – ultimately also derived from Foucault – of a shift around 1800 in the course of which literature "became" interdiscursive in the first place. If literature in a very broad sense always aimed to make sense of the world or to project a world for any society at any given time, this was only ever possible by bringing together the major concerns, questions and discourses at any given moment. It, therefore, seems more plausible to regard literature as being *inherently* interdiscursive.

A central aim of the analysis of literature as the analysis of interdiscursivity can then be formulated as follows:

> It studies (from a generative perspective) the origin of literary texts from a specific historic play of integrating discourses. [. . .] The theory of interdiscursivity allows one to reconstruct the totality of interdiscursive forms and elements of a given culture and epoch as a kind of networked ensemble, which – materially as well as formally – proves to be an essential condition for the production of literature. The interdiscursive ensemble may be said to supply the semi-finished materials for literature.
>
> *(Link/Link-Heer 95, 97)*[19]

In a comparable vein, in a still illuminating 1987 essay, John Barrell and Harriet Guest explore the latent contradictions in selected eighteenth-century long poems. Taking their cue from a key passage in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (*Quaderni del Carcere*), they attempt to take the multiplicity of – partly contradictory – discourses in eighteenth-century long

poems such as the *Essay on Man*, *The Seasons*, *The Task, Night-Thoughts* and others as "manifestations of the intimate contradictions by which society is lacerated" (Gramsci as qtd. in Barrell/Guest 123) and at the same time propose to analyse "the *ensemble* of discourses [as] a means of masking those contradictions" (123).

In their conclusion on ideology and contradiction in the eighteenth-century long poem, they write:

> The enunciation of the contradictions of ideology may not be the function for which long works of mixed genre, the characteristic production of eighteenth-century poets, were invented. But it is certainly one of the functions which they performed.
>
> *(143)*

In what follows, I would like to isolate two such contradictory strands in the discourse of trade as they appear in Young's poem and read them in the light of the contemporary discourse of mercantilism vs. free trade and, finally, to comment on early traces of a fear of global trade in Young's text. While these are by no means the only discourses in latent or open contradiction in the text,[20] they are certainly the dominant ones.

Throughout "Imperium Pelagi," Young celebrates the wonderful benefits of trade, which, it is claimed, not only brings wealth but also civilization, progress and virtually universal happiness. The following is merely one of innumerable further passages one might cite here:

> Trade barbarous lands can polish fair,
> Make earth well worth the wise man's care;
> Call forth her forests, charm them into fleets;
> Can make one house of human race;
> Can bid the distant poles embrace;
> Hers every sun, and India India meets.
>
> (IV, 13)[21]

It is clear throughout most of the text that all nations involved in trade will reap the benefits; free trade, rather than being a matter of competition in which gains to one country come at the expense of another, "levies gain on every place," not just on Britain:

> See, cherish'd by her sister, Peace,
> [Trade] levies gain on every place,
> Religion, habit, custom, tongue, and name.
> Again, she travels with the sun,

> Again she draws a golden zone
> Round earth and main,–bright zone of wealth and fame!
> (1.10)

"Imperium Pelagi" thus predominantly reads like a poetic endorsement of the doctrine of free trade that was beginning to assert itself against the older mercantilist doctrine in the first half of the eighteenth-century. Celebrating "[t]hat blood of nations,–Commerce and Increase" (1.21.6) and marvelling "[h]ow various Nature" (1.22.1), the text goes on to argue that differences in natural resources are the driving force behind trade:

> Heaven different growths to different lands imparts,
> That all may stand in need of all,
> And interest draw around the ball
> A net to catch and join all human hearts.
> (1.23.3–6)[22]

It is the desire in humans to exchange the benefits of "different growths" which "Heaven [. . .] to different lands imparts" that makes them trade in the first place. Young thus celebrates free trade in much the same way Adam Smith was to do so some 50 years later in *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith's ground-breaking work is a polemic against the restrictive measures of the "mercantile system" and, arguing the case for free trade, states that trade will benefit *all* parties involved.[23] But although "Imperium Pelagi" thus points forward to Smith's theories of specialization and "absolute advantages"[24] from trade, there remain strong traces of the older mercantilist doctrine.

Mercantilist thinking emerged in England in the mid-sixteenth century and came to be widely accepted as the dominant philosophy of trade in the 1620s.[25] The Navigation Act of 1651 (partly still in effect until 1849), which regulated trade with the colonies and restricted the import of goods of non-European origin, was an important seventeenth-century expression of mercantilist thinking. Opposition against mercantilism began in the early eighteenth century and reached a peak in Adam Smith's 1776 *The Wealth of Nations*. The essential tenets of mercantilism can be summarized as follows:

> The main tenet of mercantilism was that it was in a country's best interests to maintain a trade surplus, to export more than it imported. [. . .] Consistent with this belief, the mercantilist doctrine advocated government intervention to achieve a surplus in the balance of trade. The mercantilists saw no virtue in a large volume of trade per se. Rather, they recommended policies to maximize exports and minimize imports.

> In order to achieve this, imports were limited by tariffs and quotas, and exports were subsidized.
>
> *(Hill 124f.)*

This doctrine was essentially nationalistic and aimed to secure wealth and power for the state by encouraging exports and limiting imports. According to this ultimately antagonistic philosophy, trade was basically a zero-sum game from an international perspective in that benefits in trade for one country were assumed to come at the expense of another country.

Throughout the Ode, there is a curious contrast between the predominant emphasis on the benefits of unrestricted trade and a number of passages in which echoes of the mercantilist doctrine are clearly perceptible. Speaking about Britain's leading role in international trade, the text asks:

> Whence is a rival, then, to rise?
> Can he be found beneath the skies?
> No, *there* they dwell that can give Britain fear:
> The powers of earth by rival aim
> Her grandeur but the more proclaim,
> And prove their distance most as they draw near.
> (3.16)

This passage appears to advocate precisely the antagonistic conception of trade as a competitive game, a power struggle. This notion is apparent in a good number of further passages: Speaking about Britain as "the triple realm, that awes the continent" (2.2.6), the text goes on to claim that Britain "awes with wealth; for wealth is power" (2.3.1). Further mercantilist echoes are to be discerned in the similarly antagonistic and somewhat rapacious idea – here declared to be entirely natural – that Britain should "reap the growth of every coast":

> Others may traffic if they please;
> Britain, fair daughter of the seas,
> Is born for trade, to plough her field, the wave,
> And reap the growth of every coast.
> (3.6.1–4)[26]

Even Young's argument for the necessity of peace in "Imperium Pelagi" has mercantilist overtones in the emphasis on the connection between trade, wealth and power. Peace, the text argues, is necessary for trade:

> Trade springs from Peace, and Wealth from Trade,
> And Power from Wealth; of Power is made

The god on earth: hail, then, the dove of Peace [. . .]
War is the death of Commerce and Increase.
(5.26.1–3, 6)[27]

Especially line 2, despite the defence of peace here, is clearly another mercantilist echo. One of the clearest instances of this possessive philosophy is the following, a passage which appears twice in the poem:

Ye winds, in concert breathe around;
Ye navies, to the concert bound
From pole to pole! To Britain all belong.
(5.34.4–6; repeated as "The Chorus"
at the very end of the poem)

What is behind this emphasis on the need for naval power – at times virtually a glorification of naval war[28] – is an ultimately mercantilist belief in trade as a zero-sum game in which other nations are Britain's rivals rather than partners in trade to the benefit of all.

Young thus does have something relevant to say. The whole theme of trade is hardly new, but what "Imperium Pelagi" exemplifies is the contemporary debate between mercantilism and free trade. Half a century before Adam Smith, Young hints at specialization because of different advantages in the production of various goods as the driving force behind international trade. This points forward to Smith's theory of the advantage of specialization. But the text also formulates early eighteenth-century fears of the potential threat posed by global sea trade to Britain's economic power and its role as the dominant naval power: In a passage on the role of trade in other regions of the world, Young first voices the most atrocious orientalist and racist stereotypes about "Afric's black, lascivious, slothful breed," who "[t]o clasp their ruin, fly from toil" (5.20.3–4):

Of Nature's wealth from commerce rent,
Afric's a glaring monument:
Mid citron forests and pomegranate groves [. . .]
Her beggar'd famish'd, tradeless native roves.
(5.21.1f., 5f.)

Young then points to China as a potentially dangerous rival in global trade, who, unless – in good mercantilist fashion – barred from trade, will swamp Europe with its goods:

Not so thine, China, blooming wide!
Thy numerous fleets might bridge the tide;

> Thy products would exhaust both India's mines:
> Shut be thy gate of trade, or (woe To Britain's) Europe 't will o'erflow.
> (5.22.1–5)

It did not require divinatory powers even in the first half of the eighteenth century to recognize that trade was by no means something only Britons might be good at or that Britain was the only country that might want to export excess domestic production. But what may have been an incidental insight in the early eighteenth century, merely a marginal note, a passing remark in a poem of over 1,000 lines, from our perspective appears a prescient anticipation of economic globalization – and of the inconsistent strategy of advocating trade restrictions where just the kind of free trade one otherwise so strongly believes in might work to one's own disadvantage.

Presentifying the Eighteenth Century?

Although it has long been shown to be untenable as a general philosophy of trade, mercantilist thinking is alive and kicking. In a 1991 essay in the *Journal of World Trade*, Jarl Hagelstam, then a director in the Finnish Ministry of Finance, commented on neo-mercantilist thinking in present-day trade negotiations:

> The approach of individual negotiating countries, both industrialized and developing, has been to press for trade liberalization in areas where their own comparative advantages are the strongest, and to resist liberalization in areas where they are less competitive and fear that imports would replace domestic production.
> *(qtd. in Hill 125)*

This is quite obviously still as true in the 2020s as it was in 1991 – or in 1730. However, this does not yet answer the question about the relevance of the earlier findings for present-day debates. How modern can an early eighteenth-century poem be? Or rather, how modern can and should we make it?

Surely, at a time when what we are doing in the humanities is frequently under attack for being irrelevant burrowing in the past, we may occasionally also want to presentify in addition to historicizing. In discussing any subject, we may also, in some sense, want to "make it new." Insofar as the distinction between presentifying and historicizing approaches implies a dry and arid aloofness and irrelevance on the part of historicizing scholarship and a naïve, unscholarly *aggiornamento*[29] on the part of presentifying criticism, that pseudo-alternative disappears in the kind of criticism I propose here.

In an essay on "The Aims and Limits of Historical Scholarship," Robert D. Hume argues for the non-exclusivity of historicizing and presentifying readings:

> We need presume no conflict of interest between a "historical reading" and one carried out from a present-day vantage point (whether "theorized" or not). Neither invalidates the other; each has its own processes of validation. Even where they clash most sharply, the conflict should be fruitful, with much to tell us – about ourselves and about the past. Self-knowledge is not best achieved by indulgence in solipsism.
>
> *(2002: 417)*

But this view still assumes that one will necessarily either be doing one *or* the other. But merely stating that they do not have to be mutually exclusive is to fall short of what is possible and productive: What if historicization and presentification occur together, mutually enriching, in one reading? What if they can indeed be shown to be complementary, even to grow out of each other? An "applicative reading," as Hume calls any discussion of a text "with regard to the context and concerns of the present-day reader" (1999: 181), does not have to be ahistorical. In judging the plausibility of such applicative readings, I propose to distinguish between historical and ahistorical presentification: Genuine "historicizing presentification" allows us to trace our own preoccupations back to historical roots. If, in this sense, we argue that an early eighteenth-century poem "anticipates" early twenty-first-century fear of globalization, then "anticipation" has nothing to do with divinatory or prophetic powers. Seen in this way, we do not ahistorically claim Young as "our contemporary" nor do we have to regard him as a monument to a dead past entirely cut off from the present.[30] Rather, we can do justice to the insight that global trade – then as now predominantly by ship – was vital to a nation's economic livelihood and that concerns about competitive disadvantages and fears of other nations' economic power are not unique to our own era of economic globalization but are inherent in the very concept of global (sea) trade.[31] This seems to me to be a way of accounting for the relevance of literature and of its presentist aspects without having to be anachronistic or ahistorical in the sense of only seeing those aspects of the past that are relevant to the present.

As a hint at the potentially overpowering nature of global trade in an earlier phase of economic globalization, as interesting cases of poetic theory put into practice and as case studies in presentifying historicism,[32] Young's naval lyrics have a fascinating story to tell – although that still does not make them great poems. These remarkably conflicted "Sea Odes" at the same time celebrate British naval power and dominance in the global sea

trade *and* hail trade as an economically rewarding and culturally enriching exchange for all parties involved. They are thus revealingly ambivalent documents in the ideological struggle of two philosophies of trade, mercantilism vs. free trade – an ideological struggle that recognizably, if with variations, continues to inform present-day debates about globalization and its discontents, resurfacing in populist proposals for protectionism and economic nationalism as today's versions of mercantilism.[33]

Notes

1 The search in the MLA International Database on March 7, 2023, was conducted for "Shakespeare, William," "Swift, Jonathan" and "Young, Edward," respectively, as "Primary Subject Author."
2 The texts he is remembered for today, if at all, are those he wrote in his later years, *Night Thoughts* and *Conjectures on Original Composition*, and these are also the works that attract most of what little critical attention there is. See May 1989 and 2000.
3 My translation. "Er ist ein Genie, das nicht allein weit über einen Milton erhaben ist, sondern auch unter den Menschen am nächsten an den Geist Davids und der Propheten grenzet."
4 All references to Young's works with passages indicated in the text will be to Young 1968. References to prose texts will be indicated by volume and page number; references to poems will be by stanza and line, in the case of "Imperium Pelagi" preceded by the "strain" (1–5).
5 The textual history of "Sea-Piece" and "Foreign Address" is highly complex, and there has been much critical confusion in the dating of these two texts. For clarification, see Forster 1980 as well as Forster 1986: 296, 300. Forster corrects the dates given in Nichols's edition and in Koenig and Bliss. Forster calls them "basically variations of the same poem" (1980: 8). I would like to thank Professor James E. May for photocopies of the rare first editions of "The Foreign Address" and "A Sea-Piece" as well as for valuable comments and a lot of bibliographical material. I am also grateful to Dr Rudolf Brandmeyer for a photocopy of a first-edition copy of "Ocean: An Ode" in the Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, Göttingen.
6 See, for instance, "Night VIII," 168–215, Young 1968: 1.156f.
7 Speaking of "Ocean: An Ode," Croft is withering, singling out a number of stanzas for particular criticism. Croft's comments on Young's other naval odes are hardly less sarcastic.
8 For Imperium Pelagi, Doran has a mere seven dismissive lines.
9 In "On Lyrick Poetry," Young writes: "It holds true in this Province of writing, as in war, 'The more danger, the more honour.' It must be very Enterprising, it must (in Shakespear's Style) have hairbreadth 'Scapes; and often tread the very brink of Error" (21f.).
10 For a brief discussion of earlier stages of globalization, see Osterhammel/Petersson; for an account of how remarkably close even the ancient world came to practices associated with present-day economic globalization, see Moore/Lewis.
11 The "Discourse on Lyrick Poetry" prefixed to "Ocean: An Ode" mentions "Pindar, Anacreon, Sappho, and Horace [as] the great masters of lyric poetry among heathen writers" to be imitated and surpassed. See Young 1968: 1.417.

12 See also "The Close," 1.1–3: "Thee, Trade! I first – who boast no store, / Who owe thee nought – thus snatch from shore, / The shore of Prose, where thou hast slumber'd long."
13 See also "To the King," 10.3: "Hail, subject new!"; and stanzas 3–5 of "Ocean": "Who sings the source/Of wealth and force?" (3.1f); "Where, where are they/ Whom Paean's ray/Has touch'd, and bid divinely rave?– / What! none aspire? I snatch the lyre, / And plunge into the foaming wave" (4.1–4), see also stanza 60 and throughout.
14 For an enlightening reading of key passages in this tradition, see Brown.
15 For a pragmatic application of Bloom's notion to a Romantic text and the misreading of its key intertext, see Gurr 1998.
16 König already remarked that "naval trade and war are the major themes of all Young's Odes"; my translation. "Seehandel und Krieg sind die Hauptthemen aller Youngschen Oden" (79).
17 For an introduction, see especially Link/Link-Heer as well as Link.
18 My translation. "Wir schlagen vor, jede historisch-spezifische ‚diskursive Formation' im Sinne Foucaults als ‚Spezialdiskurs' zu bezeichnen und dann alle interferierenden, koppelnden, integrierenden usw. Quer-Beziehungen zwischen mehreren Spezialdiskursen ‚interdiskursiv' zu nennen."
19 My translation. "[Sie] untersucht [. . .] (in generativer Absicht) die Entstehung literarischer Texte aus einem je historisch-spezifischen diskursintegrativen Spiel. [. . .] Die Interdiskurstheorie erlaubt, die Gesamtheit der interdiskursiven Formen und Elemente einer gegebenen Kultur und Epoche als eine Art vernetztes Ensemble zu rekonstruieren, das sich als wesentliche Bedingung (und zwar sowohl in materialer wie in formaler Hinsicht) für die Produktion von Literatur erweist. Das interdiskursive Ensemble stellt sozusagen 'Halbfabrikate' für die Literatur bereit."
20 One such latent clash is apparent in the curious way in which Young seeks to ennoble trade by frequently claiming that morality on the one hand and acquisitiveness and commerce on the other hand are not only reconcilable but literally necessary complements. This occasionally takes on strong Calvinist overtones: "This truth, O Britain! ponder well:/Virtues should rise, as fortunes swell./What is large property? The sign of good,/Of worth superior" (3.1.1–4). See also 4.15.2: "Why is Heaven's smile in wealth convey'd?" and throughout. For the "knotting" of discourses of morality with those of trade and acquisitiveness in other eighteenth-century long poems, see also Barrell/Guest.
21 For these universally beneficial effects of trade, see also 3.20.1–3: "High Commerce from the gods came down,/With compass, chart, and starry crown,/Their delegate, to make the nations smile."; 3.26.6: "The whole creation is one vast Exchange"; 2.1: "Commerce gives Arts, as well as gain:/By Commerce wafted O'er the main,/They barbarous climes enlighten as they run./Arts, the rich traffic of the soul,/May travel thus from pole to pole,/And gild the world with Learning's brighter sun," and numerous further passages throughout.
22 This notion is developed at some length in stanzas 1.22–26.
23 For Smith's critique of mercantilism, see especially book IV.
24 The theory of "absolute advantage" – though not yet directly referred to as such – is very succinctly developed and set forth in book IV, Chapter 2 of *The Wealth of Nations*.
25 An illuminating account of mercantilism and its role in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century economic thought in Britain is to be found in Barth. For an overview of mercantilist doctrines and the later free-trade notions advocated by

Adam Smith, see Chapter 4, "International Trade Theory" in Hill, 120–49, see especially 122–34. See also Spiegel.

