Presidential Address 2017

Boundaries of Culture

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?
The barbarians are due here today.
Why isn't anything happening in the senate?
Why do the senators sit there without legislating?
Because the barbarians are coming today.
What laws can the senators make now?
Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating.

SO BEGINS CONSTANTINE CAVAFY'S CLASSIC POEM OF NOVEMBER 1898, "Waiting for the Barbarians," in Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard's assured translation. Cavafy was a writer who tested all manner of boundary conditions. His every identity came with an asterisk. He was a Greek who never lived in Greece. A government clerk of Greek Orthodox upbringing, in a tributary state of a Muslim empire, he spent his evenings on foot, looking for pagan gods in their incarnate, carnal versions. He was a poet who resisted publication, save for broadsheets he circulated among close friends; a man whose homeland was a neighborhood, and a dream. Much of his poetry is a map of Alexandria overlaid with a map of the classical world—modern Alexandria and ancient Athens—as Leopold Bloom's Dublin neighborhood underlies Odysseus's Ithaca. And I conjure Cavafy because, as I want to persuade you, he is representative precisely in all his seeming anomalousness.

For if there is a sense in which boundaries are alien to literature, there's another sense in which they are constitutive of it. The term *literature* once referred to anything written down and circulated; all books were literature. The birth of literature, in the modern sense of imaginative writing—an attainment that distinguished, you might say, the civilized from *οι βάρβαροι* ("the barbarians")—was an act

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of separation: its parturition was a partition. Moreover, our concept of literature dates to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the period in which our modern understanding of the nation also appears. As the term starts to circulate, it involves a privileging of the vernacular and the assertion of traditions taken to be national. Literature and nationalism were born twins.[1]

Now, nationalism is always cartographic: the nation-state has to picture itself to become real to itself, which is the only way it can become real. As Eric Hobsbawm, another Alexandrian-born writer, concluded, "Nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way around" (10). Hobsbawm was teaching us to read against a theorist of the nation like Johann Gottfried Herder, who had written, "Das Reich eines Volks ist . . . von der Natur gegründet"—against, that is, a modern nationalism that begins by imagining a preexisting *Volk*, grounded in nature (*Sämmtliche Werke* 77). And yet, imagined or not, once nationalism takes hold, the borders come to mean something profound—they're not the arbitrarily negotiated property line of this or that principality but the membranes of a shared and breathing soul. The very idea of literature took shape in this gleaming cartography. "[W]e must not blame any nation for preferring their poets to all others," Herder wrote in 1797; "after all, they are *its* poets. They have thought in *its* language, have exercised their imaginations in *its* context; they have felt the needs of the nation within which they were raised and have answered them in turn" ("Results" 5). It is an idea echoed for orality in a proverb from Asante, where I grew up: ɔ*man bɛbɔ a, na ɛfiri* ɔ*kyeame*. If the state is going to collapse, it is because of the one who speaks for it.

So perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that for the first half of the nineteenth century the most widely read and translated book of modern poetry was Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802–03), the border in question being the zone where Northumberland in England meets the Southern Uplands of Scotland. Scott, an aficionado of border crossing, was at the same time a poet of *Heimat*: hence the oft-quoted lines from his "Lay of the Last Minstrel" (1805): "Breathes there the man with soul so dead / Who never to himself hath said, / This is my own, my native land!" (175). In the same period, no work of fiction was more widely read and translated than Scott's *Waverley* (1814), in which the eponymous Englishman journeys north to the Scottish lowlands and highlands, taking up their cause as his own; it is a novel of North and South, in collision and reconciliation. Note that the Highlanders, in Scott's day, were the barbarians, a putatively savage race; in his account, they were, though undomesticated and dangerous, also glamorous figures of untrammeled nobility. The allure of Romantic nationalism was not confined to its nationals: after all, the nationalism for which that other Scot, George Gordon Byron, gave his life, a decade later, was Greek. So it was with Romantic nationalism: it crossed the borders it sought to create. For the matrix that gives rise to the ideas of literature and nationalism also spawned a coordinating normative concept, that of humanity. To give this matrix a voice, its most eloquent one, we might turn again to Herder, the Enlightenment's greatest theorist of the nation, whose immanent critique of Enlightenment shaped the birth of Romanticism, which brought literature and nation together. For if Herder is best known for catalyzing the discourse of nationalism, he catalyzed, as well, a concept of *Humanität*.[2]

This idea is a complex one for him, as it should be for us: it involved human capability, human freedom, unfolding within the constraints and contours of one's world. And so nationalism, in this original conception, wasn't at odds with cosmopolitanism—they were joined at the hip. The boundaries were real; the barbarians were not. Herder was committed to the rights of nations and to the

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rights of individual human beings. Imperial conquest, for many of his contemporaries, was a civilizing mission; for him it was a moral disaster. "Can you name a land," he asked, "where Europeans have entered without defiling themselves forever before defenseless, trusting mankind, by the unjust word, greedy deceit, crushing oppression, disease, fatal gifts they have brought?" (qtd. in Patten 673–74).

