

Coherence and the Longing for Modernity in Literary Historiography, or: Why History and Historicism Are Two Things¹

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’Jeg véd jo nok’ – sagde han – ’at der skal være foregaaet et aandeligt Gennembrud i vore Dage. Jeg har hørt Tale om Gennembrudsmænd i Videnskab, Literatur og Kunst. Men det er endnu ikke lykkedes mig at faa Øje paa, hvad det egentlig er, der er bleven gennembrudt, eller hvad det er for Noget, der er brudt igennem.’

[‘I *do* know’ – he said – ‘that there is supposed to have been an intellectual breakthrough in our days. I have heard talk of ‘breakthrough men’ in science, literature and art. But I have not yet succeeded in seeing what has actually *been* broken through or what it is that *has* broken through.’]

- Pater Rüdeshaimer in *Det forjættede Land* [The Promised Land] (1891-95) by Henrik Pontoppidan

Towards the crepuscular hour in both literal and figurative meaning, the aloof clergyman Rüdeshaimer sits with Ragnhild, who was supposed to have been Emanuel Hansted’s chosen one, in the Danish Nobel laureate novelist Henrik Pontoppidan’s first long novel. The reader has been through popular religious revivals and fellowship meetings, parochial intrigues and the battle for the young political party of ‘Venstre’s’ soul. He has even experienced people’s willingness to join the evangelical-missionary side if it implies more power or enough to fill one’s (considerable) belly. Everywhere the reader has encountered dreamers and fantasts including the Quixotic type in the form of the protagonist Emanuel Hansted. We are dealing with men who are busy proclaiming the return of something old or the transition to something new.

¹ This article was originally written in Danish for the forthcoming publication *Det historiske blik. En antologi om historiebrug og historisk metode* (ed. Sofie Kluge, Ulla Kallenbach & Rasmus Vangshardt, Aarhus University Press). I should like to express my gratitude towards my fellow editors for accepting to let me publish it here in this English version.

This appears also to pertain to those who believe themselves to be representatives of the so-called 'Modern Breakthrough' in Danish history. And it is quite the question Rüdeshimer asks: What is it that has become new? What became old because something new arose?

The Great Divide

This longing to identify *a* break in history is not an exclusively Danish phenomenon. The latent desire for that place in history where we became 'modern' and thus also *ipso facto* for a demonstration that *we* are placed on the right side of the divide is pan-European. It simultaneously constitutes a foundational problem regarding the role of history within the humanities. Historiography is laden with dreams of some such break. Pontoppidan masterly mocked the Brandesian terminology and the Grundtvigian epigonism of it on Danish soil, but it exists in countless forms and within most disciplines and genres.

In one of my generation's most defining movies, Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* from 1994, a Black mafia boss is sexually abused by two pale white men, one of them even a police officer. After having been rescued from the violent rape and having shot one of the officers in the abdomen, Marsellus Wallace says the now famous words which must necessarily torment any professor of the period, we have come to know as the Middle Ages:

I'ma call a coupla hard, pipe-hittin' niggers, who'll go to work on the homies here with a pair of pliers and a blow torch. You hear me talkin', hillbilly boy? I ain't through with you by a damn sight. *I'ma get medieval on your ass.* (Tarantino 1994)

What Marsellus has been exposed to seems to him so preposterous that the 'modern' condition, where we do not punish each other with pliers and blow torches, prohibits just retaliation. To 'get medieval on someone's ass' is to stop being civilized, to suspend one's own modernity. Apparently.

Similar patterns can be observed in the area of academia. Medievalists have, at least since the 1970's, been attempting to outdo each other when it comes to describing the problems, which followed in the wake of Jacob Burckhardt's publication of *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* in 1860. Burckhardt's famous claim was that medieval man "erkannte sich nur als Race,

Volk, Partei, Corporation, Familie“ and that in the Middle Ages, “die beiden Seiten des Bewusstseins – nach der Welt hin und nach dem Inneren des Menschen selbst – wie unter einem gemeinsamen Schleier träumend oder halbwach [lagen].“ (Burckhardt 1860, 131)