26 See also 1.15.1: "All these one British harvest make!"

27 This argument for peace concludes as follows: "Then perish War!–Detested War!" (5.27.1).

28 This glorification of war is even more blatant in the other naval lyrics. See, for instance, the "Ode to the King": "Our fleet, if War or Commerce call,/[It] rides in triumph round the ball" (8.2+4); see also stanza 24: "Our factions end, The nations bend!/For when Britannia's sons, combined/In fair array, All march one way,/They march the terror of mankind" (24.1–6). See also "The Foreign Address" with its curious call to Britons to fight for peace (not that this curiously distorted call has lost currency since then): "Yet, Peace celestial, may thy charms/Still fire our breasts, though clad in arms:/If scenes of blood avenging Fates decree,/For thee the sword brave Britons wield;/For thee charge o'er the'embattled field;/Or plunge through seas, through crimson seas, for thee" ("Foreign Address," 25). For a similarly astonishing glorification of battle in the midst of a sustained praise of peace, see stanza 35: "How the drums all around/Soul-rousing resound!/Swift drawn from the thigh/How the swords flame on high!/How the cannon, deep knell,/Fates of kingdoms foretell!/How to battle, to battle, sick of feminine art,/How to battle, to conquest, to glory, we dart!" (35.1–6).

29 Frank Kermode uses *aggiornamento* as a pleasant term for "presentification" (155).

30 For a comparable earlier attempt at bridging historicizing and presentifying approaches, see Breuer, esp. 267f.

31 There is no space here to dwell on the continuities and discontinuities in the development of globalization since long before classical antiquity (Moore and Lewis begin their account around 3500 B.C.). For this, see Moore/Lewis as well as Osterhammel/Petersson.

32 For an earlier hint at an applicative reading of "Imperium Pelagi" in the highly charged context of 1942, see Robert W. Chapman's short note on "Imperium Pelagi": "The main theme of this remarkable and neglected poem is not Britannia's rule as exerted by ships of the line, but the milder sway of her merchantmen. I question if our nation of traders has ever been more lyrically extolled than in some of Young's stanzas. [. . .] A tract for our own time?" (343–44). The full name of the author, which was originally abbreviated to the initials R.W.C., is supplied in May 1989.

33 An earlier version of this chapter first appeared as Gurr 2014.

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5

CLI-FI NOVELS AS MODELS OF AND FOR CLIMATE FUTURES

> I would say that near-future climate fiction is just as good a model of the future as the climate models and integrated assessment models that we have. [. . .] [Y]ou can explore the social consequences and you can think about what it means and how it actually works, how it plays out in a way that you can't in a sort of relatively low-dimensional climate model. You can draw the pictures, you can draw the sort of red and blue diagrams of where is going to be hot and where is going to be a bit cooler. But actually thinking about what that would look like and what the social consequences would be and what the political consequences would be and how it would feel to be a part of that future. That's something that models, the mathematical kind of models can't do at all. That's [. . .] one of the axes of uncertainty that they just can't represent at all. But climate fiction can do extremely well.
>
> (Erica Thompson in David Roberts, "On the Abuse (and Proper Use) of Climate Models: A Conversation with Erica Thompson about her New Book *Escape from Model Land*." *Volts Podcast* January 27, 2023)

Introduction

In the approximately two decades in which climate fiction has become a prolific genre of its own, a number of concerns have emerged in the study of cli-fi and its potential functions in societal debates about climate change. One central issue is that much cli-fi is a form of "preaching to the choir": Those who read climate fiction are frequently not the ones in need of further elucidation on the threats of climate change. Further key issues include the insight that, given a growing sense of urgency and an

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increasing awareness of climate change as a problem, the use of fear and of dystopian scenarios no longer does the cultural work it was once thought to do; moreover, there is the problematic use of fiction as a mere Trojan horse for climate facts – the much-criticized "info-dumping" – but also the often unquestioned reliance on identification with likeable characters (for these, see Hoydis/Bartosch/Gurr). A further central issue, however, is the missing step beyond the fictionalized "diagnosis" of climate change as a pressing issue: Cli-fi frequently fails to point out a way forward (by which I do not mean a simplistic "how-to" manual; this would once more be a misunderstanding about how fiction works).

In this chapter, I first trace key developments in the evolution of climate fiction in the last 20 years and outline some key pitfalls in thinking about how cli-fi might contribute to climate change communication, pointing out a need which a number of recent cli-fi novels address so compellingly. Taking my cue from the observations on these pitfalls, I argue that the notion of texts – and especially of cli-fi novels – as models of and models for the climate debate (see later section) can help make sense of a number of recent cli-fi novels that are both highly conscious of model theory *and* of their own role as models. It seems necessary to point out, however, that an understanding of novels as models for the climate debate does not – or rather *should* not – entail reading them as mere blueprints for what needs to be done. In the light of these insights, I then comment on two key types from the enormously diverse field of recent cli-fi since about 2018, which appear to do two different kinds of cultural work: The first type, ideally represented, for instance, by Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations* (2020), dwells on loss and mourning in the face of what is portrayed as a now inevitable environmental disaster; the second type is the highly model-conscious, forward-looking and ultimately optimistic long-term narrative of transformation to a more sustainable world. This type is here represented by Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) and Stephen Markley's 2023 *The Deluge*. Both modes of writing can be read in the light of model theory; the latter, however, will be discussed in more detail because its overt aspiration to narrate – or model – transitions is better suited to explicating a modelling theory of fiction (for a survey of mathematical transition modelling, see Moallemi/de Haan). My aim in this section is not so much to provide a typology of cli-fi or anything like an overview of cli-fi production. Rather, I am here concerned with how several recent cli-fi novels situate themselves with regard to debates about climate change – and, conversely, how a discussion of these novels might help make sense of the debate. Here, a specific form of model theory that some recent novels appear highly conscious of will be crucial.[1]

20 Years and Two Phases of Cli-fi – and Key Pitfalls in the Debate

In this section, I survey two decades in the development of climate fiction, primarily seeking to sketch – somewhat schematically – a succession of phases in the representation of climate change. I here point out remarkable correlations between developments in cli-fi production and in climate science: I correlate these phases with selected events and developments such as major natural disasters, key moments in climate science and climate communication (e.g., IPCC reports) and in climate activism. Changing representations of fear and the growing sense of urgency in cli-fi, I argue, suggestively – if unsurprisingly – dovetails with a growing sense of public climate awareness and a growing sense of urgency in climate science, climate communication and climate activism. Finally, I discuss the impact of this growing sense of urgency on the perception of earlier cli-fi novels, arguing that they undergo a form of readerly recontextualization.

Around and just after the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the 2000 IPCC special report on *Emissions Scenarios* and the 3rd IPCC report in 2001, each widely reported, and thus at a time of rapidly increasing media coverage of climate change, a significant number of climate change novels appeared; Goodbody and Johns-Putra speak of climate fiction's "first flowering around 2000" (4).[2] These texts include Maggie Gee's *The Ice People* (1998), T.C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth* (2000) and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Forty Signs of Rain* (2004) as the most widely read first instalment of his *Science in the Capital* trilogy.

In this early phase, climate change frequently appears as a rather diffuse issue among other forms of environmental degradation and frequently – especially in retrospect – does not seem a cause for dystopian fear. As a case in point, readers of Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth* today are likely to be struck by what, given the general sense of environmental degradation, decline and decay, seems an oddly optimistic ending on a hopeful, virtually pastoral note:

> The woods – these woods, our woods – are coming back, the shoots of the new trees rising up out of the graveyard of the old, aspens shaking out their leaves with a sound like applause. [. . .] Then there comes a soft pale evening in the middle of the summer, wildflowers on fire in the fields, toads and tree frogs in full song down by the creek, and my wife and I strolling down the verge of the open street, arm in arm. [. . .] That's when the girl appears [. . .] and there's a chirp to her voice that brings me back thirty-seven years.
>
> *(274f. [the final two pages])*

With its generally humorous tone, its unpleasantly sexist depictions of women, its bumbling activists and the strangely optimistic ending, it appears to have struck quite a few more recent readers as oddly dated, despite its drastic depictions of environmental degradation. Oddly dated, that is, until early 2020; reread given the experience of COVID, references to a respiratory pandemic that might previously have gone largely unnoticed suddenly appeared shockingly topical: "Lori died in the *mucosa* epidemic that hit three years ago" (3); "Lori died in my arms, both of us wearing gauze masks, the *mucosa* so thick in her lungs and throat, she couldn't draw a breath" (93); "[w]e all wore masks and kept strictly to ourselves" (143). One goodreads.com reviewer in June 2020 formulated what seems a representative perception:

> I do not recommend reading this during a pandemic! I had to put it aside because it was too depressing. Mucosa virus and masks? Eek! I'm not even sure why I pressed on to get through this book. [. . .] Perhaps I did it for the animals. I certainly didn't find the humour people keep mentioning in reviews here. Maybe it's there and too close to home at the moment so I couldn't see it?
>
> *("Tanya" n.p.; for a discussion, see also Hoydis/Bartosch/Gurr 33)*

In the face of a growing sense of urgency and a growing awareness that climate change, too, is no longer a threat looming in the distant future but is affecting us already, such recontextualized rereading is becoming increasingly common, even for fairly recent cli-fi.

A second phase of cli-fi writing – again to be taken heuristically and with frequent overlaps with earlier and later cli-fi – might be said to have begun around 2008. This is the period after the 4th IPCC report in 2007 with its diagnoses that "[w]arming of the climate system is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising global average sea level" (30). The impact of this now clearly evident change, the report exhorted, "can be reduced, delayed or avoided by mitigation" (73). However, this period also saw the widely perceived failure of the Copenhagen Climate Summit 2009 and the drastic warnings of the 2012 IPCC Special Report *Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change Adaptation*. Key novels published in this phase include Saci Lloyd's *The Carbon Diaries: 2015* (2008), Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009), Ian McEwan's *Solar* (2010), Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012) and Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013) (see Schneider-Mayerson 2018; Hoydis/Bartosch/Gurr). This "second cluster of novels" published around 2010 sought "to understand

the reasons for the seemingly irrational unwillingness of the public and politicians to take action" (Goodbody/Johns-Putra 5). These texts, therefore, often resorted to drastic representations of the climate catastrophe, frequently with the rather obvious aim of shocking people into recognition and/or action by evoking fear.[3] Moreover, these novels frequently contain significant amounts of info-dumping on climate science, often in the form of climate scientists lecturing, as evident, for instance, in McEwan's *Solar* or Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (for the way info-dumping may be read as ironically undermined in *Solar*, see Hoydis/Bartosch/Gurr 27f.). This period also witnessed a rapid diversification of genres and modes, with climate issues featuring prominently in realist fiction, comic modes, sci-fi or genre fiction. The growing sense of urgency in this period and the resulting shift in perception can be illustrated using the case of Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow*: Written before but published after Hurricane Sandy, which flooded large parts of New York City in October 2012, the perception of the novel's drastic representation of a submerged Manhattan changed – literally overnight – from a speculative engagement with a seemingly remote future to a depiction of present-day reality (for an insightful discussion, see Morel 81–82).

In sum, even a brief survey of two decades of climate fiction suggests a growing sense of urgency, both in the representation of climate change in individual texts and in the sheer number of cli-fi texts published. This growing sense of urgency also plausibly accounts for a tendency in the temporal setting of future projections in cli-fi novels to move closer to the present over time. Exceptions, such as the setting of *The Windup Girl* in twenty-third-century Thailand, have tended to be genre-specific; and even that novel, one suspects, would, if written today, not be projected quite so far into the future.

In the case of young adult fiction, too, there is evidence of a growing sense of urgency in the increasingly alarmist and threatening cover design of successive editions of the same novel (this can be studied on sites such as goodreads.com). Take the case of Saci Lloyd's *Carbon Diaries 2015*: The first English edition in 2008 has an entirely unalarming drawing of a teenager playing bass; the paperback edition months later has a somewhat abstract drawing of fern leaves, suggesting something like natural fragility; the 2010 sequel *Carbon Diaries 2017* has a girl running away from a fire; while the first paperback edition has an illustration of a burning sheet of paper. Interestingly, this is the illustration that was then used for the 2012 French edition of *Carbon Diaries 2015* in 2012. As for the reception of this novel, present-day readers might find surprising the 2012 comment by a young reviewer in *The Guardian*, who stated that the novel "had me rolling around in laughter at some points, and thoughtful at others" (The

Pink Elephant); today, readers are likely to find this a much darker novel, an observation confirmed, for instance, in a goodreads.com search (admittedly more impressionistic than quantitatively sound): Even considering the number of reviews per year, recent readers appear less frequently than early readers to find the book "funny" or "humorous."

Julia Hoydis, Roman Bartosch and I have recently argued that two fallacies plague both much early cli-fi and much previous cli-fi scholarship, namely, the assumptions that (1) one of the primary achievements of cli-fi is to convey factual knowledge (cli-fi as a Trojan horse for facts) and (2) that one of its key mechanisms is to evoke sympathy with likeable climate heroes or vulnerable animals (we refer to these erroneous assumptions as the "cognitive" and the "sentimental fallacies"; 15, 17 *et passim*). Moreover, it has become increasingly clear that cli-fi faces a classic "preaching to the choir" problem: By and large, those in need of climate change communication do not read cli-fi; those who do don't need to be told climate change is a problem.

I here argue that a number of cli-fi novels in this phase evince an oblique awareness of the *limitations* of cli-fi, such as the "preaching to the choir" problem of audiences or doubts about the efficacy of fiction. As a case in point for a text apparently aware of these limitations and seeking to process them on the level of story, take Ghosh's *Gun Island*. Although the novel as a whole does in parts – inescapably? – rely on such mechanisms, it is the personification of grand issues, its representation through "human-interest stories," that the character of Piya ironically comments on: " 'Human interest, huh?' said Piya. 'I guess the sci-comm guys in my university would be happy about that' " (302).

In a related vein, self-reflexive passages – whether obtrusively metafictional or subtly reflecting on the benefits and limitations of art generally or of specific art forms – are also an important form of narrative attention management: A discussion on the limits of art that draws attention to the text itself hardly allows for a complete absorption in the story. *Solar* provides a telling example. In an obliquely self-reflexive passage, Beard finds himself on a ship in the Arctic with a group of artists and scientists:

> Beard would not have believed it possible that he would be in a room drinking with so many seized by the same particular assumption, that it was art in its highest forms, poetry, sculpture, dance, abstract music, conceptual art, that would lift climate change as a subject, gild it, palpate it, reveal all the horror and lost beauty and awesome threat and inspire the public to take thought, take action, or demand it of others. [. . .] Idealism was so alien to his nature that he could not raise an objection.
>
> *(107)*

This self-aware reflection on the limits of what art can do is arguably made all the more poignant by the fact that "the novel" is a conspicuous absence in the list of art forms. Kerridge also briefly discusses this passage, reading it as McEwan's novel "uneasily mocking its own pretensions here" (155). In a related vein, the passage in which, in *Odds Against Tomorrow*, Mitchell and Jane survive the Manhattan flood in a $28,000 painted canoe Mitchell had bought as a piece of art (98, 151, 155, 165) implicitly raises questions about the role and status of art. A visual artwork here functions as a stand-in reflection on the use or uselessness of art: Is art useless and only good if it has a practical purpose, or is art what saves your life? In a similar way, the widely debated climate classic *The Day After Tomorrow* has an iconic scene in which those who have escaped the freezing cold by taking shelter in the library decide to keep warm by burning books (from "Friedrich Nietzsche" to "tax law"). Does this suggest that books are only useful when they burn and keep the fire going? Or does it suggest that "books" save your life? My point is not that we should come to an unambiguous reading of these passages. Rather, what matters is the insight that the self-reflexive question – what role can art and culture play in the face of climate change? – is being raised.

Finally, given the growing sense of urgency, wider climate awareness and the insight that those who read climate fiction generally no longer need to be shocked into recognition, recent climate fiction in its more thoughtful forms usually no longer engages in fear-mongering and doomsterism (for discussions of "doomsterism" and "disaster imaginaries" as unhelpful fictional responses to the climate crisis, see Mackenthun; Goodbody/Johns-Putra 9).

Thus, it seems that neither dystopian disaster imaginaries, info-dumping, likeable protagonists inviting identification nor elegiac fictions of loss and mourning could possibly fulfil the high hopes placed in various genres of climate literature as forms of creative and allegedly effective climate communication. "Lighting the Way" (see Bilodeau/Peterson for climate drama), creating inspiring future scenarios and thus exploring potential pathways into a more sustainable future, it seems, has not been a *forte* of cli-fi so far.

Cli-fi Novels as "Models of" and "Models for" Climate Futures, Or: Why Cli-fi and Cli-fi Research Need Model Theory

Given these limitations of much cli-fi in the last two decades and given the insights into the key challenges and pitfalls of climate communication, I here propose that the notion of texts as an alternative form of climate model lends itself to conceptualizing the role of cli-fi in climate communication; as I will show, cli-fi itself has recently often turned to model theory.[4]

To regard texts and discourses as models can be fruitful for my purpose: According to a general theory of models (see Stachowiak 131–133), all models share the characteristics of being (1) representational, (2) reductive and (3) pragmatic. A model may, therefore, be defined as a simplified physical, digital or mental representation of a more complex outside entity to which it must be functionally or structurally similar in order to function as a model. Models are devised or chosen for a specific purpose and – depending on that purpose – will selectively focus on different characteristics, elements or connections of the system perceived as central to this purpose while disregarding others. Thus, a computer-based climate simulation with a 10 km grid is a model of the global climate system in that it (1) represents that system, (2) does so in a selective, simplified, abstracted and aggregate form and (3) does so for a specific purpose – to predict future climate developments – while it would be largely or entirely useless for other objectives, such as short-term local weather forecasts, let alone, say, economic decision-making or biodiversity monitoring.