This nationalism was meant as a defense of all nations, then. As Friedrich Meinecke observed at the turn of the next century, "cosmopolitanism and nationalism stood for a considerable time in a close community of blood and life."[3] Because, in Herderian terms, every *Volk* had its *Seele*, because every tongue had its *Sprachgeist*, the tropism of the boundary was outward-facing. *Sprachgeist*, the mediating notion of humanity, meant that nationalisms were an opening to a broader cosmopolitan order: it was in this spirit that Goethe, one of Herder's many students, coined the term *Weltliteratur* in the 1820s, imagining national literatures in fruitful conversation.[4] Literature was how we explored the many ways of being human.

The invention of literature meant, as well, the invention of literary studies, grounded and shaped by this triad of the literary, the national, and the humane. Here, a nineteenth-century British lineage could take in the critics of the *Edinburgh Review* and move on to the likes of Matthew Arnold, George Saintsbury, and John Churton Collins. We can see, before our eyes, literary studies being disciplined into a discipline. If scholarship was to distinguish itself from the belles lettres of the drawing room, if reading was to move from leisure to labor, it needed boundaries. The critic became a cartographer, mapping out from on high the territories where writers found themselves. Michel de Certeau once noted that "the desire to see the city preceded the means of satisfying it," that "medieval or Renaissance painters represented the city as seen in a perspective that no eye had yet enjoyed" (92). Critics likewise, assuming the mapmaker's placeless vantage, sought to see forces and patterns imperceptible to the writers they acted on.

We see a rising rigorism as we retrace the ascent of the historicisms from Hippolyte Taine, the founder of critical historicism, with his famous heuristic of *race, milieu, et moment*, to Eustace Tillyard, with his now suspect "world pictures." We see it in the long arc of philology, in the stylistics of Leo Spitzer and the comparativism of Ernst Robert Curtius, in the technical textualism of Charles Kay Ogden and I. A. Richards. We see it, too, as we retrace the rockier path by which literary studies was institutionalized, mainly in the last century, with the establishment of faculties of modern languages.[5]

When the ideas of nationalism and humanism fell into crisis in my youth, the idea of the literary inevitably did as well. We all know this *grand récit*. Literary studies—once preoccupied with the boundaries charted under the question "What is literature?"—discovered the Talmudic truth that the existence of a question does not entail the existence of an answer. New candidates arose to be the singular critical paradigm. That was true of the old criticism; it had been true of the New Criticism and its successors. Structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction, the new historicisms: each was a global theory, universally applicable, unbounded. Under the aegis of cultural studies, the old anxieties about literariness were swept brutally away. If *literature* is defined as the subject of literary studies, the term can be used, as I use it, as shorthand for thinking about writing, film, television, and many other forms of address, because what we're now at pains to demarcate is not what is read but the ways in which we read it. As our focus expands to encompass the whole interpretable world, new cartographies arise.

People often remark nowadays that we literary scholars are posttheory, inasmuch as few pay obeisance to any one aspirant "theory

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of everything." Yet this has not been a victory for theory's skeptics. Long Island oystermen, hoping to protect their beds, used to slice up any starfish they caught and toss the pieces into the sea. Confoundingly, the pieces regenerated, and starfish grew more plentiful than ever (Andersen 211).[6] The would-be slayers of theory soon confronted the oystermen's conundrum. Literary studies has been called postdisciplinary, but in truth it has become many disciplines. Instead of Theory, capitalized and in the singular, we have a cascade of theories, complex relay circuits between interpretation and generalization, the idiographic and the nomothetic.

Those theories now tend to be domain-limited enterprises, even if each has its own territorial ambitions. We have affect theory. Queer and gender theories. Trauma theory. Theories of postcoloniality. We have ecocriticism and disability studies. We have neural and cognitive studies. We have posthumanism and object-oriented ontology; we have the digital humanities; we have distant reading to complement deep reading, reparative reading and its putative counterdiscourse, paranoid reading.[7] You can complete the litany. And, as you also know, we have countervailing vectors between increasing specificity and increasing breadth: thus the field of American literature, for example, discovers once-effaced localities even as it has become transnational, multilingual, comparative, Atlanticist. Like a mille-feuille of the mind, literary and cultural scholarship is now almost nothing but borders. Each specialty has established its own Schengen Agreement with favored neighbors, while steep tariffs and vigilant border patrols are deployed against disfavored ones.