Ever since, several strategies to overcome this abyss between the Middle Ages and modernity have been introduced, especially through the sprouting academic discipline of ‘medievalism studies.’ It is defined as “the post-medieval idea and study of the Middle Ages and the influence, both scholarly and popular, of this study on Western society after 1500.” (Workman, quoted after Fugelso 2009, 86) Many new medievalism studies concern themselves with public discourse and general media debate and describe how the public is influenced by the idea that you can describe contemporary practices – for instance honor killing, terrorism, the Guantanamo, young adults’ drinking habits or Muslim view on women – as ‘medieval’ when they represent a counterpart to everything ‘we’ would like to be: Civilized, mature, rational. (Patterson 1990, 92)

The Burckhardtian metaphor of aging is recognizable: The medieval man was mentally childish; we have now become mature. In the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten, a reader wrote the following commentary in 2005 as a reaction to the honor killing of a young Pakistani girl: “Many people with Muslim background think and act *humanely* and will never accept *medieval*, Islamic treatment of women.” (Riazi 2005, my italics.) We must thus understand that one can (no longer) regard the people who lived in the Middle Ages as human.

From Burckhardt through Pontoppidan’s Modern Breakthrough and Tarantino’s black mafia boss to contemporary media discourse, this urge towards modernity documents our own narcissism in the wish to stand on the right side of history, and it points to a utopian longing that everything must become new.² We would then be able to escape the judgement that history must repeat itself, and we could at least break free of the sullied contingency and

² This tendency does not, of course, begin with historicism or the rise of the new media – I merely use these as illustrative examples. One could also argue that the tendency is observable with the rise of Christianity or with the French Revolution.

begin to move towards pure necessity. Our longing to (have) become modern is the dream of the end of history in the name of perfectibility.³

The point of this diagnostic cross-section is not another medievalist's attempt to rehabilitate the Middle Ages. On the contrary, the purpose of this essay is to discuss the role of history within comparative literature when we accept the idea that a time in history can be identified when 'we' became modern. It is in this perspective irrelevant whether one believes that this happened in the year 1345, when Petrarch found Cicero's lost *Epistulae ad Atticum* in the library of the cathedral in Verona, or if it were to have happened in a lecture hall in 1871 at Frue Plads in Copenhagen.

The main concern is to show that a possible reservation towards such dreams of modernity is not reactionary or 'anti-modern' but rather a counterweight to overtly confident descriptions of the uniqueness of the modern condition. Subsequently, I will argue that such a correction will not necessarily be achieved through more historicism, no matter if it comes from Basel or from Berkeley, but that it rather lies in the cultivation of the sense of historical continuity. It is not the same thing. What follows is not original but a reminder of the consequences for our relation to history when historicist 'great divides' are installed.

In a metahistorical perspective, the present article demonstrates that identifications of radical rupture in history often work as an attempt to deny the role of the historical within the humanities and especially within the discipline of comparative literature; it furthermore argues that it also influences the possibility of general cultural criticism because it presupposes certain ontological assumptions of time and history and a specific idea of what 'modern society' is. The article concludes by discussing two strategies for a more coherent notion of literary history in C.S. Lewis' historiographical essays and Bruno Latour's theory of science respectively. This leads to a claim of the inevitability of history within the humanities: One cannot dispose of it, even if that was desirable; luckily, it is not.

³ There are, of course, other ideas of modernity than this one, but the dream of the end of history is undeniably one important version. See below for an exposition.

Danish Modernities

The historiographical logic of great divides can be observed within most national philologies. If we begin in Denmark, the urge towards identification of a great divide is clear in relation to the aforementioned ‘Modern Breakthrough’ as the Pater Rüdeshimer clearly senses. We are not dealing with a use of the Middle Ages as the ‘wholly other’ of modernity but a quite regular idea of the fact that Georg Brandes and the first generation of authors within the Modern Breakthrough introduced a final break in Danish literary history when ‘we’ finally grew up mentally. Certain of Brandes’ formulations, especially from the introduction to his lectures on ‘main currents’ in European literature from the 19th century, have ever since been taken into account for the idea that a passing can be identified in Danish literary history from Romantic and superstitious childhood to enlightened and rational maturity. Even though Brandes’ lectures were about European currents, the words about what was happening ‘at home’ had immeasurable consequences. Brandes made the now familiar claim: “Dass eine Literatur in unseren Tagen lebt, zeigt sich dadurch, dass sie Probleme zur Debatte bringt.” (Brandes 1872, 8)⁴ This realism has been practiced extensively ever since. As I have documented elsewhere in the case of Henrik Pontoppidan, it is observable how an author, who was distinctly torn between romanticism and realism and who did not write literature which depicted any form of ‘progress’ in the human spirit, is one-sidedly treated as a realistic author in all larger literary histories. This is even often done with precisely the argument that Pontoppidan was ‘modern.’ (Vangshardt 2017)