Moreover, building on Stachowiak and others, mathematician and information theorist Bernd Mahr has argued that models should additionally be understood in their dual nature of always being both "models of" something and "models for" something:

> A model is always based on something *of* which it is a model, i.e. departing from which or referring to which it has been produced or chosen, its matrix. The purpose of building or choosing a model is its use. [. . .] One of the typical uses of models is their use as *a means of designing [or creating]* something. [Here] models are samples, pre-formations or specifications. [. . .] The notion of the model can therefore only be explained convincingly if it is acknowledged that a model is always both a *model of something* and a *model for something*.
>
> *(2015, 331f.; italics original; my translation)*[5]

In a related vein, literary theorist Helmut Bonheim highlights this dual nature of models by distinguishing between "retrospective" and "prospective" models, a distinction he exemplifies as follows: "toys [. . .] show what is, whereas architectural models show what could be" (13). Adapting this notion, a model can be understood as being to varying degrees (and sometimes only implicitly) both the descriptive rendering of an entity *of* which it is a model and – at least implicitly – the forward-looking representation of potential future states of the entity *for* which it is a model.

The notion of texts as models lends itself to being applied to a wide range of representations of and engagements with the climate crisis. However, more clearly than in Mahr's original conceptualization, where

"model of" and "model for" are two sides of the same coin or may only be gradually more or less prominent in different models,[6] "model of" and "model for" are here regarded as occurring in very different combinations and gradations.[7]

More specifically, I here propose to specify further for our purpose (and with no claim to completeness) Mahr's notion of "model for" and Bonheim's notion of "prospective models." In their future orientation, models may be:

a) "prescriptive" or at least "evaluative" in the sense of a blueprint to be followed or an evaluation of a future scenario (most cli-fi will be at least implicitly prescriptive, if only negatively in that certain future scenarios are suggested to be undesirable or that climate change is portrayed as a threat; as we will see in the discussion especially of *Ministry for the Future*; however, it is frequently misleading to read fiction as being *primarily* prescriptive);
b) "predictive" in the sense that they make predictions about likely futures (it is to be doubted whether this is really what cli-fi does; rather, it seems, this is the domain of quantitative models);
c) "illustrative" in the sense that, rather than *making* such predictions, cli-fi illustrates predictions and projections made by using other types of models; this might also be regarded as the "experiential" function of cli-fi in that it makes more tangible the frequently somewhat abstract results of numerical models (for the experiential function of cli-fi, see especially Caracciolo 2022); and
d) "explorative" in the sense of developing possible (sometimes alternative) scenarios; literary texts would here be regarded as – in Wellershoff's classic formulation – providing "spaces of simulation for alternative behaviour in rehearsal at reduced risk"[8] (57; my translation; for a discussion, see Gurr 2021, 127–130; for a different discussion of the "exploratory" function of models, see Salis).[9]

Any given model can, of course, have more than one of these functions, though one or the other function will frequently be predominant. A text can thus be understood as modelling the climate crisis if it is (again to varying degrees) descriptive in its representation of (parts or facets of) the crisis, its causes or consequences and if it is (again at least implicitly) forward-looking (in prescriptive, evaluative, predictive, illustrative or explorative ways or amalgamations of these) in that it formulates, suggests or explores options and scenarios for an engagement with or response to the crisis. The dual nature of texts as *models of* and *models for* is particularly evident in the fact that texts not only represent an external reality but

centrally contribute to shaping perceptions of reality and thus to highlighting that a different world is at least conceptually possible. *This* is how we should understand the function of novels as, in varying degrees, also *models for*: To argue that novels are at least potentially or implicitly forward-looking forms of scenario-development does not mean reading them as simple blueprints or how-to manuals for the climate crisis; fiction is still fiction (see my discussion later).

As for the connection between the descriptive and the – frequently at least implicit – prescriptive components of the model and the transformative potential inherent in the notion of the model, Ricœur's account is compelling:

> the model is essentially a heuristic instrument that seeks, by means of fiction, to break down an inadequate interpretation and to lay the way for a new, more adequate interpretation. In the language of Mary Hesse [. . .] the model is an instrument of redescription.
>
> *(Ricœur 283)*

In a related vein, Buse suggestively highlights the parallels between climate models and science fiction as a specific form of textual model as follows: "After all, the central premise of climate modeling, that *things could be otherwise*, is also the central premise of science fiction" (Buse 54, italics original).

As for the complementarities between quantitative and textual models (a heuristic distinction that is not to be taken as a binary classification of all models), the comparative benefits are widely familiar: It is clear that for the scientific purpose of forecasting climate developments (usually by means of quantitative general circulation models [GCMs]), a novel is useless, while, for other purposes, especially in climate change communication, textual models can make different scenarios tangible and concrete in ways that quantitative models cannot (for a highly informative account of the limitations of quantitative models, see Thompson; see also Davidson/Kemp; for an earlier discussion of the limitations of quantitative models and of literary texts as complementary models, see Gurr 2014).[10] Thus, the parallels and complementarities between different types of models have been highlighted both from the point of view of literary studies and in the quantitative modelling community: While modelling specialist Erica Thompson has argued that "Integrated Assessment Models are essentially just a mathematical version of near-future climate fiction" (161; see also Roberts), literary scholar Jesse Oak Taylor has (without any reference to the theory of models) discussed "the novel as a performative model of climatic phenomenology," stating that "[t]he novel [. . .] is uniquely suited to

the challenges of climate modelling because of how its expansive scale and diffusive complexity intersect with the temporality of reading" (4; see also Nitzke 100; Van Beek/Versteeg).[11]

Just how suggestive the notion of texts as models is has obliquely been pointed out by Schneider-Mayerson in his discussion of reader responses to Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow* and its risk-obsessed protagonist, Mitchell Zukor:

> none of the readers of *Odds Against Tomorrow* appeared to view the novel as satire, and some reported that its primary lesson concerned the need for personal disaster preparedness. [. . .] At least one reader seemed to view [the protagonist] as a *model* for climate adaption.
>
> *(Schneider-Mayerson 2019, 951; my italics; for a discussion of this passage in the light of "climate change literacy," see Hoydis/Bartosch/Gurr 45)*

It seems that cli-fi readers occasionally even read texts as prescriptive models that, at least to most literary scholars, do not appear to function that way.

In addition to *functioning as* models themselves, texts might also draw attention to this fact by *thematically negotiating* models and modelling; given the centrality of modelling to understanding the climate crisis, one might even expect climate models to play a significant role in climate fiction. However, in many of the most widely debated cli-fi novels to date, especially those from the 2000s and 2010s,[12] climate modelling hardly figures: Thus, in T.C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth* (2000), Saci Lloyd's *Carbon Diaries 2015* (2008) and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012), climate modelling is not mentioned at all and "models" only occur in the sense of fashion models, toy models or car models. In Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009), "the Environment Ministry's [. . .] modelling computer" is mentioned, but there is no sustained engagement with modelling, while Ian McEwan's *Solar* (2010) mentions a "computer modeler," but the activity of climate modelling does not feature at all, while Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013), though it discusses financial risk modelling in some depth, makes no mention of climate modelling. The only novel from this corpus in which modelling plays a significant role is Kim Stanley Robinson's 2004 *Forty Signs of Rain*, in which estuarine modelling, socioeconomic modelling and climate modelling are frequently mentioned. However, given the importance of modelling to climate change research and to debates about climate change *and* given the present state of play in climate change communication, cli-fi production and cli-fi criticism, we should not be surprised, I argue, to see models, modelling and the theory of models play an increasing role.

Perspectives of Characters, Authors, Texts; or (Once More): Reading Fiction as Fiction

If I here argue that, in the field of cli-fi, too, we need to read fiction as fiction and to attend to questions of perspective, identification and narrative form,[13] this is not in order to uphold a traditional *l'art pour l'art* conception of the aesthetic autonomy of fiction but purely so as not to misread the modelling function of fiction: We can only appropriately tap into the potentials of fiction as an alternative type of model if we remain aware that prescription, evaluation, prediction, exploration and illustration are not the same and that a scenario unfolded in a novel must not simplistically be assumed to be the text's implicit ideal. Similarly, we only do justice to the complex ways in which fiction can stage a debate if we remain aware that characters do not necessarily function as mouthpieces of an author and that perspectives matter. As a case in point, I propose to briefly discuss a critical reading of Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow* by one of the most influential cli-fi scholars, with whom I otherwise agree on most points: In a 2019 essay on questions of environmental justice in cli-fi, Schneider-Mayerson scathingly critiques Rich's novel for being blind to questions of privilege. He cites a description of a group of survivors of the flood in an emergency relief camp: "Who were all these people? Waiting on line outside the food tent. [. . .] It was clear what they weren't: Manhattanites. Many were first-generation immigrants" (241; see also 248). He then comments that "[t]his is the sole paragraph in the novel that focuses on poor people, people of color, or non-Americans, and it describes them in contemptuous terms by what they are not: residents of Manhattan. Descriptions of these outer-borough denizens frequently contain a hint of disgust" (Schneider-Mayerson 8). It is certainly true that the novel centres on privileged, educated, overwhelmingly white Manhattanites, for whom Brooklyn is "just about the end of the earth": "'What are the Flatlands?' This was Mitchell. 'It's just about the end of the earth,' someone said. 'Or as close as you can get without leaving New York City'" (251). However, Schneider-Mayerson here rather too easily equates the protagonist's privileged ignorance with the perspective of the text; whether the novel itself is blind to questions of privilege and environmental justice or is rather to be read as a *satire on* privileged ignorance is open to debate. This is also an open question for the ending of the novel, which Schneider-Mayerson views especially critically. Having escaped flooded Manhattan, protagonist Mitchell Zukor decides not to return to the city but to lead a largely solitary and allegedly self-sufficient simple life in the Brooklyn Flatlands, which have been entirely destroyed by the hurricane and have been abandoned by the city administration. Schneider-Mayerson quotes a short

passage from the final pages of the novel and then especially condemns it for being blind to neocolonial implications:

> "Walking around the property, swinging the ax, he felt for the first time as if he owned the land. The Canarsie Bank Trust, as well as the adjacent plot, whatever it had been, was his domain." (290). This is a Lockean claim that by making use of the land, Zukor now owns it. This is particularly problematic from a justice perspective. While Flatlands might seem like the end of the Earth from the vantage point of Manhattan's Upper West Side, where Rich was raised, [. . .] it is (in the real world) a stable, middle-class neighborhood of 60,000. Home to African-Americans, Caribbeans, Latinxs, and Asian-Americans, the neighborhood was not even flooded during Hurricane Sandy, when its denizens generously organized aid for their less fortunate neighbors in Brooklyn and Queens through organizations like the Flatlands Lions Clubs ("Superstorm"). To recapitulate: two white, wealthy, educated, twenty-somethings find a complicated financial means to profit off of climate disasters, then use these funds to settle a destroyed minority neighborhood where they discover themselves by working the land. The echo of settler-colonial land appropriation and historical erasure [. . .] is too loud to ignore. [. . .] Rich's apparent ignorance of these settler-colonial reverberations and the absence of diversity and climate justice considerations constitute a deficient and pernicious framing of climate change.
>
> *(Schneider-Mayerson 2019, 9–10)*

Quite apart from the somewhat narrow-minded insistence that the portrayal of the neighbourhood is demographically inaccurate and misrepresents its fate in the storm and its role in aid activism afterwards, it seems that this reading overlooks a number of important textual signals: As Schneider-Mayerson himself has convincingly shown by means of a survey of goodreads.com comments, one cannot take for granted a shared understanding of literary texts; readers will differ widely in how they understand a text and what they take away from it. Such an unambiguous dismissal of a complex passage, therefore, is hardly convincing. Mitchell here seems too closely modelled on ecocritical patron saint Thoreau to miss: Like Thoreau on Walden Pond, who had his washing done for him and enjoyed the comfort of his mother's cookies and cooking rather too often for his self-fashioning as a self-sufficient recluse to be plausible, Mitchell, too, claims to be "self-sufficient" in the wilderness (285) but, as "supplies he had requested," has his "floor wax," "filtration cartridges" and "fresh vegetables" brought to him (295; for a harshly critical account of *Walden*

and of Thoreau's pretence to self-sufficiency while relying on the comforts of civilization, see Schulz). So whose blindness and narrow-mindedness is in evidence here – the character's or the novel's? It seems to me to be part of the point of what we might call a complexity-literate reading of the novel – a reading that leads to the illuminating questions rather than to simple answers – that this is undecided and undecidable. An "intertextual awareness" (for the concept, see Myren-Svelstad 11) of the Thoreau parallels, however, suggests that the passage may be more reflexive and multilayered than Schneider-Mayerson's dismissive reading would have it. Such questions of perspective as well as questions of narrative form generally, I will argue, are also central to a number of key texts from the present phase of cli-fi production.

Thus – rather than serving the purpose of defending an art for art's sake view of literature from the privileged position of dwellers in the ivory tower – it is *only* by privileging complexity, ambiguity and ambivalence that we can recognize the cultural work these texts do in modelling climate debates. Moreover, under conditions of agonistic plurality, with the concomitant deep disagreements, fundamental conflicts and the threat of societal polarization, an understanding of literature as a means of fostering learning about – and of practicing dealing with – different perspectives, ambiguity and complexity is simply more adequate and more helpful than one that all too quickly disambiguates and simplifies.

Two Types of "Phase Three Cli-fi" – Loss and Mourning vs. Transition Narrative

A third phase (again, periodization is conceptual and to be taken with a pinch of salt), in which an even greater sense of urgency and even more dire projections about the acceleration and the increasing impacts of climate change appear significantly to have impacted cli-fi production, may be said to have begun around 2018 (see Ghosh 2019 for the argument that 2018 marked a turning point in perceptions of climate change). In climate science, this period saw the publication of the 2019 IPCC Special Report *Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate* with its grim prognosis of a "decrease in global biomass of marine animal communities, their production, and fisheries catch potential, and a shift in species composition [. . .] over the 21st century in ocean ecosystems [. . .] under all emission scenarios" (22) as well as the first part of the 6th IPCC Report (2021) with yet clearer and more urgent diagnoses of the state of the climate system. In climate activism, this has been the time of widely publicized milestones such as the emergence of the "Fridays for Future" movement in 2018/2019 or Greta Thunberg's "I want you to panic" speech in Davos in 2019.

Moreover, the unprecedented number and intensity of storms, wildfires, droughts, heatwaves and floods in the years since 2018 – all, as attribution science tells us, further instances of the reality of climate change (see Otto 2017) – appear to have brought home to all but the most die-hard climate sceptics that climate change is not an abstract problem of the future. One widely publicized and hotly debated response to this increasingly gloomy outlook was Jonathan Franzen's 2019 *New Yorker* essay "What If We Stopped Pretending?" with its claim – often read as defeatist – that "[t]he climate apocalypse is coming. To prepare for it, we need to admit that we can't prevent it" (n.p.).

In keeping with drastically increased public awareness of climate change in this phase, climate fiction appears increasingly conscious that those who read cli-fi know the facts and need no wake-up calls; much recent climate fiction has thus tended either to focus on inspiring hope and on pointing out solutions *or* on the recognition of inevitability (*sensu* Franzen) and on elegiac representations of loss and mourning. A key instance here is Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations* (2019), which, judging from reviews and reader responses, appears to have become an instant cli-fi classic. Set in "a future near enough you could almost mistake it for the present" (A. Morton n.p.), the text laments: "A nameless sadness, the fading away of the birds. The fading away of the animals. How lonely it will be here, when it's just us" (McConaghy 62). Passages such as the following are representative of this type of fictional response to the climate crisis:

> There are no more monkeys in the wild, no chimps or apes or gorillas, nor indeed any animal that once lived in rain forests. The big cats of the savannas haven't been seen in years. [. . .] There are no bears in the once-frozen north, or reptiles in the too-hot south, and the last known wolf in the world died in captivity last winter.
>
> *(24)*

Such texts fulfil a socio-psychological function in coming to terms with the crisis and thus function as "models *for*" the future in that they model ways of coping with the sadness of living a damaged life. What they do not do is imagine a world in which humanity "will have succeeded" in averting catastrophic climate change. It is this function of the grammatical form of the future perfect, I argue, that lies at the heart of what – beyond the much-needed but insufficient function of inspiring hope – climate fiction of the kind exemplified in Robinson's *Ministry for the Future* is capable of doing.[14] I here take my cue from the German Foundation FUTURZWEI (meaning both the grammatical "future perfect" but also, literally, "future two," suggesting an *alternative* future), which seeks to do precisely this:

Work towards a more sustainable, resilient and liveable future through the telling of success stories of how, again from a future vantage point,[15] this "will have been achieved" (see futurzwei.org as well as Giesecke et al.; for this function of the future perfect, see also Mattheis/Gurr). Without reference to the future perfect and its grammatical and cognitive functions, the inspirational effects of such narratives of how humanity "will have managed" are central to what, in an essay that also briefly discusses *The Ministry for the Future*, Mackenthun terms "Social-Ecological Transition Stories" (7).