Take, by way of example, the ascent, in the past decade or so, of the digital humanities. We are familiar now with its deliverances and with its limitations, but is it, finally, a rising barbarism, supinely awaited by the citizens of an exhausted, temporizing empire? That's the picture that emerges from a widely discussed multiauthor critique published in 2016 in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (Allington et al.). In this account, a once-subaltern class of digital assistants—the IT help desk, so to speak—has risen up to threaten the very enterprise of criticism itself, hoovering up grant monies Pac-Man style and waging quiet war against the practice of social critique. They are akin to the Mamluks who took power in the thirteenth century, warrior slaves who overthrew the Egyptian sultanate they once served. Or, perhaps closer to the mark, they are the android hosts of *Westworld*, poised to lay waste to the guests they were created to please. An older hierarchy has been inverted.

"The privileging of technical expertise above other forms of knowledge is a political gesture . . . that has proved highly effective in neutralizing critique of established power relations," we are warned by the digital skeptics (Allington et al.). Such critics, sounding an alarm, hurl the most hurtful slurs at their disposal, including the N-word. And, yes, I mean *neoliberal*. At such unquiet moments, the barbarians would seem to be waiting for us in the office next door.

Perhaps it will help to recall that these anxieties trail a history. The contours of humanism have been disputed for more than a century, and now the posthumanists have renewed the decentering project. Some, with Jürgen Habermas, worry that technology is "obliterating the boundary between persons and things" and wonder "whether the instrumentalization of human nature changes the ethical self-understanding of the species in such a way that we may no longer see ourselves as ethically free and morally equal beings guided by norms and reasons" (13, 40). Others, like Peter Sloterdijk, see promise in what he calls "anthropo-technology," where the distinction between man and machine will dissolve into the flux of the network.

I mentioned a history. Yes, you can find the expected rejoinder to the encroachments of science and technology by reaching back to

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John Keats, who worried in "Lamia," in 1819, that a "cold philosophy" would "clip an Angel's wings" and "unweave a rainbow." But you'll find something very different in Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Queen Mab*, written just a few years earlier, in 1813; its notes are riddled with references to William Herschel, an astronomer, and Robert Boyle, a Fellow of the Royal Society, to up-to-date discussions of the nature and the speed of light.[8] Shelley, the arch Romantic, could not have seen STEM as a menacing alterity or a rival authority: he saw science as an ally of progress. In the history of literature, then, the dispute between poetry and technology is recapitulated rather than resolved.

We see something similar with respect to recent arguments over the hermeneutics of suspicion, the ascent of critique, or, more broadly, the overtly political torque of much contemporary criticism. For some in the profession, much critical discourse has become a grim stridency that blots out *le plaisir du texte* and buries the joy that first led literary scholars into the field. Ears trained and attuned to the subtle near inaudibilities of the dog whistle, they may add, were ill-prepared for political developments that announced themselves with a train whistle, a steam whistle, a wolf whistle. In one genealogy, our rigorous textualisms foreclosed ethical instruction, and a movement like cultural studies, rooted in the British left, could be greeted as a rescue operation, bearing social-democratic imperatives. In the wary words of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, two decades ago, "Cultural Studies finally encouraged a generation—my own generation—of self-declared revolutionaries to impose their visions of politics and ethics upon the academic space." Politics here was conceived not as many liberals conceive it: as a means to accommodate differences of view and custom and achieve a civic modus vivendi. Instead, in a tradition aligned with Carl Schmitt—for whom the life of a political community, with transcendent values for which one would kill or die, is all that saves us from a shallow and meaningless existence—politics is how you get meaning without God. Literary studies becomes the site of struggle over everything important.

This development strikes some as a novelty; arguably, however, it is a return to form. You could hardly tell William Hazlitt to pack away his politics, and, of course, Matthew Arnold's criticism was interlaced with his proto-Fabian inclinations.[9] Arnold reserved his particular disapproval, on the one hand, for the nexus of money and machinery he identified with industrialism and, on the other, for those who would trivialize culture as a badge of class privilege—the tickling of the spinet keyboard, the recited postprandial sonnet. When he referred to the upper classes as "Barbarians," the rebuke was subtle, not patent: a reference to the aristocracy's mythicized past as a warrior caste, remote from the effete contemporary existence of polite society (*Culture* 100–03).