Another Danish example is Anders Thyrring Andersen’s examination of later uses of Brandes in Danish historiography of literature. With his enormous work on Martin A. Hansen, Thyrring Andersen has documented how such different literary scholars as Torben Brostrøm, Peter Madsen and Anne-Marie Mai talk of the ‘transition’ from poets of the Heretica movement (Hansen,

⁴ I quote in the German translation of 1872 because the standard English translation of 1906 did not include the full introductory chapter and thus missed this essential line of Danish literary history. It is of immense importance that Brandes’ life work *not* be reduced to this catch phrase. Brandes regretted that it had become so emblematic for his oeuvre and in 1916 in a letter to Francis Bull, he underscored that had just said it *once* and *never* repeated it. (Quoted in Knudsen 2004, 496f.) The point to quote it in the above is historiographical: It became *the* defining phrase of the Modern Breakthrough and a (telling) unfortunate evergreen in Danish histories of literature.

Frank Jæger, Ole Wivel) to a 1960's modernist as Klaus Rifbjerg as the final transition to a

vivid, reality-committed, internationally oriented and contemporaneous-conscious literature [...] Brandes' ideas about an internalization and modernization of literature was carried on by the young Brostrøm and his thoughts on a modernism, which was engaged with the new worldview, anthropology and modern psychology of its time, and thereby was able to criticize outdated forms of poetry. (Mai quoted after Andersen 2015, 47).

The passing from something outdated to something modern is clearly depicted. Now, the caesura is simply displaced to the year 1960.

European Modernities

In other European countries, literary historians have often been tempted to put the beginning of modernity at the moment the Germans often call 'die frühe Neuzeit,' the paradigm example being William Shakespeare (1564-1616) who was apotheosized in the *Goethezeit*. The case of Shakespeare and the dream of modernity has been thoroughly documented. Two reminders from different ends of the spectrum should therefore suffice.

Harold Bloom's worship of literary genius has with greatest popular force established the thought of Shakespeare's 'invention of the human.' The claim is that before the early modern period, notions of the self as a morally accountable entity may have existed, but Shakespeare was the one to invent 'personality:' "Insofar as we ourselves value, and deplore, our own personalities, we are the heirs of Falstaff and of Hamlet." (Bloom 1998, 4) In the other end of the playing field, Shakespeare is not in the same way the active creator of the modern self, but nonetheless he is the sublime expression of the sudden social genesis of it. Stephen Greenblatt, the founder of New Historicism, has thus in the same way become a proponent of the idea of modernity's birth in the Renaissance and Shakespeare as this phenomenon's distinct image. (Greenblatt 1980)⁵

⁵ This also gives reason to a substantial clarification of terms. As the Danish historian Jes Fabricius Møller has noted in a forthcoming article not yet published, it creates confusion that the English language cannot easily distinguish between *Historismus* and *Historizismus* – a problem of course not made any less serious through the fact that Anglo-Saxon 'New Historicism' has its roots in Continental *Historismus*. It is, however, important to remember that Greenblatt's *New Historicism* rightfully should be used as a token-form of the specific historiographical school of *Historismus* and not the type-form of *Historizismus*.

Even if the above examples of the specific framing of modernities are not accepted, the permanent urge towards historical logics of break is well documented. Both by those who renounce it and by those who practice it. That goes for C.S. Lewis with the description of the ‘great divide’ between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (Lewis 1944; 1969), Peter Sloterdijk, who in *Sphären II* describes the end of history and the latent radicality of modernity (Sloterdijk 1999, 519),⁶ for Bruno Latour (1993 [1991]) with the telling title *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes* and for Rita Felski’s work to document the epistemology of modernism whereby she has called attention to the fact that “the quintessentially modern gesture [is the] disavowing and disclaiming [of] the past.” (Felski 2003, 503) The Chaucer expert Lee Patterson has called it “modernism’s purist erasure of history” (Patterson 1990, 88) and in this relation even gestured at the deconstructivist Paul de Man who also thought that “the cultural imperative of modernity” does not rely on a fixed or specific point in history but on the assumption of *one* break, no matter whether that be the Renaissance or 20th century modernism: “A desire to wipe out whatever came earlier in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure.” (De Man quoted after Patterson 1990, 88)

Postmodern Salvation?