In this vein, in response to the increasingly apocalyptic prospects in the planetary crisis, a number of recent novels[16] focus on inspiring hope. As a case in point, one might cite Amitav Ghosh's 2019 *Gun Island* with its highly poetical insistence on the power of stories (140ff., 292–312), its take on magical realism, its representation of chance encounters and its striking optimism. The concluding celebration of and faith in "all that was best about our world – the wide open sea, the horizon, the bright moonlight, leaping dolphins, and also the outpouring of hope, goodness, love, charity and generosity" (295) – animates not only the narrator but also the novel as a whole. *Gun Island* thus in many ways fulfils a task formulated in Ghosh's 2021 *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, which can be read as the retroactively delivered literary programme and agenda for *Gun Island*. Ghosh here states:

> erasure of non-human voices from "serious" literature has played no small part in creating that blindness to other beings that is so marked a feature of official modernity. [. . .] That is the great burden that now rests upon writers, artists, filmmakers, and everyone else who is involved in the telling of stories: to us falls the task of imaginatively restoring agency and voice to non-humans.
>
> *(Nutmeg's Curse, 204)*

However, *Gun Island*, also in another sense programmatic for much recent climate fiction, seems designed to make good on Ghosh's later pronouncement in *The Nutmeg's Curse*: Ghosh here also argues that it is the task of the storyteller now to do justice to the complexities, entanglements and sheer temporal and spatial scale of climate change by linking it to other global issues such as general environmental degradation, migration or the legacy of colonialism.[17] More specifically, both *The Nutmeg's Curse* and *Gun Island* draw attention to the origins of extractive capitalism in the Western colonial project: The ending of the novel is programmatically incisive about colonialism and the slave trade as a European "experiment in

planetary remaking [. . .] in the service of commerce" (305), thus fulfilling a need Ghosh retroactively formulated as follows:

> What possible bearing could the story of something as cheap and insignificant as the nutmeg have on the twenty-first century? [. . .] The continuities between the two are so pressing and powerful that it could even be said that the fate of the Banda Islands [where the nutmeg originates] might be read as a template for the present, *if only we knew how to tell that story*.
>
> *(Nutmeg's Curse, 18–19; my emphasis)*

In Ghosh's view – and that of other authors of recent climate fiction – "that story" appears essentially to be the story of climate change and its relation to capitalism, colonialism and other "hyperobjects" (*sensu* T. Morton) in all their complexities.

Two novels of the early 2020s, Kim Stanley Robinson's 2020 *The Ministry for the Future* and Stephen Markley's 2023 *The Deluge*, seem to me to respond to the cultural situation of intense debate, a growing sense of urgency, a need to strike a balance between portraying the gravity of the situation while nonetheless inspiring hope (without, again, providing anything like a simplistic how-to manual for dealing with the climate crisis). However, these texts also appear to respond to the challenge raised by critiques such as Ghosh's that Western thinking is the problem and cannot be part of the solution, which can allegedly only come from non-Western traditions; Ghosh's own *Gun Island* or Africanfuturist texts such as Nnedi Okorafor's *Noor* might be seen as examples. In the light of such critiques, however, it seems particularly interesting to see how texts from the tradition thus criticized themselves respond to the challenge. Moreover, in proposing a model theory of climate fiction, explicitly model-conscious texts such as *The Ministry for the Future* or *The Deluge* are more central to my argument.

Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) as a Near-Future Climate Model

Given the insights from two decades of climate fiction and the debate on the potentials and shortcomings of fiction in fostering climate-consciousness, Kim Stanley Robinson's widely debated[18] *The Ministry for the Future* seems to me to be an exemplary response to the state of the debate. It is a novel of ideas that combines a clear sense of urgency with an agenda of inspiring hope that the climate crisis may still be manageable: Beginning with

a harrowing depiction of a heatwave in India that kills millions of people, the novel recounts the story of how, over decades and against a lot of resistance and setbacks, humanity succeeds in the transformation towards a sustainable, more equitable world, involving large-scale geo-engineering, sustainable mobility, cooperative agriculture and major parts of the globe reserved for wildlife preservation. A central agent in this transition is the so-called Ministry for the Future, set up as an intergovernmental body in Zurich in 2025 and headed by Mary Murphy, one of the novel's two "protagonists" (a term that will have to be qualified).

One of the central instruments in the transition is a financial mechanism implemented by the world's central banks: "Carbon quantitative easing," the financial remuneration of carbon avoidance and sequestration by means of carbon coins, a cryptocurrency issued and backed by the world's leading central banks (see 172–176 et passim). The novel here appears to share the diagnosis recently formulated by Amitav Ghosh in his similarly sweeping (and tellingly subtitled) *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*:

> [E]xtractivist capitalism is on its last legs, its end foreordained by the withering of the very horizon on which its existence is predicated – the future. When the future becomes radically uncertain, nothing [financial] works: insurance, share prices, credit, dividends, even money (which is, after all, a promissory note that someone must redeem.
>
> *(241f.)*

In Robinson's novel, however, the central banks as the guarantors of capitalism's continued functioning use capitalism to both save it and to transform it from within: Initially sceptical, the bankers argue that financial measures designed to make the world economy shift towards sustainability are outside their "purview" of financial stability (188), until Murphy succeeds in making it clear to them that a world in crisis is inherently unstable: "[The Fed Chair, Jane] Yablonski nodded, grimly amused. 'If the world ends, the dollar is in trouble' " (188; see also 288f.):

> If [the world's major central banks] were now using their power to protect the biosphere and increase equity, the world could very well [. . .] take a new course. [. . .] And yet by their own criteria, so pinched and narrow, they were doing the necessary things. They were securing money's value, they still told themselves; which in this moment of history required that the world get saved.
>
> *(510–511)*

However, it is clear that not a single measure implemented in the novel alone can bring about the change – nor does the novel suggest that it could. Thus, although the emphasis on institutions such as the Ministry for the Future or the central banks suggests a top-down approach, this is counterbalanced on the level of the two protagonists by the character of Frank, a development aid worker who survived the Indian heatwave with severe PTSD and who, throughout the novel, acts as the representative of radical, occasionally illegal and even violent activism. Moreover, numerous references to bottom-up activities also highlight *their* role in the transition. For instance, a four-page chapter lists NGOs, activist groups, collectives and other agents of change towards sustainability and equity (425–428).

One of the most striking features of the novel is the unprecedented amount of factual information it provides, with many chapters in the form of meeting notes, lectures, expository essays, first-person accounts and eyewitness reports. In an interview on the novel and on his strategies as a novelist, Robinson with remarkable understatement refers to his novels as "a little fact-heavy" (interview with Tasha Robinson).[19] This wealth of factual information on a range of fields related to climate change – on banking and the global financial system, monetary theory, taxation systems and monetary incentive structures, inequality indices, health science and epidemiology, climate science, geo-engineering, glaciology, sustainable agriculture, approaches to wildlife preservation and countless further, economic, sociological, technological and scientific concepts – might be dismissed as a grotesquely inflated amount of info-dumping. However, this impression is dispelled precisely through the multiplication of voices and the avoidance of an authoritative climate-expert perspective so commonly chosen for such factual expositions in previous cli-fi novels. Thus, the novel has passages told from the point of view not only of innumerable, often nameless witnesses and victims of climate change as well as scientists, activists and other agents of change but also chapters with "blockchain [. . .] code" (177), "the market" (191), "a photon" (235f.), "a carbon atom" (327–329) or "history" itself (385) as speakers. In one of the most perceptive reviews of the novel, Ahne appears still to understate the case when she speaks of "a Dos-Passos-like multi-perspectivity" (12; my translation; for the multiplicity of perspectives highlighted in numerous reviews, see also Berry; Burgmann; Canavan; Poole; Probst).

In her brief discussion of the novel, Mackenthun does comment on the novel's "polyvocal concert – sometimes chorus – of impersonal voices" (11) but does not read it as central to its mechanics of climate change communication; rather, she regards the "lack" of "psychological interiority" (11) as a problem: It is only based on the assumption – stated with some

qualifications throughout her essay – that the effectiveness of cli-fi in climate change communication depends on sympathetic characters endowed with enough interiority to allow for identification that Mackenthun can then state that Robinson "does not employ the formal possibilities of literature, e.g., in dramatizing such individual conversions" (11). While this appears to her – and others – as a defect in Robinson's novel, it seems to me to be precisely its deliberate and informed response to the simplistic assumptions of the "sentimental fallacy" outlined earlier (see also Hoydis/Bartosch/Gurr 15, 17). Thus, with the refusal to put the many expository passages into the mouth of one or the other "interesting" or "likeable" character – often, indeed, of *any* recognizable, individualized character – as well as with the impersonal clipped news-report-style meeting notes, Socratic dialogue, handbook article, riddle or prose poem, and other forms employed throughout, the novel appears deliberately to *undermine* and *prevent* readerly identification.[20]

So far, discussions of the novel have tended to read it as a thesis novel and have systematically underestimated its potential as a think-piece and exploratory text. As an example, take one of the novel's most controversial issues, the role of violence in the transition to a sustainable world: It remains open what share the Ministry's secret branch has in the more radical measures – the shooting down of 60 commercial jets in one day (228), the sinking of diesel-powered container vessels (417) or the assassinations of oil magnates and other "climate criminals" (86, 254, 347, 390f.) – all of which lead to radical, ultimately more sustainable changes in mobility, transportation and economic production. Take the attack against commercial aircraft:

> Everyone alive knew that not enough was being done [. . .] and the pressure kept building. So it was not really a surprise when a day came that sixty passenger jets crashed in a matter of hours. [. . .] clouds of small drones had been directed into the flight paths of the planes involved, fouling their engines. [. . .] One message was fairly obvious: stop flying. And indeed many people stopped.
>
> *(228)*

A number of critics less attuned to reading fiction as fiction and novels as models in the sense outlined earlier – occasionally but not exclusively those reviewing it for scientific journals – have read the novel as a rather unsubtle call for action: "violence towards petro-capitalist structures by agents from the Global South is portrayed as justified, even necessary, as a form of anti-imperial struggle for survival" (Frame/Flamm n.p.). However, does the previous passage justify violence? The crashed flights predominantly

involved "private or business jets, and the commercial flights [. . .] had been mostly occupied by business travelers. But people, innocent people, flying for all kinds of reasons: all dead. About seven thousand people died that day" (228). To take the action of individual characters and groups in the novel as an expression of the author's views[21] and – apparently ascribing to the novel a callously utilitarian offsetting of lives lost against lives saved – to read the fact that violence plays a role in the transition as justifying that violence, as some critics have done (see Frame/Flamm but also Probst), appears to misunderstand how fiction works and to misread the explorative function of textual models for prescription. It also ignores the multi-perspectivity and underestimates the complexity of the novel. In one of the most perceptive short reviews on the occasion of its German translation being published, Ahne highlights this exploratory nature of the text:

> A novel beginning in a very recognizable present and ending in a desirable future: Is this possibly not so much literature as activism? And ultimately one that propagates violence? It is not that simple. Science fiction writer Robinson [. . .] is too good a storyteller to make his novel the vehicle of a message. *Ministry for the Future* is not a how-to manual but a detached probing of the dynamics that might turn a world driven by the forces of inertia into one of change.
>
> *(12; my translation)*[22]

Interestingly, as a text highly conscious of some of the pitfalls of climate change communication, the novel frequently contains explicit reflections *on* these pitfalls: Thus, it frequently comments on central aspects of the mind-behaviour gap, on the cognitive biases that allow people to ignore the threats of climate change (349), on the "tragedy of the time horizon" and on the problem that "we can't imagine the suffering of the people of the future, so nothing much gets done on their behalf" (172). It also – following Rittel and Webber's classic 1973 definition – depicts the climate crisis and questions of global equity as "wicked problems, in the technical sense of the term [as] problems that not only could not be solved, but dragged other situations down into them; they were contagious, in effect" (Robinson 482).

Moreover, in a highly self-reflexive passage, the text fairly explicitly unfolds a model theory exemplifying the dual notion of models as "models of" and "models for" as well as virtually all central implications and functions of models highlighted earlier. What is more, this reflection is to be found in a chapter conceptually central to the novel because it depicts the meeting in which the key national bankers first discuss the idea of the carbon coin so crucial to both the plot and the conceptual work of the novel.

In this chapter, the novel's protagonist, Mary Murphy, head of the Ministry for the Future, visits California for a meeting with the bankers and for a number of site visits. The passage needs to be quoted at some length to show just how many facets of model theory are elaborated on here, including issues of scale and the simplifications and abstractions needed in the reduction of reality to the model, but also the inverse process, the reintroduction of complexity in the return to reality:

> California [. . .] ran at carbon neutrality, having established strong policies early on. They were intent to continue that process [. . .] what they were doing was a model other people could learn from. [. . .] Inside [a big warehouse] the US Army Corps of Engineers had created a giant model of the California bay area and delta, a 3D map with active water flows sloshing around on it. [. . .] The Californians told her and showed her how the northern half of the state was now functioning. [. . .] All this they told Mary while looking down on the pretty model of the landscape filling the warehouse, as if from a small satellite. [. . .] "It looks great," Mary said. "I hope we can do this everywhere." "Models always look good," Esther said cheerfully. But she was proud of it – not just the model, but the state. Back in San Francisco [. . .] on the top floor of the Big Tower [the view] reminded Mary of the day before, looking down on the model of California, but this time it was real, and vast.
> *(183–187; for models and modelling, see also, e.g., 82, 96, 132f., 172, 181, 188, 523, 544)*

The passage thus even suggests the need for all models not to mistake the model for reality and, at some point, to restore complexity in the return to reality. This might be read as an acknowledgement of the often-perceived danger of mistaking the model *for* reality (for a brief account, see Gurr 2021, 15–18) and thus, the danger of ignoring the reduction of complexity necessary to any modelling. At some point, in an application of any model to reality, the complexity must be restored. In a discussion of the potential of literary texts in climate change communication, this is the crucial step in which readers need, as it were, to look up from the model and to apply insights gained from the model to their reality.

This need for readers to apply insights from the reading of texts to their reality can be understood in terms of what, conceptually following Hannes Bergthaller, one might call the "diegetic leap" in the return from the textual model back to reader's "lifeworld":

> At the end of the story, the seed is suspended in mid-air. In order to catch it, to achieve the closure which the text withholds, the reader

> must reach beyond the text and take the leap from the fictional world of the text into her own lifeworld. [. . .] Such a conversion is, I submit, the object of all texts that strive to "raise consciousness" or aim at any sort of political effect – and it bears repeating that this conversion is not something that can be traced back to "facts," but an effect of the narrative's structure.
>
> *(167)*

Thus, if a text is a plausible *model of* something, its being a persuasive *model for* something can explain how we come from textual to empirical worlds. Given the novel's sustained engagement with model theory, it is unsurprising that Robinson in interviews explicitly argues that "science fiction is a modeling exercise" (interview with Tasha Robinson).[23]

The Ministry for the Future thus not only does justice to the previous concerns but also in virtually unprecedented fashion reflects *on* these issues such that it "trains" readers to become climate-change literate (without discussing Robinson's novel, Hoydis/Bartosch/Gurr develop the notion of "climate change literacy") in a way that goes far beyond simplistic concepts of literacy as a mere familiarity with the basic scientific facts about climate change but that centrally also involves an awareness of the pitfalls of climate communication. Thus, what interests me here is emphatically *not* whether the strategies of transformation depicted in the novel are feasible or would economically work but, insisting on the conceptual distinction between the prescriptive, evaluative, predictive and explorative functions of prospective textual models, how the text works as an instrument in staging a debate. I argue that *Ministry for the Future* is an exemplary cli-fi text that in a largely unprecedented, highly reflexive way unfolds the theory that informs its own practice of climate change communication.

Another "Task Force to Unfuck the World": Stephen Markley's *The Deluge* (2023) and the Complexities of the Climate Debate

Stephen Markley's 2023 novel *The Deluge* is in many ways a remarkably similar case:[24] Here, too – in almost 900 pages and over a time of several decades (2013 to the 2040s), if with more of a U.S. focus than Robinson's *Ministry* – a novel unfolds a vast panorama of the climate crisis and the concomitant political, social and economic upheavals. Moreover, like *Ministry*, the novel combines harrowing depictions of environmental catastrophe with an ultimately somewhat hopeful outlook, if more tentatively so, with more dramatic setbacks and thus with less of a linear teleology. Again, like *Ministry*, Markley's novel explores how, in the face

of an ever-deteriorating ecological situation and a lack of decisive action, some activists turn to increasingly radical ecoterrorism – from destroying fossil fuel infrastructure to targeted killings of people held to be responsible for political and economic denialism and obstruction of more sustainable policies. Here, too, it is important to bear in mind that this should not be read as the author's (or the novel's) advocacy or justification of violence (see Markley in conversation with Roberts).

Suggesting the enormity of the challenge humanity faces – and the enormous scope of the novel – the group of experts assembled in 2037 to develop a sweeping political, economic and environmental programme to address the major challenges is referred to as the "Task Force to Unfuck the World" (722). The complexity of the challenge is illuminated by means of a wealth of characters – eco-activists, climate scientists, politicians, an (ex) drug addict, business executives, eco-terrorists and their families and social circles – whose lives and activities increasingly come to be interconnected. This impression of an extremely large canvas is enhanced by a range of perspectives, narrative strategies and modes of narration, ranging from first-person via second-person and third-person narrative, scientific accounts, political memos and briefings, entire pages of news headlines to provide context and temporal "feel" for different moments in the future, info-boxes with background info, discussion and alternative perspectives.

As part of an astonishing wealth of factual information from a range of fields – climatology, glaciology, economics, climate policymaking and politics, finance, AI research, etc. – there are dozens of references to climate modelling, many of them detailed discussions of different types of models and the limitations of modelling with significant levels of detail: Characters talk of an "integrated assessment model (IAM) that broke new ground with its accounting of biospheric inputs, population, economic activity, national and international policies, and technological options available on decadal and century timescales" (218) or "dynamic pathways planning [with] aleatory uncertainty [. . .] priced in" (728; see also 59, 62, 71, 218, 229f., 435, 562, 716–721, 727, 819, 828, 853). Here, too, modelling is discussed both in its analytical-descriptive ("models of") and its prescriptive, evaluative, predictive and explorative dimensions ("models for"). Moreover, the connections between models and narratives are explicitly discussed in unobtrusively self-reflexive ways. Thus, in a passage on financial modelling, "Peter's model and his team of analysts [. . .] had something special on their hands, making bets with forward-thinking algorithms accounting for the environment, weather, and water in groundbreaking ways," with one of the financial experts commenting: "It's math but it's also narrative. [. . .] What are the underlying stories beneath the trends?" (396). Similarly,

characters comment on the need to combine quantitative modelling with "imagination":

> "You of all people, Ash. You of all goddamn people. You look right at the models. Right at 'em! How can you turn your back on this?"
> I nodded to the assembled. "They're fantasists."
> "Sure they are! But people like you and me, we've been sorely lacking in imagination for a long time."
>
> (435)

By so consistently negotiating models and modelling as part of the story, both novels thus do not only do justice to the importance of modelling to climate science and the climate debate but they also appear to draw attention to their own function as textual climate models, thus providing a type of diegetic instruction for use.