If criticism is a "form of attention" (Kermode), to speak plainly, what it attends to can certainly be moral, and social, and political: it can subject the aesthetic to interrogation, maybe even to enhanced interrogation, as the suspected product of social forces. But it can also explore and appreciate the aesthetic, eliciting, say, the experiential dimensions of beauty and disgust—sometimes in combination. The poet Paul Celan, a Holocaust survivor, captured these antinomies as well as anyone. In his 1944 poem "Todesfuge" ("Deathfugue") he writes of Jewish prisoners compelled to play music at their own executions; it is probably the most beautiful poem he ever wrote.

> Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends
> wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts
> wir trinken und trinken. (qtd. in Weimar 85)
>
> Black milk of early morning we drink it in the evenings
> We drink it at midday and morning we

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drink it at night
We drink and drink. (my trans.)

Those convinced of Theodor Adorno's motto—no poetry after Auschwitz—reprimanded the work for its aestheticizations, unsettled by the poet's own violin melodies.[10] Beauty is loftily shunned as corruption.

But resistance isn't always a matter of matching a political gesture with a political gesture. Sometimes the seditious act is abjuring politics: Dmitry Shostakovich, accused by Joseph Stalin's ideologists of bourgeois formalism, rebels by aesthetic assertion. Instead of the anthemic sound track the ideologists sought, the tunes of a Sovietized Sousa, he produces the sorrowing uncertainties of his Fourth Symphony (even if it could not be performed at home) or the intimacies of preludes and fugues in the line of J. S. Bach and Frédéric Chopin. Augusto Pinochet's protestors did not merely speak truth to power; they spoke joy to power, literally, singing Ludwig van Beethoven's setting of Friedrich von Schiller's "An die Freude" (see Dorfman 104).

We are, as Aristotle said, a *πολιτικὸν ζῷον* 'political animal' (1.1253a; 11); but we are not that always and only—at least if, unlike the Chileans under Pinochet, we are spared citizenship in a totalizing state or culture. Perhaps because I grew up in a dictatorship, with its fumbling, fledging secret police, I'm convinced in my bones that one feature of a decent society is the possibility of spheres—intimate, familial, social—that are unsurveilled by the political; free, that is, from the external imposition of a comprehensive conception of the good life. (This is another thought with a long history: it is adumbrated by, among others, Johannes Althusius, the seventeenth-century Calvinist theorist of subsidiarity [Elazar].) But my concern, with respect to our intramural border skirmishes, is not to call for a truce; philosophy would come to an end without disputation, and criticism would soon falter as well. Rather, I want to urge that, where some see fresh disruptions, to be cheered on or railed against, we might again remind ourselves of continuities.

For one thing, to say that literary study is fissured by shifting boundaries is merely to say that it shares the condition of its objects. The preoccupation with borders wasn't merely a feature of literary Romanticism. You might even say that literatures are national only to the extent that they probe the limits of the nation. Recall the two customary candidates for the Great American Novel, one by Mark Twain and the other by Herman Melville. The central terrain of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is, of course, a raft, which takes Huck and Jim to stranger and stranger lands; the account concludes with Huck's intention to flee the nation and "light out for the Territory" (293). *Moby-Dick* mostly doesn't take place in America at all. Both, then, are exercises in extraterritoriality. The past century bears witness to the same impulses elsewhere. France confers its highest literary honor on novels set in Shanghai, Algeria, Afghanistan, Amerindia, and so on. You can find similar patterns if you look at the recipients of Germany's Georg Büchner Prize.[11] The borderlands are the novel's natural terrain.

At times, the very existence of a border can be its topos, as in the 1951 novel *Le rivage des Syrtes*, beautifully rendered by its translator, Richard Howard, as *The Opposing Shore*. (The author wrote under the pen name Julien Gracq; he was Louis Poirier, a professor of geography, so he knew his maps.) The protagonist, from the imagined nation of Orsenna, comes to understand that the seventy-two grievances against its barbarous neighbor Farghestan "were an eternal part of Orsenna's patrimony, a precious mandate to be surrendered only with life itself" (9). The boundary separating the two nations becomes an overriding obsession: the sanctum sanctorum is the "Map Room" (17).