Against these provisional forays in literary longings for modernity, it could be objected that they represent a thing of the past – so to speak. History has resolved the problem as we are no longer modern. Those who believe that we have lived through modernity will claim that we have hence moved on. I am of course here alluding to the postmodern revolt against cohesive explanation and grand scale stories about ourselves, especially known from Jean-François Lyotard’s *La condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir* from 1979. If we have become postmodern, it is due to the fact that we no longer believe in myths of progress or in a *telos* of history and can thereby forget about old ideas of a ‘grand’ transition or a ‘deep’ break in history.

⁶ In Denmark first pointed out by Goldbæk 2014, 220.

Against such a postulate of postmodernity as the cure for our longing towards breaks with the past, at least two objections can be made. Firstly, it is a fact that in general public discourses, in the 'broad' humanities and in recent literary histories, no one seems to tire of identifying *the* definitive break(through) in history. In a subjunctive clause to this argument, a Bruno Latour would also remind us of the logical impossibility of being postmodern if we have never been modern to begin with. (Latour 1993, 46) Secondly, it is important to remember on the general level that even if a postmodern condition were the correct description of our times, the foundational historico-philosophical problem has not changed: We are still epistemologically and existentially segregated from the world of ideas of the Middle Ages or from the time before the Modern Breakthrough: A historical abyss or great divide no. 2 has just been installed. Furthermore, the literary-historical mark of modernity is not a belief in 'grand narratives' in the plural; the original European myths are certainly premodern. Literary-historical modernity is the belief in exactly one *grand récit*: That we are different from all those who lived and wrote before the break.

The Real Presence of History – and of Metaphor

I mention these subjects to suggest the essentiality of ontological assumptions of history when dealing with works of art. There are at least three foundational problems with the described longing for modernity and an ontology of 'breaks.' Firstly, the curse of obsolescence seems to be the price to pay. As in the case of Anne-Marie Mai where Rifbjerg marks the abandonment of 'outdated' forms of poetry or as in the case of Greenblatt where everything before the year 1500 becomes a *terra incognita*. (Patterson 99) This historical logic often has a pedagogical or didactical purpose. We build these boxes of periods for the students to learn how to play with them. But the price of this rectangular *Bildung* is equally high. If you have accepted these kinds of divides, the alienation effect of premodern texts is dramatically increased: How are you to defend the greatness of, say, the Danish Romantic N.F.S. Grundtvig's poetry if you have just lectured the students on the Brandesian model of the childish state of Danish Romanticism? How to make them experience Beowulf's torn mind between the lost life in the hall and the promise of future salvation if no

personality is to exist before the great divide? Something happens to our ability and possibility to teach and write about literary classics which suffer the unfortunate fate of being placed in the premature phase of our civilization. How are you to pass on the joy of great literature which has ended on the wrong side when historians of literature describe them as difference (in essence) from ‘us’? Their very existential truth potential is weakened in favor of teachable periodizations.⁷

The problem can, however, not be reduced to one of didactics. We also must ask what happens to the possible experience of a common Europe of ideas beyond present-day politics if the historical logic of rupture and break is to be upheld; an experience which we might describe as a ‘European identity’ and which was erstwhile rather popular. It is an evident wish in more recent literary historiographies that a common-European identity be established beyond the national states and the national philologies which for so long were the natural habitat of comparative literature. What happens to the pan-European primordial myths if they are essentially different from us or if history has ended? Ulysses’ adventures on the oceans with the purpose to learn man’s virtues and vices; Aeneas’ road from Troy to Rome; Hrothgar’s sorrow; Dante’s hell – and his Paradise. Logically speaking, this stems from a time annihilated in its absolute foreignness to us if the logic of break is sustained. They can at best stand as childhood memories in the windowsill: But there, you fade away when your function has been reduced to ornamentation or to stigma.