Despite these striking similarities in scope, multiplicity of perspective, richness in scientific facts and especially in the unprecedented degree of explicit model-consciousness, there are also important differences between the two novels; Markley even calls *Ministry* "a different type almost" (Roberts): First, while Robinson's *Ministry*, as we have seen, appears to undercut identification with either of the two characters by denying readers any interiority, Markley's *Deluge* sequentially invites identification with several characters and the taking over, by turns, of their radically diverging perspectives. In conversation with Roberts, Markley has even highlighted this as being, in his view, "the job of the fiction writer":

> I think it's important to know . . . the job of the fiction writer. It's, like, none of these characters can share my point of view [. . .] that is [. . .] the path to hell. That's the path to creating a character that's just your mouthpiece, right? So [with] every character, you have to be [. . .] deeply in their perspective and see the world through them. I feel like the way the book should work is [. . .] when you're in Shane's sections, her point of view makes sense. These mealy-mouthed activists [. . .] they're not getting anything done. We have to go after pipelines, right? Then you switch over to this other set of people and they're thinking, "These people are fucking it up for us. They are creating a situation in which [. . .] we're going to get a Patriot Act for environmental activists and so forth.
>
> *(Markley in Roberts; the pause marked by . . . without parentheses is original)*

Contradictory as these positions often are, the novel tries hard, in each case, to make them appear plausible. It also repeatedly has characters

engage in sustained (and self-reflexive) discussions of the pitfalls of climate communication, talking about "contemporary fiction [as] status quo white male" and "all this literature of late capitalist exhaustion" (95) or "the messaging apparatus that can only preach to the converted" (164).

Moreover, while *Ministry*, despite being exploratory rather than narrowly thesis-driven, does appear to have more of an agenda, *Deluge*, by contrast, deploys the multiplicity of perspectives to reveal contradictions, ambivalences, ambiguities, inconsistencies and blind spots in individual and collective perspectives, assumptions and strategies. In this vein, Kate Morris, one of the activist protagonists and founder of the "Fierce Blue Fire" movement the novel mainly follows, in conversation with a fellow activist with an entirely different educational and professional background, asks her: "what's your dissent? If you had to say something the rest of us don't want to hear, what would it be?" (703). Thus, in addition to depicting conflicts with climate deniers and fossil fuel profiteers, the novel dwells on disagreements between different groups of climate activists and even repeatedly depicts acrimonious debates over questions of class, education, race and privilege as well as the familiar debates over what is ecologically necessary vs. what is politically feasible *within* the "Fierce Blue Fire" group (165, 164, 171, 178, 208, 482, 703). For example, before she is offered a job in the group,[25] Rekia Reynolds attacks Kate as the "white apologist's fantasy girl for deracialized discourse" and her vision as "gloss[ing] over the country's foundational organizing principle of white supremacy in favour of a kumbaya story about post-racial eco-camaraderie" (171). This insistent staging of conflicts, trade-offs, ambiguities and opposing perspectives, it seems to me, can even be seen as the central strategy of Markley's novel: Despite being an inherently forward-looking model *for* the climate debate (not least by covering a period until the 2040s and by conveying some moderate optimism), the novel is to the same extent an extremely elaborate model *of* the debate: *The Deluge*, in many ways, stages in all its complexity the climate debate we are currently having.

Conclusion: The Theory-Generating Cli-fi Novel

In a way informed by a complex understanding of model theory and the function of models, both *The Ministry for the Future* and *The Deluge* thus model the pitfalls of societal debates about climate change (and of the role climate fiction is often assumed to be capable of playing in these debates) by explicitly discussing *and*, in their own practice, addressing these key challenges: Both novels, it seems, attempt to tell "the whole story," to do justice to climate change with its range of scientific and technological,

political, economic and societal entanglements and implications precisely by looking at it as a complex, "wicked problem" (*sensu* Rittel/Webber); Robinson's novel, following Rittel and Webber, even explicitly refers to the concept (482; see previous section). Both novels are remarkably similar in strategy and scope as well as in modelling awareness. However, while *Ministry* – though it does occasionally zoom in on individuals and on certain aspects of the problem – largely refuses to heed what common wisdom argues climate change communication needs to do, namely, to invite identification with attractive protagonists, Markley's novel offers more means of identification (here, too, however, the protagonists are also highly ambivalent and do not lend themselves as simple role models). Both novels are highly aware of the pitfalls of climate communication – and especially of climate communication through fiction – and both are highly self-reflexive in their discussion of model theory *and* in the way they themselves function as models. Both can thus be read as "theory-generation novels," though not in the sense in which Dames and Clark use the term – as novels by members of the generation informed by "theory" (they name Teju Cole, Jennifer Egan, Ben Lerner and Jonathan Lethem) – but as novels that in highly reflexive ways unfold the theory that informs their own practice. We might thus rather speak of this type of novel as the "theory-generating novel."

In this capacity, both Robinson's *Ministry for the Future* and Markley's *The Deluge* also contribute to the debate on the potential role of fiction in climate change communication: While it is common to argue that the "cognitive capacity of distinguishing fact from fiction, as well as grasping the long-term and long-distance connections involved in the phenomenon of climate change, crucially depends on hermeneutic powers trained by literature" (Mackenthun 3), it largely remains unclear how this cognitive and attitudinal "education through literature" might work concretely. The assumption that the reading of texts will somehow automatically "do" this seems to me to underestimate the degree to which the potential role of literature is predicated on what readers bring to the text:

> When the debate dwells on the merits of individual works as political silver bullets (or, in its Mr. Hyde version, as ideological miseducation) – or on the appropriateness of fiction media as sources of ethical instruction, tout court – the assumption of reading's transparency curtails [. . .] questions [. . .] such as *how different interpretive strategies influence what readers take away from cli-fi, and what the continuing publication of cli-fi might signal about expectations readers apply to narrative interpretation*.
>
> *(Morel 67; my emphasis)*

Even with novels as explicitly savvy about the pitfalls of climate change communication as some of those discussed here, this readerly education does not happen automatically, as we have seen in the discussion of a number of reviews of Robinson's novel and of the ending of *Odds Against Tomorrow*. Such characteristics of a novel are not self-evident: To "see" them and productively to engage with them is an ability that requires what Julia Hoydis, Roman Bartosch and I propose to call "climate change literacy." This type of literacy, beyond the narrow sense of "knowing the facts about climate change," also involves an understanding of the socio-psychological issues central to the climate change debate and a self-reflexive understanding of cognitive and attitudinal limitations impeding effective individual and collective responses to the climate crisis. As I have tried to show, what is crucial here is the engagement with cli-fi novels *as literary texts* rather than as Trojan horses for climate facts – an engagement that does justice to narrative perspectives, intertextuality, questions of identification and the manipulation of sympathy, as well as to key challenges in climate communication.

However, I here conclude that – arguably as a result of insights into the limitations of using climate fiction in climate change communication that cli-fi research has highlighted – "phase three cli-fi" (since about 2018) has come to be increasingly self-conscious about these pitfalls. Similarly, the high degree of explicit model-consciousness and the turn to more explicit future orientation in the modelling of climate futures in some of the most widely debated cli-fi novels of this phase make the notion of texts as models central to an understanding of recent cli-fi.

Notes

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2 There are, to be sure, a number of forerunners, such as J.G. Ballard's *Drowned World* (1962), Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971), Max Frisch's *Man in the Holocene* (1979) or George Turner's *The Sea and Summer* (1987) – for a brief account of "proto-cli-fi," see several entries in Goodbody/Johns-Putra.

3 This is also apparent, for instance, in the widely read short story anthology *I'm with the Bears: Stories from a Damaged Planet* (Martin 2011).

4 The following brief account of model theory reuses material from Gurr 2021.

5 The original reads: "Einem Modell liegt immer etwas zugrunde, *wovon* es ein Modell ist, d.h. von dem ausgehend oder auf das Bezug nehmend es hergestellt oder gewählt wurde, seine *Matrix*. Zweck der Herstellung oder Wahl eines Modells ist sein Gebrauch. [. . .] Zu den typischen Gebrauchsweisen von Modellen gehört ihr Gebrauch als *Mittel der Gestaltung*. Für die Gestaltung sind Modelle Vorformen, Vorbilder oder Spezifikationen. [. . .] Der Begriff des Modells lässt sich daher nur dann überzeugend erklären, wenn man berücksichtigt, dass ein Modell immer zugleich ein *Modell von etwas* und ein *Modell für etwas* ist." See also Mahr 2008; see also Geertz 93 and Yanow, esp. 227.

6 To be sure, Mahr clearly states that models "can be used for very different purposes: models can be descriptive for us, like Bohr's model of the atom, prescriptive, like [an ISO standard], conceptual, like the architecture of a software system [and several further purposes]" (2015, 332).

7 There has recently been an increased interest in adapting a general theory of models (with frequent references to Stachowiak and especially to Mahr) to literary studies and in disciplinary literary and cultural studies approaches to the theory of models (see several contributions in Balke et al. as well as in Dirks/Knobloch; Wendler). Pioneering work has been done, for instance, in two research training groups in Münster and Jena. These are the Münster RTG 1886 "Literarische Form: Geschichte und Kultur ästhetischer Modellbildung" (see, for instance, Erdbeer) as well as the Jena RTG 2041 "Modell Romantik" (see, for instance, Matuschek/Kerschbaumer). For a recent application in the field of literary urban studies and with a view to discourses of sustainability, see Gurr 2021.

8 The German original reads: "Simulationsräume für ein alternatives Probehandeln mit herabgesetztem Risiko."

9 For Mahr's short account of different functions of models generally – he mentions, e.g., "descriptive," "prescriptive," "conceptual," "exemplary," "experimental," "prognostic," "metaphorical," "prophesizing," "hypothetical" and "designing or blueprinting" functions – see Mahr 2015, 332. These seem to me to be on different conceptual levels and also overlap considerably.

10 Similarly, Dillon and Craig have recently argued that "[n]arrative models are not a replacement for scientific models, but can complement those methods. [. . .] Although they lack scientific precision, they are particularly useful in representing complexity and in modelling that which cannot (yet) be modelled scientifically" (97).

11 For a discussion "of how formal strategies may help audiences negotiate the uncertainty of the climate crisis," see Caracciolo 2022, 9, who also uses the terminology of modelling. In his book, however, "emphasis shifts [. . .] from how narrative models the complexity of the ecological crisis per se to how it may model readers' existential and psychological stance on this crisis" (9f.).

12 According to a survey by Schneider-Mayerson (2018), these are among the most widely read and most frequently discussed cli-fi novels. For a discussion, see also Hoydis/Bartosch/Gurr.

13 For questions of form in ecocriticism, see Gurr 2010; for questions of perspective in the staging of debates, see also my discussion in Chapter 2.

14 For a perceptive discussion of Robinson's influential earlier *Science in the Capital* trilogy and its "Utopian Vision," see Johns-Putra.

15 In a related vein, the collection *The 2051 Munich Climate Conference: Future Visions of Climate Change* follows the logic of looking back at the early 2020s from the vantage point of an imagined 2051 (see Heisel et al.).

16 A further variety of the more optimistic type is to be found in Nnedi Okorafor's 2021 *Noor*, broadly to be classified as "Africanfuturist" (as coined by Okorafor herself). To be sure, this also goes for other genres: Take, for instance, the 2020 anthology of short climate plays suggestively entitled *Lighting the Way: An Anthology of Short Plays about the Climate Crisis* (see Bilodeau/Peterson), though by far not all of these are optimistic or forward-looking.
17 For a discussion of how "novelistic form" can do justice to global complexities and entanglements, see Caracciolo 2023, who also discusses *Gun Island* in this context. Caracciolo's article only appeared in the phase of final revisions for this chapter.
18 Apart from numerous reviews partly referenced in my discussion, there is as yet little to no scholarly engagement with the novel. A brief discussion is to be found in Mackenthun.
19 Robinson here states: "to make a good novel, and yet also have the story set in the [future], which is a bit of a crazy thing, I had to overcompensate and try to make them even more realistic than your ordinary realist novel. So then they become a little fact-heavy. [. . .] So to be a little bizarre and obdurate, so it's actually a bit of work, and even sometimes irritating? Well, that's part of the experience of reading one of my novels, and afterward, you remember it better. [. . .] I have fast-paced sections in my book all the time. But the ultimate effect is that my books are these big monsters." The interview is illuminating because Robinson also talks about role models, influences, functions of utopian fiction, developments in science fiction, etc.
20 Moreover, the novel's refusal to provide sufficient psychological interiority ever to allow readers fully to identify with any of its characters undercuts simplistic assumptions about the role of sympathy and identification in climate change communication through fiction (see Hoydis/Gurr/Bartosch 17–19). McEwan's *Solar* (2010) comes to mind as a novel that in similarly self-reflexive ways goes beyond simplistic assumptions about the role of identification and sympathy (see Hoydis 537–554; Hoydis/Gurr/Bartosch 36f.).
21 In an interview with Brady, it is clear that Robinson finds violence against individual oil executives problematic and does not advocate it but believes it may happen (n.p.). He also makes it very clear he does not condone many of the opinions voiced by characters in the novel.
22 The original reads: "Ein Roman, der in einer sehr wiedererkennbaren Gegenwart beginnt und in einer wünschenswerten Zukunft endet: Ist das vielleicht weniger Literatur als Aktivismus? Und am Ende einer, der Gewalt propagiert? So einfach ist es nicht. Der Science-Fiction-Autor Robinson [. . .] ist ein zu guter Erzähler, um seinen Roman zum Vehikel einer Botschaft zu machen. *Ein Ministerium für die Zukunft* ist keine Handlungsanweisung, sondern ein kühles Ausloten der Dynamiken, die aus einer Welt der Beharrungskräfte eine der Veränderung machen könnten."
23 In the same interview, Robinson also formulates his approach as follows: "I consider my novels, amongst many other things, to be my political activism. I'm interested in portraying futures where there are more cooperative, altruistic, post-capitalist systems that are working well. I try to model them on things already going on in this world that seem to be better to me than the dominant global neoliberal order. [. . .] I don't think utopian fiction will ever go away. It's like a necessary blueprint for thinking our way forward" (n.p.).
24 Even the financial strategies developed to incentivise environmentally friendly behaviour are remarkably similar: "carbon quantitative easing" is prominently referred to both in *Ministry* (172, 188, 344, 365) and in *Deluge* (820).

25 In the vein of the earlier reflections on the way both novels discuss strategies of using capitalist incentivization of climate-friendly behaviour, Kate's move of hiring her harshest critic might be read as a nod to the capitalist logic of incorporating criticism, thus rendering it powerless or even commodifying it, but it can also plausibly be read as part of an inclusive activist strategy aiming at the broadest possible alliances.

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6

UNDERSTANDING CONFLICTS THROUGH CONFLICT NARRATIVES

Narrative Path Dependencies and the Chances for Compromise

> [Conflicts] react to their external definition and adapt [. . .] to the formatting template. The conflict models the narration and the narration models the conflict. For this reason narrative theory, understood in our present sense, is a *political* discipline.
>
> (Koschorke 2018, 197, emphasis original)

Introduction

Given the centrality of "compromise" as a cultural technique, there is remarkably little systematic analysis of its forms and functions, its historical and cultural specificities and variations or the conditions for successful or failed negotiations towards a compromise (see later section). I here propose to explore whether an analysis of the role of narratives in conflicts might not go some way towards explaining successes and failures in attempts at their regulation through compromise. In this final chapter, I thus want to take the discussion of how literary studies can contribute to understanding public debates and societal conflicts to another systematic level: Rather than asking how the reading of individual texts can illuminate a specific debate, I ask how, by analysing non-literary conflict narratives, we can help understand conflict dynamics generally. In doing so, I build on five, to date, largely distinct traditions of research: 1) research on compromise as a cultural technique central to the functioning of pluralist societies; 2) research on path dependencies and especially more recent research on what has variously been called "cultural" or "discursive lock-in" or "narrative path dependency"; 3) mediation research and research in peace and

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conflict studies on the impact of conflict narratives on perceptions of and behaviour in a conflict; 4) research on the cognitive functions of narratives, plot patterns, cognitive models and scripts; and 5) the relatively small body of narratological research on conflict narratives. These diverse research traditions, fruitful as they individually are, have hardly been synthesized, and the creation of *de facto* path dependencies enabling or precluding compromise through generic choices, plot patterns and narrative schemata in conflict narratives has hardly been studied.[1] The present chapter thus does not regard "narratives" and "path dependencies" as alternative ways of accounting for political developments (see Howlett/Rayner) but seeks to explain how solidified narratives may *create* path dependencies in the first place. It should be noted that, following usage in planning theory, economics and STS research, the term "path dependency" is here not used in a strictly deterministic sense but as an established short-hand for what might more precisely be called "corridors of possibility" or "guide rails, which make certain conflict outcomes more or less likely."

To be sure, international conflicts, civil wars, acrimonious societal conflicts over the issues discussed in this book, inter-ethnic conflicts, conflicts in labour relations, conflicts within teams at work or intra-family conflicts (and any other type of conflict in which a compromise may or may not be achieved), each may have different dynamics and in empirical research would have to be studied separately; for the more conceptual purposes of this chapter, however, narrative accounts can be considered central to each of them and so can the question how different narratives *about* the conflict may make compromise a more or less likely outcome *in* the conflict. Also, for the purposes of this chapter, "compromise" and "reconciliation," though clearly not synonymous, are assumed to be functionally similar: Both require concessions in order to pacify or at least regulate a conflict, and both can be enabled, supported, prevented or made less (or more) likely by narratives.

In sum, this chapter proposes systematically to study the ideological implications and effects of specific narrative patterns and the inclusions, exclusions and dénouements they suggest or even predetermine and thus to take seriously the notion of *narrative* path dependencies. This, it is argued here, can be an important contribution to the urgent call for further research Bar-Tal et al., made in their ground-breaking 2014 article "Sociopsychological Analysis of Conflict-supporting Narratives: A General Framework":

> [F]uture research should focus on the content, functions, and construction of conflict-supportive narratives as well as on struggles over their dominance, internally and externally. In addition, research should address questions that can illuminate pathways and conditions for

enabling construction of new, peace-supportive narratives, which can serve as foundations for cultures of peace.