You might assume that the critique of nationalism—in its later, more uncosmopolitan

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incarnations—is a luxury of nationalisms old enough to take themselves for granted. Not so. The past century has been a breeding ground of new nationalisms, many associated with decolonization and the retraction of empire. Yet what Gloria Anzaldúa memorably called "una conciencia de la mestiza" 'a mestiza consciousness,' which inhabits the borderlands / *la frontera*, is everywhere imaginatively central. The most resonant fictions about freshly inked borders can take them as emblems of irrationality, as in the well-known 1955 Urdu story "Toba Tek Singh," by the Indo-Pakistani writer Saadat Hasan Manto. "Two or three years after Partition," the story begins, "the governments of Pakistan and India decided to exchange lunatics in the same way that they had exchanged civilian prisoners. In other words, Muslim lunatics in Indian madhouses would be sent to Pakistan, while Hindu and Sikh lunatics in Pakistani madhouses would be handed over to India." A Sikh inmate from a Lahore asylum, sent under protection to India, learns from one guard that his hometown is now in Pakistan and from another that it is, or soon will be, in India. Confronted with the larger lunacy of unsatisfiable boundary conditions, he refuses to move from a no-man's land between the borders. The story ends: "India was on one side, behind a barbed wire fence. Pakistan was on the other side, behind another fence. Toba Tek Singh lay in the middle, on a piece of land that had no name."

Boundaries both enfold and shut out. "The stranger finds himself in the stranger," the poet Mahmoud Darwish writes, in an almost Levinasian image; in the absence of a national state, it can be hard to manage Manto's irony about the nation (106). "Mix sorrow with sorrow, like time-saving history," Yehuda Amichai writes with matching mordancy. He continues: "And everything in three languages: Hebrew, Arabic, and Death" (95). Literary nationalisms subsist on boundaries they sometimes cannot help dreaming away. Abdellah Taïa's *Infidèles*, a novel about a Moroccan prostitute and her gay son, makes room for the voice of God, or God's messenger: "You've arrived. You've crossed the river. I followed you. I've been with you from the start. Approach. Closer, closer. Boundaries no longer exist. Behind me, the other world begins" (*Infidels*). Yet in this world, Taïa knows, those boundaries he would dissolve can exact a lethal toll.

I am reminded of Ama Ata Aidoo's 1979 novel *Our Sister Killjoy*—I call it a novel, but it migrates regularly across the borders between poetry and fiction—whose Ghanaian protagonist, Sissie, arrives in Germany to be civilized, yet everywhere she sees barbarians. When she hears a woman tell her daughter, "Ja, das Schwartze [sic] Mädchen" 'Yes, the black girl,' Sissie is struck by a visual epiphany: "That all that crowd of people going and coming in all sorts of directions had the colour of . . . pickled pig parts" (12). Seen as alien, Sissie suddenly sees everyone else as alien too. For her, the most fateful cartographic lines are interior, and they will encompass her assumptions about sexuality and its boundaries. Boundary conditions, in this account, are written on the body.

As they are in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, another novel out of Africa, published a year later, in 1980. The novel (titled after the Cavafy poem, of course), is at the same time an amalgam of Joseph Conrad and Franz Kafka; it gives us an unambitious magistrate at the outskirts of an unnamed empire, who becomes conscience-stricken as the security forces led by Colonel Joll set about torturing the local "barbarians." At one point, the word *enemy* is written with a charcoal stick on the backs of bound prisoners and then washed away by their own blood—a rather haunting scene of writing and erasure, *écriture sous rature* literalized (103). Literature, once a civilized attainment that separated us from barbarism, has regularly taken the idea of barbarism as a consuming subject.

The condition of so much contemporary fiction and poetry, accordingly, involves a

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kind of cartographic crisis, an emergency in the map room. Cavafy's community—cosmopolitan Alexandria—has long since vanished, though, of course, it is still on the map. In Naguib Mahfouz's 1967 novel *Miramar*, an Alexandrian Greek, mistress of the eponymous pensione, reflects of her people, "They're gone, every one of them." Mr. Amer, an aging Egyptian friend and tenant, tries to console her. "*We* are your people now," he says. "That sort of thing is happening everywhere" (8).

The literature of extraterritoriality is alert to the perils of this condition. And it is indeed happening everywhere. Taïa's most recent novel, *Un pays pour mourir* ("A Country to Die In/For"), a deeply lyrical and interior work, concerns another Moroccan prostitute—this one living undocumented in Paris—along with an Algerian transsexual and a gay Iranian dissident, whose lives converge in the *banlieue*. Accepted neither by the Islamic *umma* nor by a secular *européanité*, they are not merely stateless but nationless—in every sense extraterritorial. There is no place for them on the map of l'Hexagone. They find solace only in the stories they tell one another.

The Somali writer Nuruddin Farah has long explored the ways in which cartography is suspended between fact and force. "Tell me, Askar," the narrator of his novel *Maps* is asked, "[d]o you find truth in the maps you draw?" (227). The question is a challenge. Jean Baudrillard, reflecting on Jorge Luis Borges's conceit of a map the size of the empire it maps, had one answer: "The territory no longer precedes the map"; rather, the map "engenders the territory" (166). The real and the representation of the real are no longer readily distinguished.[12]

And with literary studies, as well, there are always these questions: In which ways is criticism the map, in which ways the territory? Is there a zone that is both? When we anatomize and analyze, is it an exercise of creative authority or a reflection of what is already there? *Aut viam inveniam aut faciam*. Are we finding or creating? It is an issue explored in a dialogic poem series titled *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, by the Jamaican poet Kei Miller. The poet writes:

> The landscape does not sit
> Willingly
> As if behind an easel
> Holding pose
> Waiting on someone to pencil
> Its lines, compose its best features
> Or unruly contours.
> Landmarks shift,
> become unfixed
> by earthquake
> by landslide
> by utter spite.
> Whole places will slip
> Out from your grip.

Literary studies, crenellated by its own methodological autarkies, has had to recognize the centrality of boundaries—those pertaining to genre, to readers, to authors. We keep redrawing the maps, yet "[w]hole places" seem always to "slip / [o]ut from [our] grip."

Given how disciplinary conflicts seem presaged by our professional phylogeny, it can seem as though literary study must eternally recapitulate its birth pangs. Have we really discarded those normative conceptions of nationalism and humanity, so eloquently elaborated by Herder? Maybe they have merely been updated—given an upgrade and a new build, as our digitalists might say. Surely our antihumanisms and posthumanisms are still only diacritics of humanism; some notion of *Humanität* still mediates between what we are and who we are and conditions the possibility of a shared *Weltliteratur*, the concept that allows for a conversation among Cafavy, Coetzee, and Mahfouz; Scott and Aidoo; Gracq and Taïa; even (or perhaps especially) Amichai and Darwish. Meanwhile, the Herderian *Volksgeist* has come to repose in those social collectivities we now call identities.

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One could even say that Taine's triad—*race, milieu, moment*—has been not so much cast out as recast.

Literatures of nationalism are typically about the limits of nationalism, and to explore identity, too, is to probe its limits, the shiftiness of its boundary conditions. There's a pointed moment in Zadie Smith's new novel, *Swing Time*, in which its narrator, who has grown up in London, ends up in rural West Africa, in an unnamed nation, and experiences the unsettlingly contextual and contingent nature of identity: "Even the simplest ideas I'd brought with me did not seem to work here when I tried to apply them," she reflects, almost like a literary scholar navigating unfamiliar terrain. "I was not, for example, standing at this moment in a field with my extended tribe, with my fellow black women. Here there was no such category. There were only the Sere women, the Wolof, and the Mandinka, the Serahuli, the Fula, and Jola . . ." (204).

Identity, she sees, is frangible. Yet the fact that these West Africans don't grasp her blackness does not leave her shut out; her age-mates in the village adopt her, just as, one of them fondly explains, "you would a calf whose mother died in the having of her." (A lovely image: it is how this philosopher sometimes feels among his friends from the English department across Washington Square.)

The narrator is not therefore disabused or divested of her other identities; she does not become a villager. We can no more do without boundaries than we can do without identities, because, *ex vi termini*, identities are made through boundaries. The challenge is, in Richard Rorty's language, to recognize their contingencies without abolishing their solidarities. It's to recall that identities may merely have been written in charcoal but that sometimes they can be erased only with blood.

This is why writers of ambition are less likely to walk the line than to walk across it—literally, that is, as well as figuratively. Literature and the nation-state may have been born twins, but another activity emerged in the very same period: walking. Walking not as needful drudgery but as a mode of contemplation and observation, a way of being fully in the world, a mode of movement that was also a form of attention. It was a preoccupation of so many of the nineteenth-century writers I've mentioned. Scott, though lamed by polio, was a concerted walker; it was how he traversed those borderlands. Arnold's letters are filled with references to his walks. For all of them, like Wilhelm Müller's miller whom Franz Schubert immortalized, "das Wandern"—hiking, rambling, tramping—was a form of transport in more senses than one.[13]

Literary modernism, too, arrived on foot. Virginia Woolf's daily walks were, among her intimates, as famous as those of *Mrs. Dalloway*, as you might have gleaned from her essay "Street Haunting." The work of the imagination was, for Woolf, literally, a walk in the park. The same can be said of Italo Svevo and his best-known creation, Zeno, whose Triestine peregrinations are a constant theme. Svevo is said to be one of the models for Leopold Bloom, that least pedestrian of pedestrians, and if modernist fiction has a central monument, it is the chronicle of Bloom's rambling itinerancies.