(672)[2]

Building Blocks: Compromise, Path Dependencies, Conflict Narratives

Compromise

For the purposes of this chapter, a compromise is understood as an agreement between two or more parties in which, usually in the process of negotiations, all parties make (not necessarily equally far-reaching) concessions (for a discussion of different definitions, see Willems 248–254 and throughout). Apart from the commonly very different negotiation processes involved, a compromise can occur at very different levels and in very different situations: Between individuals in the family or at the workplace, between groups in a community, in labour conflicts, between parties in a civil war, between nation states or between supra-national coalitions. The ability to seek and find "compromise" appears central to the functioning of any social system, from the nuclear family level to supra-national organizations: While Edmund Burke rather soberly argued that "[a]ll government, indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue, and every prudent act, is founded on compromise and barter" (72), Georg Simmel even hailed compromise as "one of the greatest human inventions" (329; my translation).[3] In this vein, the last few years have seen a veritable wave of popular, frequently essayistic pleas upholding the importance of compromise at a time when the willingness and ability to seek it is frequently diagnosed as waning (Menasse, Weber, M'Barek).[4]

As for existing research, a number of studies in political philosophy and political science discuss forms of compromise generally (Margalit; Zanetti) or in specific political systems such as the U.S. (Gutman/Thompson; for a provocative essayistic discussion, see Smith) or Sweden (Rustow). Other studies examine it as essential to any peacemaking (Zacharias 15 and throughout) or discuss the history and cultural variations of compromise. In this vein, Greiffenhagen, Voigts or Zanetti, for instance, provide helpful accounts of debates on compromise, not least in German political thought (W. Benjamin; H. Kelsen; Th. Wilhelm; for the international traditions, see Willems 247–268). Here, the notion of compromise itself and its function in political processes is shown to have been subject to competing assessments and narratives; one view regards democracy as inherently based on the ability to compromise, while another understands compromise as inherently tainted (for a short account of both views, see Voigts). Existing

research has also, for instance, yielded different typologies to classify compromises: While Margalit distinguishes between "sound" and "rotten" compromises (see 39–67), Rustow proposes a distinction between "inclusive" (if two parties have different demands, fulfil both), "exclusive" (agree on the – possibly minimal – overlap of two competing proposals) or "split the difference" (meet halfway) compromises (231; Rustow here also insightfully discusses other classifications and terminologies). In a more essayistic vein, Smith has recently distinguished between "compromise as a principle or a general value" and "*a* compromise, something specific to a moment in time" (9; she relates this to the distinction between "compromise as a means and compromise as an end"). Compromise, it has also become clear in this type of research, although "one of the oldest human cultural inventions," is not a culturally invariant problem-solving technique (Greiffenhagen 10) but is dependent on culturally specific valuations, traditions of negotiation and, surely, also specific narrative patterns.

Another type of publication – frequently rather praxis-oriented – might be described as "negotiation manuals." Works of this type frequently combine (occasionally simplistic) psychology and fairly basic game theory to make practical recommendations for successful negotiations; Fisher and Ury's tellingly titled *Getting to Yes: Negotiating an Agreement Without Giving In* is a bestselling case in point. A central issue here is frequently the evaluation of a compromise against the "best alternative to a negotiated agreement" ("BATNA"; see Fisher/Ury 101–107; for the notion of testing the value of a compromise against available alternatives to compromise, see also Gutman/Thompson 208; Willems 250–251).

There is even less research, however, on the role of narratives in enabling or precluding compromise. There are, it is true, fascinating studies in the field of peace and conflict research on the influence of conflict narratives on actors' attitudes to and behaviour in key conflicts (Israeli-Palestinian, Turkish-Kurdish, Northern Ireland, former Yugoslavia), including their commitment to the conflict or to reconciliation efforts. These studies, however, though often empirically insightful, almost exclusively come from peace studies and social psychology and show little interest in narrative forms and patterns and in *how* conflict narratives precisely function and *how* they predispose actors towards conflict or towards reconciliation (see later section).

Path Dependencies[5]

Most research on path dependencies has focused on technology management and technological standards in markets with a need for a systemic fit of different components, in which decisions for one or the other system creates technological lock-ins. The most widely debated case study here is

that of the QWERTY keyboard: Originally the result of technical limitations in mechanical typewriters that no longer apply to modern keyboards, where other arrangements of keys would be ergonomically superior and more efficient, QWERTY has remained the standard, not least because of the time-consuming need for literally billions of users to retrain for a different typing system (for a classic account, see David 1985). Other notorious examples include the battle over VHS vs. Betamax as the standard system for videorecorders in the 1970s and 1980s or the issue of rail track gauges as arguably the clearest case of path dependency and technological lock-in: Although wider gauges would be technically superior, it is easy to see that the incompatibility of new tracks and trains with the already installed rail system makes a switch to wider gauges virtually impossible. Path dependencies are thus defined as developments in which a situation or decision to a large extent predetermines the future development of a system so that a decision at one point in time might severely limit the range of options for future decision-makers. Conceptually, such developments are frequently described in terms of critical junctures or punctuated equilibria: According to this logic, long stretches of comparative stability are interrupted by shorter periods of drastic change in which, based on the need for quite fundamental decisions about a future course to be taken, systems are set on pathways that frequently create forms of lock-in, for instance, because of large investments in certain infrastructures. Moreover, positive feedback loops and self-reinforcing dynamics enforce continuity and make change less likely (for helpful discussions of path dependencies, see David 1985, 2007; Sorensen; Capoccia/Kelemen; Hein/Schubert).

It has recently become clear, however, that infrastructural or technological lock-in, economic logic (increasing returns as reinforcing lock-in), institutional inertia or behavioural explanations (for a typology, see Seto et al.) need to be complemented by what has variously been called "discursive" or "cultural" lock-in (as in "the U.S. has been and remains a car culture after all") and by the notion of narrative path dependencies.[6] In this vein, Buschmann and Oels have convincingly argued that "discursive lock-in and discursive turning points are useful analytical tools" in explaining political change (1). Viewed from the perspective of literary studies, this interest in narratives in the explanation of policy changes is part of a wider "narrative turn" with a surge of interest in "narratives" – often understood very loosely – in a wide variety of disciplines.[7]

Conflict Narratives

The importance of narratives to conflicts and peace processes as well as the impact of different conflict narratives on people's understanding *of* a

conflict and positioning *in* and commitment *to* a conflict, including their dedication to or resistance against reconciliation efforts, has been widely acknowledged and researched from a variety of perspectives (peace and conflict research, social psychology, anthropology) and for various long-standing conflicts, though almost exclusively for violent conflicts (Northern Ireland, the Turkish/Kurdish conflicts, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Rwanda or the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014) rather than for the kind of debate and conflict otherwise discussed in this book.[8] In this vein, based on an empirical study of responses to different narratives on territorial policies in Israel, Zellman argues that narratives can "encourage conciliatory policy attitudes" (492), just as they can "stifl[e] conflict resolution," not least by "discursively limiting bargaining flexibility" (492). Thus, in his study, "resistance to compromise was found to vary significantly by narrative treatment" (493).

In an article on the role of narratives in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the 1993 Oslo Accords, Khoury in virtually ideal-typical fashion makes the connection explicit when he comments on two possible Palestinian narratives:

> The first is a history of Palestine "with its complete geography" that places the *Nakba* of 1948 at the heart of the Palestinian experience and depicts Israel as settler-colonial state. The second is a "partitioned narrative" of Palestine that depicts Israel as "an ordinary neighbour," de-emphasizes the *Nakba* of 1948, accentuates the war of 1967, and highlights the peace agreements it signed in 1993. The first narrative calls for revenge; the second ends with compromise and a Palestinian state.
>
> *(472)*

The field of conflict mediation research and practice, too, has long recognized the importance of narrative (see especially Cobb; Cobb et al.; Federman; Hardy; Winslade/Monk; Zellman). In this vein, Federman seeks to "make [. . .] the case for the power of narrative approaches to conflict analysis and conflict management at all levels" (156). She provides an overview of several approaches to the analysis of conflict narratives and of approaches to narrative interventions. Especially such approaches from the field of mediation research and mediation practice, however, frequently share a somewhat simplistic understanding of narratives and an overly optimistic belief that simply telling a different story will change reality. In a related vein – though from a different field – Hansen's 2020 account of narrative change management has an impressive case study but similarly draws sweeping, somewhat simplistic and overly optimistic conclusions. The somewhat clamouring title alone – *Narrative Change: How Changing*

the Story Can Transform Society, Business, and Ourselves – might give us pause. Sarah Cobb's longstanding and ground-breaking work in the area of narrative conflict analysis *and* narrative intervention in conflicts from the point of view of conflict mediation research and practice is synthesized in her 2013 monograph, *Speaking of Violence: The Politics and Poetics of Narrative in Conflict Resolution*. She develops a conception of the role of narratives in conflict with concerns similar to my own in this chapter and argues, for instance:

> [e]scalatory narrative syntaxes have a path dependency of their own, and once they are in motion, they gain strength. And, indeed, the concept of narrative syntax is only useful insofar as it supports the analysis of conflict dynamics and provides a lens to make sense of escalation and transformation.
>
> *(56; see also 235; for "[e]scalation as a narrative process," see 78–88)*

One problem here and in much conflict mediation research and practice seems to me that there is a tendency to see narratives as the panacea to conflict "resolution" (see the titles both of Cobb's monograph and of the entire journal dedicated to "conflict resolution"). In the type of conflict I am concerned with in this book, *resolution* frequently is not a realistic option; what we can hope for, at best, is conflict *regulation* – the cooling down of a conflict, its containment, its being waged in "civilized" ways compatible with the functioning of a pluralist society.

There is thus both a wealth of conceptual thought on the role of conflict-supporting narratives on the one hand and empirical analysis based on surveys in specific conflicts, but there is little actual narratological theory or analysis that might explain these effects, a research need Bar-Tal et al. have clearly formulated (see 672; see my Introduction to this chapter).

On the other hand, more specifically narratological research on conflict narratives has mostly been conceptual, operating at a high level of abstraction, largely with little to no analytical engagement with individual conflicts and their regulation (see Koschorke 2012, 2018; Gius). In this vein, Gius seeks to identify general narratological markers for conflict narratives but deliberately disregards any "content related aspects concerning the conflict – such as the issue of the conflict, the assessment of the overall situation by the narrator, etc." (5), thus severely limiting the usefulness of her analysis both conceptually and for the understanding of specific conflicts.

One of the few narratological and metaphorological engagements with an actual conflict and an excellent discussion of "the performative power of storytelling, its capacity to change events, to create conflicts, and project possible futures" (208) is Ansgar and Vera Nünning's essay on George W. Bush's rhetoric in the build-up to the war in Iraq. Their analysis of Bush's "narrative conflict- and worldmaking" (215) ends by suggesting "that narratives might also be a way of solving conflicts and problems" (225) but makes no reference to the tradition of peace and conflict research on the role of narrative in conflict or to research on narrative mediation (see previous section).[9]

In a 2012 article on the narration of civil wars and a closely related chapter of his 2018 *Facts and Fiction: Elements of a General Theory of Narrative*, Koschorke provides a largely conceptual but highly illuminating narratological discussion of "narratives of conflict" (189–199), on which I propose to draw for a number of key analytical concepts. A central notion here is that conflicts are virtually never confined to a "quantifiable conflict-value" but almost invariably come with some kind of "semantic surplus," which frequently takes the form of "a discourse of origin and justification reflecting the opposing claims" (189f.). It is not least this "semantic surplus" that explains the intractability of many conflicts. Narrative accounts, Koschorke argues, are crucial to antagonists' understanding and presentation of their roles in any conflict, by providing (inherently conflicting) answers to the central questions of "Who wronged whom at the start of the conflict?" or "Who am I and what are my demands for a regulation of the conflict?" (see also my discussion of Woloch and the distribution of "narrative attention" later).

As a final conceptual building block in advancing the notion of narrative path dependencies, I draw on Koschorke's notion that "conflict narratives" can function as "formatting templates" (2018, 197): In many conflicts, actors appropriate external narratives *on* the conflict (even those in academic diagnoses) as models for their behaviour *in* the conflict. As an example, Koschorke points to Amartya Sen's discussion of how Hindu nationalists in India have occasionally modelled their strategies on Huntington's controversial thesis of a "Clash of Civilizations" (Sen 48). A "diagnosis" can thus become "a screenplay" (Koschorke 197): "The conflict models the narration and the narration models the conflict" (197).[10] Similarly, Baker and Edelstein in the Introduction to their suggestively titled collection *Scripting Revolution: A Historical Approach to the Comparative Study of Revolutions* also highlight the ways in which actors at critical historical junctures model their behaviour on "scripts" established in comparable previous situations. If reality thus in certain situations adapts to the narrative, this suggests that specific patterns of emplotment in conflict

narratives and the cognitive models they convey strongly imply certain conflict outcomes while precluding others.

How Conflict Narratives Negotiate Oppositions and Shape Conflict Behaviour

Narrative Sense-Making in Conflicts: A Cognitive Approach to Figures of Thought and their Emplotment[11]

It has long been clear that narrative proceeds from binary oppositions (see Greimas; Lotman; Todorov). The structuralist narratologists have also revealed the grammar of narrative, the operations by means of which the deep structure of a binary opposition is translated into the surface structure of a text. Narrative, it is clear, is based on the acting out, on the "*mise en branle*" (Greimas 164), of underlying dichotomies. In that sense, narrative is always already *as narrative* a way of dealing with binary oppositions; narrative is uniquely suited for – in fact, centrally hinges on – the negotiation of oppositions. In seeking to understand how conflict narratives shape attitudes to a specific conflict – and thus have an impact on the chances of reaching a compromise – we need to understand the ways in which narratives negotiate oppositions and dichotomies.

What I aim to look at specifically is the way in which narrative can be seen to use a very limited repertoire of figures of thought, of firmly established cognitive patterns and schemata available to deal with these binaries. This chapter does not seek fully to unfold or historicize this inventory but merely to sketch a typology.[12] One can first of all distinguish between those figures of thought which analytically leave the opposition unmediated and unresolved and those which attempt a synthesis or harmonization.

- The non-mediating assumption of an "**either-or**," black-or-white distinction between the opposites with no shades of grey in between (at least in Western thinking, one of the two poles is usually privileged over the other);
- Also, without shades of grey, but on the side of the synthesizing or mediating figures, the notion of a "**both-and**" position (take the understanding of the incarnated Christ as fully human *and* fully God or the notion of complementarity in modern physics with light as both wave and particle);
- The notion of a **continuum between the two**, in other words, to assume shades of grey in between (as in Aristotle's definition of courage as lying on the continuum between the two poles of being a coward and being reckless but closer to the extreme of recklessness) (Aristotle 1934, 1115a);

- The figure one might term "**monistic inclusion**": A figure of thought which collapses opposite aspects into one, in which one pole is defined so broadly as to actually include the other and to defuse it as an opposite (take the familiar mechanism of the commodification of subversion, i.e., the absorption of the counterculture into the mainstream as frequently discussed in cultural studies; see Chapter 3);
- The notion of a ***coincidentia oppositorum***, according to which the extremes meet and become identical, a notion especially present in both Western and Eastern mystical traditions (as in the assumption found with Plotinus or Cusanus that the world is necessarily "made up of contraries" and that all oppositions are reconciled in God; but this conception can also be found in the controversial "horseshoe theory" of political extremism, according to which the extreme left and the extreme right are fairly close to each other in some respects);
- "***Aufhebung***" in the sense of Hegel's dialectic, with the extremes being "*aufgehoben*" by being reconciled on a higher level (the usual English translation, "sublation," is unsatisfactory in that it fails to capture the triple sense auf "*aufgehoben*" as "negated," "preserved" and "raised to a higher level"); and
- Even the fundamental **poststructuralist operation of deconstructing binary oppositions** by arguing that each term of the opposition (e.g., *signifiant/signifié*, freedom/necessity, nature/culture, etc.) is logically dependent upon its opposite, i.e., dependent on the very ideas and concepts that the term was meant to oppose or exclude, can arguably be seen as a figure of thought; in fundamental opposition to any harmonizing pattern, emphasis with this figure is on maintaining difference, rather than – as Derrida criticized Hegel for – seeking to obliterate it.

Each of these cognitive patterns clearly suggests different views of the underlying dichotomy. In order better to understand the ideological implications of narratives, research on emplotment in the wake especially of Hayden White's classic discussion in *Metahistory* becomes central (see esp. 1–42; the other landmark account of emplotment is Ricœur's; for a more recent account, see Ryan 90–109). In producing narrative accounts of past developments – and this surely also applies for narrative representations of anticipated future developments – White argues there is only a limited set of basic plots available. For historical accounts, White only speaks of four such basic plots: Comedy, tragedy, romance and satire. The choice of a plot structure, moreover, also implies the choice of a figure of speech and thought – White analogizes them with the established tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony – and carries an implicit ideology, a way of seeing the world. Drawing on Frye, Pepper and Mannheim, White

thus comes up with an extremely complex and sometimes quite schematic, though highly suggestive account of correspondences or "elective affinities" between these plot patterns, key figures of thought and their ideological implications (White 29 et passim). If not pursued in an overly schematic way, such an analysis can be very illuminating.[13] Thus, Stone (2002) has helpfully applied White's notion of the limited arsenal of plot patterns to policy analysis (138 et passim).

It is clear that there cannot be a mechanistic mapping of form to function, but White's notion of a correspondence of certain figures of thought with certain patterns of emplotment and certain ideological preconceptions, if not taken too schematically, is very compelling. Where White has demonstrated that there are very few basic patterns available to emplot a historical account, I build on this conception to maintain that different options in emplotting the negotiation of the binary opposites at the heart of all narrative[14] are also quite limited indeed: In conflicts, too, there are only a limited number of basic plots available (see also Cobb 57). These can be correlated with certain cultural models and cognitive schemas and can, therefore, be studied with a view to their cultural functions. These plot patterns frequently function in profoundly "literary" ways, calling up epic, comic or tragic narrative conventions with their ideological implications. They can fruitfully be conceptualized as "scripts," which each suggest specific views of the conflict, specific conflict behaviours, as well as different outcomes or *dénouements* of the conflict (see also Koschorke's notion of narratives as "formatting templates" for conflict behaviour, 197).[15] A future detailed comparative analysis of conflict narratives across cultures will have to address the question to what extent the plot patterns underlying such narratives are culturally specific and to what extent they are universal (research on universality vs. cultural specificity of metaphors and cognitive models can point the way here; see Kövecses's study briefly discussed later).

What becomes crucial to me here is the research carried out in cognitive linguistics and cognitive literary studies in recent decades.[16] This research, which has become far more rigorously cognitive and empirical in the last 20 years or so, has revealed the close connection between figures of speech, figures of thought, human experience and the way in which cognitive patterns shape our understanding of the world.

A related field of research at the intersection of cognitive linguistics and cognitive anthropology is concerned with cognitive or cultural models. These are established concepts of perception and cognition which also shape thought and behaviour. Quinn and Holland in a classic account define cultural models as "presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared [. . .] by the members of a society and that

play an enormous role in their understanding of that world and their behaviour in it" (Quinn/Holland 4; see also Kronenfeld).

It is one of the central insights of this branch of research that these forms of conceptualizing the world are made up of a very limited number of small and comparatively simple building blocks. The "prototypical scenarios" encoded in these simplified models of reality and the applicability of these models to a wide range of situations can help to account for how we acquire knowledge about the world, how we are able appropriately to act in it and how we can share this knowledge by means of communication (see Quinn/Holland 35).

As might be expected – and as Zoltan Kövecses has shown in his excellent 2005 study *Metaphor in Culture* – a number of these metaphorical ways of conceptualizing the world are specific to certain cultures, while others appear to be universal. This may be indicative of just *how* fundamental these models are. Although strictly speaking, Kövecses is only concerned with metaphorical concepts, these are frequently elaborate and far-reaching enough to qualify as cultural models in the sense I have just outlined.

What is also helpful here is the concept of "scripts" as developed at the intersection of cognitive science, artificial intelligence, social psychology and other fields (for a synthesis, see Buchenau/Gurr). It is becoming increasingly clear that scripting, defined as a combination of procedural knowledge, narrative self-description and blueprint or behavioural guideline, is a far-reaching concept and that, in a lot of situations, rather than making conscious choices, humans individually and collectively run such automated scripts (not least in order to minimize cognitive effort). Cultural understanding as well as the organization of perceptions and actions appear to function not least by means of a limited inventory of small more or less clearly defined schemes and scripts.

What all this ultimately suggests is that patterns of conceptualizing the world, including the figures of thought in dealing with dichotomies I have been discussing, are deeply rooted and inescapably shape thinking and action. Actors in a conflict, culturally embedded as they are, cannot help sharing the limited number of figures of thought available in negotiating the opposition central to the conflict. In dealing with dichotomies, oppositions and antagonisms, there is only a strikingly limited inventory of figures of thought and plot structures available, which each suggest a certain view of this opposition and which "script" conflict behaviour and conflict outcomes.

In synthesizing these approaches, I suggest that the specific form in which a given conflict narrative encodes a central opposition, that the figure of thought it emplots in negotiating this opposition – as extreme cases,

take an "either-or" or a "both-and" figure – will have an impact on the perception of the conflict this narrative imparts to participants in the conflict, making compromise and reconciliation more or less likely.

Towards a Narratological Account of Path Dependencies in Conflict Narratives

If we understand "politics as a competition of narratives" (Gadinger et al. 9) – and the wealth of empirical research on the profound impact of narratives on political processes (see previous section) makes this a highly plausible assumption – then surely, a more systematic narratological engagement with conflict narratives seems called for. The present chapter aims to provide a few further building blocks.

A key question in understanding narrative path dependencies is to ask who is cast as the "protagonist" of any given narrative. Given the importance of narrative perspective and the centrality of a protagonist to the perception of a story that Alex Woloch has rightly drawn attention to,[17] it matters who, as "protagonist," receives the bulk of the "limited, and unevenly distributed amount of narrative attention" (177; see also 2, 14 *et passim*). Conversely, who – given the overwhelming identification with the protagonist – is relegated to the periphery of textual (and readerly) attention? Who are addressees of conflict narratives *not* invited to identify with? As for emplotment and narrative authority, Koschorke summarizes his discussion of conflict narratives as follows:

> [T]he technique of emplotment allows seemingly harmonious connections between otherwise disconnected and contradictory, ambiguous events; it places the national history in a coherent temporal sequence without deviations and caesurae; it awakens the past to new life and furnishes it, in counteraction to prevailing circumstances, with the patina of an illustrious prehistory, so that the events as a whole are placed in a sphere "outside the co-ordinates of historical time." The fact, [ethnologist Ivan] Čolović observes, that according to generic conventions the narrator is omniscient makes it possible to lay a claim to truth on authority ground alone, without having to supply arguments or proof.
>
> *(2018, 199; for a case study in the narrative harmonization of conflicting notions, see, for instance, Gurr 2017)*

Conceptually, one of the most intricate *and* possibly most consequential distinctions is that between a retrospective and a prospective understanding of (narrative) path dependence. By way of introduction to this issue, it may be worth pointing out that the linearity of most narratives frequently

glosses over contingencies, makes developments seem inevitable and – not least as a result of the past tense customarily employed in narration – makes them appear as describing events that have happened already and that are thus no longer subject to intervention. Narratives about ongoing conflicts, in contrast to most stories (which, even grammatically, are marked as "past"), are inherently open-ended and, instead of endings, contain goals and aspirations (see Khoury 467). This inherent openness makes it conceptually easier to focus on questions of individual or collective agency as opposed to having to regard developmental processes as unfolding deterministically. This is an issue frequently encountered in reconstructive studies on historical conflicts employing "analytic narratives" as game theory–inspired narrative reconstructions of actors' choices and decisions at critical junctures (for analytic narratives, see Bates et al.). As a representative case, we might take Zagare's reading of key actors' choices in the 1936 crisis over the remilitarization of the Rhineland – admittedly a fairly straightforward case for which the reduction of real-world complexity to fit a game theory model seems permissible. In the analysis of more intractable conflicts, however, this reduction will precisely be the problem (see also Capoccia/Kelemen 358). Moreover, a concern in work thus combining game theory and reconstructive narratives has primarily been with the way in which narrative accounts *retrospectively* make developments appear path dependent. Thus, Paul A. David as one of the scholars most consistently engaged in path dependence research has argued that "the tragic form of narrative" which makes a course of action seem "foreordained" clashes with "the stories that economic historians typically wish to tell" (2007, 94). In a related vein, Garud et al. have engaged with the way in which narrative accounts of (allegedly) path-dependent developments foreground the agency (or lack thereof) of key players in these developments.

In contrast to analytic narratives as a *retrospective* form of narrative analysis with its inherent tendency to make developments seem path dependent, the *prospective* use of narratives in developing scenarios and in modelling decisions in present-day and future conflict situations inherently foregrounds open-endedness and agency (although from a future perspective, developments may again appear to have been path dependent). As a fascinating case in point, take Herman Kahn's highly insightful if controversial (and still or again shockingly topical) combination of game theory and narrative scenario building in the exploration of U.S. Cold War nuclear defence strategy in his 1965 *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*.[18] Here, without quite using the term "path dependence" itself, Kahn explores the question to what extent conflict escalation follows "inexorable paths" (37) and to what extent actors can be said to have agency in such developments (for an insightful discussion of Kahn's

work, see Ghamari-Tabrizi). What may be illuminating in further exploring the distinction between retrospective and prospective accounts of path dependence and agency is Bode and Dietrich's distinction between "past narratives" and "future narratives," which inherently suggest openness because they foreground "nodes" as points of decision between alternative paths (for a short account, see 1–3).

Finally, narratological analysis of conflict narratives must be concerned with the role of ambiguity: While most societal fields will generally seek to eliminate or at least to minimize ambiguity – law, medicine or technology come to mind – scholars of narrative have argued that ambiguity may also foster social cohesion: By allowing more diverse groups of stakeholders to find points of identification, narratives with a certain fuzziness and indeterminacy, those which leave room for interpretation and negotiation, are more rather than less socially binding than precise narratives and thus more conducive to generating social cohesion and to canvassing public support (see Koschorke 349–352). A classic case in point would be programmes of political parties, which, if too specific, could hardly generate broad support across different societal groups and coalitions of interest (see also Gadinger et al. 11). In keeping with this observation, while one will hardly want to suggest that agreements or contracts should deliberately be ambiguous, it may be helpful to bear in mind this social function of ambiguity in the analysis of conflict narratives too: Contracts and agreements which make strategic use of ambiguities – thus allowing complementary, possibly even contradictory readings to the different parties and stakeholders – may productively function as "boundary objects" enabling communication and supporting compromise.[19] It seems, however, that contentious issues are here frequently "postponed" rather than truly resolved (for an excellent review of discussions on the benefits and pitfalls of ambiguity from a management perspective, see Abdallah/Langley). Nonetheless, even a mere "postponement" of conflictive issues through formulaic compromises enabled by strategic ambiguities may be beneficial by allowing antagonists to save face or by de-escalating an immediate "hot" conflict to a "cold" one that may be resolved in a "real" compromise in the future. Along these lines, Aughey has spoken of "constructive ambiguity" in the wording of the 1998 Northern Ireland Agreement (148). Thus, narrative, rhetorical and metaphorical management of ambiguity in processes of compromise-seeking is surely a further field for productive collaboration between scholars in literary studies, political science, peace and conflict research and history – and possibly legal studies.

One caveat seems necessary here: There is the danger of "overestimating" the role of narratives and of attributing the failure to reach a compromise to a "clash of narratives" even where this is not the most plausible

explanation. Faizullaev and Cornut seem to fall into this trap when, in their analysis of the failed peace talks early in 2014 after the Russian annexation of Crimea, they argue that "Russian claims were unacceptable for Ukraine and the West, and *vice versa*, because they were incompatible with their narratives. [. . .] [T]he narratives of each country were clashing to an extent where no compromise was possible" (592). Though a "clash of narratives" and "opposite political interests" are occasionally hard to tell apart, it seems that this failed compromise is more simply and more plausibly explained by means of "hard" political differences.[20]

Conflict-Supporting vs. Peace-Supporting Narratives – Facilitating or Obstructing Compromise?

As we have seen, empirical research on the impact of conflict narratives – much of it methodically sound and statistically robust in its findings – has shown that "conflict-supporting shared narratives [reduce] support for compromise to end the conflict" (Canetti et al. 87) or that conflict narratives can "become stubborn barriers to the peacemaking process" (Bar-Tal et al. 666; see also Uluğ et al.). Narratives, it is clear, have a significant effect on solidifying or liquifying positions in a conflict. In this vein, John R. Hall has insightfully discussed the impact of narratives on the course and the outcome of the notorious 1993 "Waco Siege," a confrontation between the religious sect of the Branch Davidians and U.S. law enforcement agencies around a compound in Waco, Texas, which resulted in the death of over 70 sect members (see Hall 44–75). Hall here argues that when "narratives are freighted with cultural meanings, they may exercise influence on the course of events in ways that exceed, or do not depend upon, merely factual, legal or professional considerations" (50). In keeping with Koschorke's notion of narratives as "formatting templates" in conflicts (197) and with my earlier discussion of the cognitive implications of modes of emplotment, Hall further speaks of "cultural scripts," which, if used consistently in the description *of* a conflict, can become a template or instruction for actors *in* the conflict, as it appears to have happened with the "script" of mass suicide in the Waco conflict.

Just how momentous such conflict narratives are is also evident in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the importance ascribed to their role in education: A 2013 study entitled "Victims of our own Narratives? Portrayal of the 'Other' in Israeli and Palestinian School Books" (see Council of Religious Institutions) is highly illuminating in pointing out how textual and visual school book representations (e.g., in maps) of historical and territorial issues impart different perceptions of the conflict: On both sides, "textbooks failed to make the narrative compromise that was expected of

them. This led to severe rows of textbook diplomacy where each side accused the other of not fulfilling its side of the narrative bargain" (Khoury 472–473).

As for the recurring building blocks and key properties of "conflict-supporting narratives," Bar-Tal et al. centrally mention:

- "discrediting the goals of the other side as unjustified and unreasonable";
- "delegitimiz[ing] the opponent";
- "present[ing] a glorified image of the in-group";
- "present[ing] the in-group as the sole victim of the conflict and of the opponent" (665).

Central properties of peace-supporting narratives, by contrast, can then be formulated *ex negativo*. This can be confirmed, for instance, by means of even the briefest discussion of the 1998 Northern Ireland Agreement, which was instrumental in largely ending decades of civil war. The introductory "Declaration of Support" already goes to some lengths to tell an inclusive story of *shared* suffering and a *shared* future, which it literally "scripts" in the triple sense of procedural knowledge, self-description and blueprint for the future (see Buchenau/Gurr):

> The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honor them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all.
>
> *(Northern Ireland Agreement 2)*

Moreover, when the ensuing passage "acknowledge[s] the substantial differences between our continuing, and equally legitimate, political aspirations" (Northern Ireland Agreement 2), this is tantamount to acknowledging the equal legitimacy of antagonistic narratives.

In addition to the value of recognizing such oppositional narratives, Uluğ et al., speak of the "potential [of alternative narratives] to increase openness to compromise and perhaps even pave the way for conflict resolution" (798), a potential they empirically evaluated in surveys in different conflicts. Similarly, Bar-Tal et al., have argued that "one of the core elements in the process of peacebuilding is weakening the adherence of the rivals to the conflict supportive narratives and introducing new ideas, beliefs, and attitudes that eventually develop into new peace-supportive narratives" (670). Thus, highlighting the potentials of crafting a new *shared*

narrative for previous antagonists, they refer to the case of post-genocidal Rwanda:

> The Rwandan government, for instance, in pursuing reconciliation after the 1994 genocide, promoted a new narrative about the history of Rwanda claiming that ethnicity did not exist in Rwanda prior to the arrival of the colonialists. This narrative was disseminated to the public in history books and education camps.
>
> *(Bar-Tal et al. 670)*

Here, a narrative of domestic antagonism was transformed into one of historically founded unity and shared oppression by an external force responsible for sowing division.

In an alternative view, however, the "management of conflict narratives" and, by implication, the "narrative management of conflicts," rather than relying on either the mutual recognition of antagonistic narratives or on crafting new shared narratives, may in some cases also proceed by either ignoring existing narratives or by evading them (as Khoury shows, these are not the same). These strategies, it seems, are designed to eliminate precisely the "semantic surplus" (Koschorke 2018, 189) brought about, reinforced, loaded with significance, with issues of identity, belonging, guilt or suffering by means of narrative, which often makes conflicts so intractable.[21] Thus, there is some debate on whether the acknowledgement of conflicting narratives in peace negotiations actually *helps* to make compromise possible (the logic would be that such an acknowledgement, while not yet a substantive concession, provides recognition and is a first step towards reciprocity and concession) or whether the exclusion of emotionally charged narratives from negotiations soberingly reduces, say, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to "a dispute over real estate" that can be rationally negotiated, as Amos Oz hopefully stated about the Oslo Accord[22] (cited in Khoury 466, who also provides a helpful brief discussion).

Conclusion and Avenues for Further Research

In sum, I argue that, while "path dependency" is a common concept in economics and in technology studies, it is not germane to literary studies, although it is conceptually surprisingly close to the effect of narrative templates in texts of different genres, where the choice of specific plot patterns suggests or even predetermines certain outcomes. Nor does path dependency play a significant role in peace and conflict research. However, even if we eschew the simplistic version of linguistic determinism now largely refuted as being untenable, given the surprisingly limited number of plot

patterns, narrative templates and cognitive models available for narrative negotiations of binary oppositions and agonalities, I maintain, first, that the function of conflict narratives as "formatting templates" (*sensu* Koschorke) or "scripts" for conflict behaviour should not be underestimated and that, second, the notion of path dependency is one that literary studies and, more specifically, narratology may adapt from economics and technology studies in order better to understand the real-world consequences of plot patterns, tropes, interpretive schemata or scripts.

Further research at the intersection of literary studies, political science and history might, *first, conceptually and systematically*, extend existing work on plot patterns in conflict narratives and on their cognitive underpinnings and attitudinal and behavioural effects: How do specific plots patterns, cognitive models or established patterns of narrative sense-making in conflict narratives create path dependencies? How, by influencing the attitudes of agents within conflicts, do they either "naturalize" enmities or make reconciliation appear a plausible option? (For the way in which "[m]etaphorization," too, can "underscore the implied logical, 'natural,' or necessary nature of a chosen course of action," see Ameel 6). How, more specifically, do they, if not predetermine or preclude, then at least make a compromise either far more or dramatically less likely? *Second, historically and empirically*, further research might analyse the forms and effects of conflict narratives and their path dependencies in specific historical and recent processes of compromise-seeking and their (successful or failed) regulation by means of actual compromise.

Notes

1 One exception is Hardy's 2008 essay "Mediation and Genre"; in a conceptualization similar to my own, Hardy argues that "once a typical conflict narrative is identified, it is possible to classify it within a classic literary genre and then to examine the genre's features and how they might affect the resolution of the conflict" (251). She also insightfully observes that "[t]he role of genre in the production and deconstruction of conflict narratives is worthy of further research and analysis" (267), but I very much doubt her conclusion that "a story told in the tragic genre may, in fact, be a more productive conflict story" (263).

2 The challenges to pluralist societies arising from "deep disagreements" and the ensuing "fundamental conflicts" as well as strategies of regulating such conflicts are the subject of an interdisciplinary collaborative project in the humanities, the social sciences and the educational sciences at the Universities of Münster and Duisburg-Essen, a project entitled "Agonistic Plurality: Deep Disagreements and Fundamental Conflicts as a Social, Political and Educational Challenge to Pluralist Societies." A related project in the Humanities and Social Sciences at the Universities of Duisburg-Essen, Münster and Bochum is "Cultures of Compromise." This chapter originates in this context. The terminology of "deep disagreements" and "fundamental conflicts" follows Willems.