In the contemporary era, has any imaginative writer had more influence than W. G. Sebald? Consider *The Rings of Saturn*, in which the narrator hikes his way through Suffolk and can never quite lose himself, because the narrative detours are the main road. A walk that takes him through the British countryside also takes him to the China of the Taiping rebellion, to the Congo of Leopold and Roger Casement and Conrad, to an Amsterdam neighborhood where one African chases after another. These are works of fiction that are also works of kaleidoscopic criticism: the map is always bleeding into the territory. If the map is imaginary, the blood, too often, is not.

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The position of the walker, scurrying around at street level, is the opposite of the critic as cartographer and must seem antithetical to the privileged perspective that the critic might hope for. In an essay about walking in the city, Certeau begins by ascending to the top of the World Trade Center and peering off into a "wave of verticals" (91). He sees the whole. Yet the mistrustful reader may be reminded of Harry Lime atop the Ferris wheel, a vantage from which people became insignificant, erasable dots.

That's the thing about the modern map: there are no people on it. For Certeau, walkers create, but blindly, deprived of the cartographer's vision. They "live 'down below,' below the thresholds at which visibility begins. . . . [T]hey are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read." Their knowledge of the spaces they use, he says, "is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms" (93).

But is this intimacy a form of blindness or of insight? In Teju Cole's marvelously Sebaldian novel *Open City*, our tireless walker, a Nigerian in New York, is fascinated by a scale map of the city that was built for the 1964 World's Fair. "It showed, in impressive detail, with almost a million tiny buildings, and with bridges, parks, rivers, and architectural landmarks, the true form of the city," our narrator informs us (150). He is put in mind, naturally, of Borges's cartographers. Descending in a plane, he sees a city that evokes the map, but walking in that city, he sees a hundred other cities furled within it. *La frontera* is always right in front of us.

Walking can seem a humbling metaphor for criticism. There are times when we must sprint, with our eyes fixed only on our quarry; there are even times when we should fly, the better to see the ground from thirty thousand feet. But there is something to be said for walking, by which I mean hoofing, wheeling, crawling, scrambling, dragging ourselves as best we can along paths we share with others. The walker's eye takes in what God's eye misses. We may be lost in thought and found in thought; we may even conclude, with one of Thomas Bernhard's characters—his novella *Gehen* (*Walking*) rises to a fever pitch with an extended meditation on "walking and thinking"—that "the science of walking and the science of thinking are basically a single science" (73). For itinerancy makes the alien familiar and vice versa, because no two walks are ever quite the same. It is a way to experience ownership without property. Walking is what turns spaces into places.

When we walk, then, the map in our head, or in our pocket, is consulted, corrected, discarded, or scribbled on; it is tested and challenged by experience. We color the regions of our map with washes of color, but the colors bleed, and so do we. For people, to the walker, are people-sized, not dots. They must be accommodated. Walkers see gradients where others see fault lines: the walker is no friend of the wall. We recall the narrator of Cavafy's poem "Walls" (here in a fine translation by Daniel Mendelsohn):

> Without pity, without shame, without consideration
> they've built around me enormous, towering walls.
> And I sit here now in growing desperation.
> This fate consumes my mind, I think of nothing else:
> because I had so many things to do out there.

We, too, have "πράγματα πολλά έξω," many things out there, to do. And look where our walking has taken us. Today, teachers and scholars in the humanities have seldom felt more vulnerable. In the United States, we see how power can be gained by depicting Mexicans and Muslims as the barbarian invaders. By charcoaling the word *enemy* on their backs. By sacralizing another set of seventy-two grievances. The possibilities of *Humanität* seem too often to "slip / [o]ut from [our] grip."

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Few of us are tempted by supine placation. "Aux armes, citoyens, / Formez vos bataillons, / Marchons, marchons!" This is the anthem that stirs us. But the risk is that our only light will be "the rockets' red glare." No one need tell you here to stand your ground and succor the beleaguered, to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. That is our fight song.

But a kindred challenge is to recall that persuasion and conversation may have a role, too. It's to think about how to talk across boundaries—how to make ourselves heard by those who don't know why they should listen. To think about how to convey the value of what we do to people who start from very different compass points on the map. We need to find the both-and to supplant the reflex to grasp the either-or: we should be forever reaching across boundaries. All of which is to say: let us never shy away from exploring the many ways of being human, even when they strike us as disturbingly nearby and troublesomely at odds with our own—as the savagery around the corner or across the street.