3 The original reads, "eine der größten Erfindungen der Menschheit."
4 More specifically for the U.S. political system, Gutman and Thompson have argued that it is the polarization brought about not least by constant election campaigns that makes compromise so hard to achieve. They, too, share the notion that "[s]ystematic rejection of compromise is a problem for any democracy because it biases the political process in favor of the status quo and stands in the way of desirable change" (2). By contrast, Rachel Greenwald Smith has recently argued that compromise, especially in U.S. culture, is valued *too highly*, maintaining that compromises are always "ugly things [. . .] unsatisfying, awkward, boring, haphazard" and that, though sometimes "the best we can get," they are "what you get when you give up your ideals" (51).
5 This section partly reuses material first developed in Gurr 2021, 134f.
6 For notions of discursive lock-in, narrative path dependencies and the impact of genre on reader expectations, see, for instance, Baker/Edelstein; Buschmann/Oels; Cobb 56, 235; Gurr 2021; Haefs/Gurr; Hardy; Herman et al.; Herrmann; Hess et al.; Howlett/Rayner; Roos et al., as well as Roundy, who casually also uses the term "narrative path dependency," 17.
7 Robert Shiller's 2019 *Narrative Economics* is a particularly widely discussed recent example. For a brief discussion of this "narrative turn" in a wide range of disciplines, the potential consequences for literary studies and the role this might allow literary studies to play in interdisciplinary contexts, see the 2022 *Anglistik* open access special issue "Literature and . . . : Perspectives on Interdisciplinarity" (Gurr/Kluwick). For a recent critical account of this surge of interest in narrative, see Brooks.
8 See, for instance, Bar-Tal et al.; Canetti et al.; Faizullaeva/Cornut; Hall et al.; Khoury; Rafferty; Uluğ et al.; Zagare; Zellman.
9 The collection *Narrative(s) in Conflict*, in which this is the concluding essay, is otherwise overwhelmingly concerned with fictional representations of conflict (see Müller-Funk/Ruthner).
10 Koschorke takes the term "formatting template" from Rottenburg, who also briefly comments on conflicts as following "scripts" and comments on the "discursive productivity" of cognitive models (29). For the notion of "scripts" as suggestive combinations of procedural knowledge, self-description and blueprint for the future, which frequently exploit the unmarked oscillation between the descriptive and the normative, see Buchenau/Gurr.
11 This section reuses material from the more detailed discussion in Gurr 2013.
12 For a different categorization in another context, see Elbow, who comes up with five categories.
13 For a balanced if unorthodox discussion of White and an exploration (based not least on White, Ricœur and cognitive approaches) of the interplay between metaphor, narrative and emotion, see Snævarr.
14 With Luhmann, one could speak of "Leitdifferenzen" ("guiding differences" 19, 57).
15 For a more detailed discussion of the "ideological baggage" of narrative patterns and scripts, see Ameel; Gurr 2021, 125–140; Haefs/Gurr. For the notion of scripts, see Buchenau/Gurr as well as Baker/Edelstein.
16 For the classic studies, see Fauconnier; Fauconnier/Turner; Johnson; Kövecses; Lakoff/Johnson 1980 and 1999; Lakoff/Turner; see also Geeraerts/Cuyckens, especially part I, 3–418. For accounts of the implications for literary studies, see the surveys of cognitive narratology, especially Alber/Wenzel as well as Burke/Troscianko. See also Herman's sections on "Narrative and Mind" in Herman et al.

17 To be sure, Woloch has also importantly shown – for narrative generally, though with a focus on the realist novel – that attention is by no means focused on the protagonist only (40 et passim).
18 It may be interesting to note that Kahn's work from the beginning was inspired by and evolved in close collaboration with fiction writers and especially Hollywood screenwriters.
19 For the notion of boundary objects, see the classic account by Star and Griesemer; for the notion of "communicative compromise" and the role ambiguity can play in contracts and agreements, see Koschorke 136, 286.
20 It would be tempting to suggest a similar clash of narratives for the present war in Ukraine. In this vein, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Snyder's 2018 *The Road to Unfreedom* with its discussion of how different historical narratives and conceptions of the past lead to drastically different politics has repeatedly been invoked in attempts both at understanding the invasion and Western misconceptions about Putin's goals. For an insightful recent warning against over-emphasizing the role of narratives generally, see Brooks.
21 What comes to mind here is the distinction between conflicts of interest and conflicts of values, though the distinction may be hard to uphold in many cases; for a discussion of compromise as a means of also pacifying conflicts over values, which have frequently been argued to preclude compromise, see Willems 245–268.
22 For the related argument that, historically, forgetting rather than remembering was long a common and often successful imperative in dealing with the traumatic memories resulting from violent conflicts and thus in *pacifying* conflicts, see Meier 2010.

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BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Ten Theses

1. **Deep disagreements and fundamental conflicts, which frequently manifest themselves in acrimonious debates, are a potential threat to the functioning of pluralist democracies. Literary studies can help by historicizing and contextualizing these debates. Though this alone does not mean we can automatically *rationalize* the debate, let alone regulate the conflict, it may be a step towards just that.**

Debates over different conceptions of liberty, over identity politics or the literary canon, over historical remembering and commemoration, over globalization or climate change, as I have discussed them here (or over the effects of social media, over bioethics, abortion, gun control or immigration that might also have been discussed), are evidence of deep disagreements and fundamental conflicts (for such value conflicts as a challenge to democracy, see Willems).[1] If several such conflicts coalesce and if fault lines between parties are largely the same for these conflicts, this can result in polarization. Moreover, though the concrete manifestations of these debates vary across pluralist societies, many of the conflicts themselves tend to be remarkably similar. Thus, although my examples come from British and U.S. literature, which happen to be the fields I know best, the approach I propose, too, should "work" for other cultural contexts and for other conflicts.

2. **Literature can help elucidate the connection between anthropological assessments and political positions, especially with regard to different conceptions of liberty. In often counterintuitive ways, these are**

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frequently guided by deeply entrenched conceptions such as the notion of the body politic (see Chapter 1).

Conservatism has long been seen as the "philosophy of human imperfection" (O'Sullivan) which, in the vein of Burke, has maintained that "[s]ociety cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without" (Burke 332). Thus, a latent or manifest lack of trust in the ability of citizens to behave reasonably and the concomitant tendency to nanny or patronize them and to keep them on leading strings has traditionally been characteristic of political conservatism. However, the persistence of the body politic concept in political thought across the centuries and across the political spectrum also partly accounts for the occasionally illiberal tendencies or tendencies sceptical of democracy even in *progressive* thought and with thinkers otherwise often regarded as progressive. Isaiah Berlin's cautioning against the "perils of using organic metaphors to justify the coercion of some men by others in order to raise them to a 'higher' level of freedom" (8f.) is pertinent here too. Literature particularly lends itself to tracing how different conceptions of freedom thus come to collide, both in key public controversies and within the work of individual writers and political thinkers.

3. Reading fiction can be an exercise in perspective-taking (see Chapter 2).

To mine literary texts for arguments in favour of *one* position in any given debate is to tap into them below their potential. And even where we do not mine texts for arguments in favour of our own position, we still all too easily read them as political pronouncements rather than as explorations of ideas. To study how a text *stages* the debate is frequently the more rewarding endeavour. Taken seriously as such, reading fiction becomes an exercise in perspective-taking. Here, Martha Nussbaum's compelling case for "Socratic Pedagogy: The Importance of Argument" (47) and for the importance for democracy of a humanities education becomes crucial: Learning to understand opposing perspectives "humanizes the political 'other,' making the mind see the opposing person as a rational being who may share at least some thoughts with one's own group" (52). What Nussbaum calls the "narrative imagination," "the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself" (95), is quintessentially fostered through literature. Seen in this way, engaging with literature is a form of practice for the peaceful and responsible regulation of conflicts resulting from agonistic plurality.

4. **In the case of highly polarized debates, popular music may lend itself to approaching political issues from an initially less political "fan" perspective (see Chapter 3).**

Polarization occasionally goes so deep that there may no longer be a sense of a common purpose that would even be worth arguing about, possibly not even any common ground as a basis for a discussion. Here, popular music may be such a common ground, and a song may initially seem to come with less obvious ideological baggage than more overtly "political" fiction. People who otherwise would hardly speak to each other – and who might have little overlap in their cultural choices – may find it easier to start a conversation over Neil Young or Taylor Swift than to discuss, say, Toni Morrison. The powerful appeal of popular music may not quite have a reconciliatory function, but it may well induce or at least allow for a conversation.

5. **It can be helpful to see present-day debates from a distance by engaging with their earlier manifestations in comparable – but invariably also tellingly different – earlier contexts. Historicizing and presentifying approaches, thus, do not have to be mutually exclusive (see Chapter 4).**

This also suggests that, in trying to carve out a role for literary studies both in academia and in society generally, a form of pragmatic, theoretically informed historical scholarship which seeks to do justice to texts in their historical contexts while simultaneously attempting also to make them relevant to our own concerns is more useful than much of the more heavily theorized recent work in literary studies has been. A presentifying reading of a historical debate can become illuminating rather than merely anachronistic if it can be shown that, rather than just a superficial similarity or analogy, there is indeed a continuity, a common thread, between the two. To be sure, a focus on continuities must not (and does not have to) come at the expense of blindfolding us to discontinuities and to change. Horst Breuer's discussion of topicality and historicity is still illuminating here:

> The present-day *topicality* of a work can be defined as the historical unfolding of something [. . .] initially only present as a seed; it is an occasion to trace our present to its historical roots. [. . .] The *historicity* of a work, in turn, is to be an occasion to bear in mind the further development of historical reality; history is to be understood as the prehistory of our present.
>
> *(Breuer 112; emphasis original)*[2]

This also seems a reasonable approach if we are also concerned (as I believe we should be) with questions of pedagogy and the practice of academic teaching and with the usefulness to our students (most of whom, empirically, do not remain at university to become the next generation of professors, although much graduate education proceeds as though that was the case) and to society at large of what we do. I firmly believe in the unity – or at least the proximity – of research and teaching. More precisely, I maintain that what we teach our students should at least be reconcilable with what we do in our research and vice versa. The approach proposed here allows us to teach the productivity of historically informed scholarship while at the same time upholding the continuing relevance of literature (and of literary studies). Here, the perceived persuasiveness or "literary quality" of a text may, on occasion, have little to with its diagnostic value: Contradictory, unconvincing or problematic texts, even ones universally diagnosed as "failures," can be productively discussed in this vein if approached in illuminating ways.

6. **To understand texts as an alternative type of model (different from but complementary to quantitative scientific models) productively accounts for their potentials in illuminating debates on strongly contested issues important to the future of any given society (see Chapter 5).**

In such debates, there will invariably be an intricate and frequently unspoken amalgamation of attempts at understanding a situation and of suggesting ways of dealing with it, of diagnosis and prescription for action, of descriptive and normative components and frequently also a blend of epistemic, ontological and normative disagreements. The debate about climate change can be taken as exemplary of such a discursive situation. Here, an understanding of texts as models *of* and models *for* (*sensu* Mahr) can be helpful in an analysis of the descriptive and normative components of contributions to the debate but also in understanding the combination of prescriptive, evaluative, predictive, explorative and illustrative dimensions of future imaginaries. Finally, fiction is uniquely suited to exploring the entanglements of climate change with other directly or indirectly related issues (see the argument in Hoydis/Bartosch/Gurr that climate fiction ideally lends itself to illustrating Atwood's notion of climate change as "everything change," 10; Atwood n.p.).

7. **Literary studies must – and can – help in fostering a form of literacy that understands how texts can be made productive in any given debate. Attention to literary form matters – not as a depoliticizing *l'art pour l'art* approach that diverts attention from content, ideas and**

contested issues but as a way of understanding *how* texts stage the debate. This also means that the text itself is not sufficient; just handing people a novel does not lead to better public deliberation.

While much of twentieth-century literary theory was focused on patterns of meaning-making and not so much on "content," some recent approaches have tended to neglect form – at the peril of no longer understanding how literature "works": It does matter who speaks, and not every utterance of a character in a novel is to be equated with what an author thinks. What long seemed a "Literature 101" truism now needs to be stated and possibly defended again. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is an excellent starting point for a debate on key questions in bioethics, but only if we understand how the text's "elaborate series of frames" and, thus, its intricate layering of narrative perspective is central to how it complicates that debate (Newman 144; see also Gassenmeier). Moreover, in a societal context of agonistic plurality with its deep disagreements, fundamental conflicts and the threat of societal polarization, an understanding of literature as a means of fostering learning about – and of practicing dealing with – different perspectives, ambiguity and complexity is simply more helpful than one that all too quickly disambiguates, denounces and dismisses as deficient. This also means that the case for the lasting relevance and insightfulness of literature I make in this book is inseparable from the case for the importance of educated reading: Literature can only fulfil this potential if it is tapped into in illuminating ways. Thus, the form of "Public Literary Studies" proposed here does not suggest that any literary text itself (or even an ensemble of literary texts) can ever be the solution. What is required is a broad notion of "literacy" that incorporates an awareness of narrative perspectives, the implications of certain poetic forms, the role of narratives, of metaphors and of cognitive models in the production of meaning and in the transmission of values, attitudes and perspectives (for a discussion of such a broad conception of literacy, see Hoydis/Bartosch/Gurr).

8. **Literary studies can help understand escalation dynamics in conflicts by understanding conflict narratives and how they shape the conflict (see Chapter 6).**

We should not overestimate the role of narrative; many conflicts are not the *result* of conflicting narratives but of clear conflicts of interest that then bring forth conflict narratives to justify, legitimise and historicise claims and positions in the conflict. However, narratives can decisively shape perceptions *of* and script actors' behaviour *in* the conflict. Applying what we

know about the functioning of narratives, literary studies can help understand conflict dynamics; understanding narrative path dependencies can help us understand which types of narratives tend to prolong the conflict and which tend to make reconciliation and compromise more likely. Moreover, research on narrative mediation (Winslade/Monk; Cobb, Federman) suggests that narrative can deliberately be used in conflict mediation, though we might want to be wary of overly optimistic assessments of its powers.

9. **The education system – all the way from kindergarten through school ("K–12") to higher education – is a central arena in which key debates are waged, conflicts themselves as well as attitudes towards conflicts and strategies for dealing with them are acquired and in which some debates even originate.**

From debates about immigration leading to ethnic stereotypes among children in kindergarten via the Israeli-Palestinian conflict waged among schoolchildren in European or U.S. schools or conflicts over controversial topics in school books, all the way to debates over identity politics or historical commemoration in academia: Key public debates have frequently also been waged in educational institutions or have had significant repercussions there. But educational institutions are also crucial sites of social learning. It is here that children learn strategies of peaceful conflict regulation, that acceptance of otherness can be taught and practiced. It is here that educators can foster a culture of debate in which young people learn to deal with uncomfortable topics and practice plurality by learning to listen to and accept opposing viewpoints. And it is here that they acquire and learn to use strategies for peaceful conflict regulation (from among innumerable studies on agonism in education and on citizenship education, see Koutsouris et al.; Schulz et al.). Finally, it is important to bear in mind the role of academia as a *source* of central societal debates: Discourses of remembering and commemoration, different ideas about identity politics, debates about gender roles and many other central debates of recent decades have *originated* in academia. In this sense, my argument *is* related to Graff's that "the best solution to today's conflicts over culture is to teach the conflicts themselves, making them part of our object of study" (12). But while Graff here largely spoke about disagreements *within* academia, I argue that some of the larger societal conflicts manifest themselves in the education system – take the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its repercussions in schools or in our universities – and that here lies our best chance of having opposing parties engage in anything like a reasonable debate.

10. This is why educational institutions – again, all the way from kindergarten to university – are also crucial sites for the application of central ideas in this book. It is here that fostering "debate and conflict literacy" is possible. And it is here that literature as a crucial means of understanding, contextualizing and rationalizing public debates and of helping participants in a conflict see "the other side" may have the best chance of being useful.

Teaching the civic virtue of trying to understand a conflict from both sides usually faces an audience problem, a "preaching to the choir problem in reverse," as it where: Those most invested in a conflict may be least willing to entertain the idea that the other side may not just be evil, irresponsible or stupid. But in pluralist democracies, virtually everyone spends a sizeable share of their time in educational institutions: We here have a captive audience. Moreover, starting early is important: Young people may be assumed to be less firmly committed to one side in a conflict and may still be more amenable to learning about different perspectives. Educational institutions at all levels are our best chance to teach a democratic culture of debate: The formative period young people spend here is the period during which, empirically, they learn conflict behaviour and during which they can and should acquire the crucial civic skills and virtues of rational deliberation, respectful debate and democratic conflict styles, but where they can also learn to stand up against anti-democratic and discriminatory behaviour (for citizenship education, see, e.g., Roczen et al.; Manzel 2016, 2022).

Moreover, these are also institutions where learning with and through literature – at various levels of complexity – is either part of the curriculum anyway (schools), where it happens naturally or can easily be made part of everyday practice (kindergarten) or where (in higher education) it is established in some fields and formats and where, though not everyone, it still does reach a significant number of young people (for the debate about a liberal arts curriculum or a *studium generale* and their importance to democratic education, see Nussbaum; for a survey of research, see Heilbronn). Here, it is rarely a single text that can serve as the "silver bullet": Often, excerpts or selected passages may be enough to create meaningful "text ensembles" that allow different learners to engage with texts or excerpts that most directly appeal to them or "work" for them (for the pedagogy of literacy in the exemplary field of climate change, see Hoydis/Bartosch/Gurr 41–56). Finally, given the seismographic qualities of literature (see, e.g., Chapter 2 earlier), there are texts on virtually any relevant debate at various levels of complexity, from the wealth of wonderful children's

books via young adult fiction all the way to the most challenging literary texts of all periods.

Notes

1 A large interdisciplinary team of scholars from the humanities, the social sciences and the educational sciences at the Universities of Duisburg-Essen and Münster is currently working on the social, political and educational challenges of deep disagreements and fundamental conflicts in pluralist societies and, in a related project, with colleagues from Bochum, on compromise as a key cultural technique of conflict regulation (see Cultures of Compromise). Like much of this book, this Conclusion is indebted to many productive discussions in these contexts.

2 The original reads: "Die *Aktualität* des Werks soll bestimmt werden als geschichtliche Entfaltung eines zunächst noch Verdrängten, nur keimhaft Angelegten; sie soll Anlaß geben, unsere Gegenwart zu ihren historischen Wurzeln zurückzuverfolgen. [. . .] Die *Historizität* des Werks wiederum soll Anlaß sein, die Fortentwicklung der historischen Wirklichkeit im Blick zu halten; Geschichte soll verstanden werden als Vorgeschichte unserer Gegenwart" (Breuer 112; emphasis original).

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INDEX

Note: Subjects discussed throughout the book as a whole (such as "debate," "conflict," "narrative, functions of," "literature, functions of," "Public Literary Studies" etc.) are not listed in this index.