Talking the talk is how members of our profession walk the walk. And in this pursuit, we could find a worse companion than our Alexandrian street stroller, Cavafy, a poet of aesthetic transport who spoke joy to power, a cosmopolitan of the provinces who knew how to resist complacency, the fearful phantasms of alterity, and imaginations that stopped short at the borderlands. Recall how "Waiting for the Barbarians" ends:

> Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?
> (How serious people's faces have become.)
> Why are the streets and squares emptying so
> rapidly,
> everyone going home so lost in thought?
> Because night has fallen and the
> barbarians have not come.
> And some who have just returned from the
> border say
> there are no barbarians any longer.
> And now, what's going to happen to us
> without barbarians?
> They were, those people, a kind of solution.

Notes

1. A few distinct but overlapping accounts of the origin of the concept of literature: Williams 46–52; Bromwich 1–13; Ross. For a broader discussion of English nationalism and Romanticism, see Butler.

2. See, e.g., Adler; Patten.

3. "Es war nicht so, wie man sich oft und bequem die Sache vorstellt, daß der Kosmopolitismus fade und abgelebt am Boden lag und der junge nationale Gedanke nun leicht und siegreich emporstieg, sondern Kosmopolitismus und Nationalität standen noch geraume Zeit in einer engen Blut- und Lebensgemeinschaft" 'It was not the case, as people have so often comfortably imagined the matter, that cosmopolitanism lay on the ground, dusty and decrepit, while the young national idea soared easily and victoriously; rather, cosmopolitanism and nationalism stood for a considerable time in a close community of blood and life' (27; my trans.).

4. The 1827 conversation is recounted in Eckermann. The two go on to discuss a Chinese novel, which Goethe had read in French. (Probably Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat's *Iu-Kiao-Li; ou, Les deux cousines* [Moutardier, 1826], one of the earliest Chinese novels to be published in a European translation; the Chinese original is Tianhua Zhang Zhuren's *Yu Jiao Li*.) Eckermann wonders, Was it very strange? Goethe replies, "Nicht so sehr als man glauben sollte. Die Menschen denken, handeln und empfinden fast ebenso wie wir, und man fühlt sich sehr bald als ihresgleichen, nur daß bei Ihnen alles klarer, reinlicher und sittlicher zugeht" 'Not so very much as one would have thought. People think, behave, and feel almost exactly as we do, and one very soon feels oneself like them, except that with them everything is clearer, purer, and more moral' (223; my trans.). So Goethe heralds the ethical virtues of what he imagined to be the Chinese tradition. His notion of world literature has been widely discussed; a particularly illuminating discussion appears in Damrosch.

5. See, e.g., Hequembourg. Harvard's first professor of English literature, in 1876, was Francis James Child, an expert on English and Scottish ballads.

6. Starfish are great predators of oysters.

7. To choose what I hope are uninvidious instances: Berlant, as a contribution to affect theory; Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, to queer theory; Caruth, trauma studies; Bhabha, to postcolonial studies; Garrard, to ecocriticism, or environmental criticism; Johns, to book history; Davis, to disability studies; Richardson, to neurocognitive studies; Wolfe, to posthumanism; Morton, to object-oriented ontology; Liu, to digital humanities. Moretti's *Distant*

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Reading helped give currency to the eponymous practice. Sedgwick named the distinction between reparative and paranoid reading in "Paranoid Reading." On the critique of critique and advocacy of postcritical reading, see Felski.

8. "[I]n *Queen Mab* [Shelley's] favored style is assertion" (Leader and O'Neill xxii).

9. Remember that Arnold on Dover Beach was at least contemplating a world of meaning without God.

10. See, e.g., Reinhard Baumgart qtd. in Englund 28: "[D]id [Celan's poem] not display too much enjoyment of art, of the despair that it has once more rendered beautiful?"

11. Martin Mosebach, for example, who won the Büchner in 2007, is the author of *Die Türkin*, a novel that recounts a German man's Anatolian travel with his Turkish girlfriend; Oskar Pastior, who won the Büchner in 2006, was a Romanian-born member of the (largely French) Oulipo.

12. In Michel Houellebecq's *La carte et le territoire*, which pays homage to both Borges and Baudrillard, the protagonist, an artist, makes a specialty of photographing Michelin maps, sometimes in overlay.

13. "Das Wandern ist des Müllers Lust, / das Wandern! / Das muß ein schlechter Müller sein, / dem niemals fiel das Wandern ein, / das Wandern" 'Hiking is the miller's passion, / hiking! / You have to be a bad miller / never to think of hiking, / hiking' (my trans.).

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