The question is also what we are to do with ‘modern’ texts which articulate experiences of the coherence of history. In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy can upon first sight of Moscow let Napoleon see that “this city was evidently living with the full force of its own life. By the indefinite signs which, even at a distance, distinguish a living body from a dead one, Napoleon from the Poklonny Hill perceived the throb of life in the town and felt, as it were, the breathing of that great and beautiful body.” (Tolstoy 2010, 935)⁸ This is an unambiguously

⁷ This line of argument is akin to Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s criticism of naturalized and ‘scientific’ views of history and to their arguments against overtly confidential views of human consciousness. See the end of the section ‘New Friends’ below for a consideration of the present argument’s relation to this tradition.

⁸ Trans. Louise Maude, rev. Amy Mandelker.

metaphysical experience of a city and the reason for the following exclamation: “This Asiatic city with her innumerable churches. Holy Moscow.” (ibid.) The latter expression relates to either the mystical idea of Moscow as the ‘third Rome’ or the sense of Moscow’s historical continuation with Jerusalem – in the middle of the birth of literary realism. The past is not always that distant. If you are to understand Kutuzov or Alexander in this modern masterpiece, the premodern idea, known for example from the *Aeneid*’s story of the transition from Troy to Rome, is indispensable. It is harmful to ignore this fundamental continuity, but it is bound to become just that *terra incognita* which debar the moderns from such continuity. The modernist idea of history can therefore not only be harmful to the experience of the coherence of history but also brings with it a natural preference towards anti-metaphysical stances.

To stay in the categories of example, the phenomenon is of course also identifiable in Denmark. A similar experience of historical real presence can be found in Martin A. Hansen, no matter how outdated he might be in certain versions of the great divide. *Lykkelige Kristoffer* (1945) activates an experience of all historical time’s unbroken continuity. In opposition to ontological over-periodization (i.e. historicism) which would claim that Hansen too worked with absolute breaks in history – in *Orm og Tyr* he supposedly just established it before the Middle Ages – it should be evident that a novel like *Lykkelige Kristoffer* investigates heathen, antique and Judeo-Christian origins alongside the Nordic Middle Ages. They become present existential options and possibilities which do not mutually exclude each other. Kristoffer dies in the occupied Copenhagen of 1536 which becomes a “rainy Troy and Jerusalem.” By his spiritual mentor, he is told that “we all carry Troy in our hearts,” and his ideas of guilt, motivating his heroic deeds, are in accordance with Hansen’s notion of the Nordic Middle Ages. (Vangshardt 2018) In both a didactical and a European-intellectual scope, Tolstoy’s and Hansen’s experiences of what might be called ‘the real presence of intellectual history’ appear deeply desirable. It paves a way to put readers or students in contact with Troy, Jerusalem or Rome. Who does not see the necessity today to speak of this peculiar fusion of spatial and temporal unity across the continent? But categories of break *de jure* – if not *de facto* – make the belief in such real presence of history in existence and culture difficult.

The third foundational problem concerns the preconditions of beauty in historical prisms of modernity. In the beginning of the 1960's, the philosopher Hans Blumenberg tried to develop paradigms for a metaphorology and thereby coined the term 'absolute metaphors.' (Blumenberg 1960, 22) His goal was to show that certain metaphors exist which cannot be reduced to their possible origin in rhetorical desires to ornament discourse with the purpose of persuasion: Beauty and purpose are, in other words, not of essential identity. Blumenberg's point was that these metaphors seem to contain an ontological surplus which makes them resistant to rationality without losing their force of attraction on man – prior to and after the sexually mature period of the human spirit. Blumenberg's examples are images of coherence between truth as light or power, the world as a stage or as a clockwork, fate as a travel or as a voyage on the ocean, nature as a book. One could also add life as a dream. The argument is foremost systematic; it is about metaphor and its semantics but in subordinate clauses, a paradoxical historical point emerges: These metaphors hold a more or less permanent place in the European literary canon, at least from Homer to Goethe. That is a period much longer than the period between Hamlet's problematization of existence and the possible end of modernity in the middle of the 20th century. At the same time, these metaphors hold a historical potential as they appear to comprise a 'remainder' (Ger.: *Restbestand*) which has proven a counterweight to dreams of theorems of modernity. Blumenberg would see this point as a subtle correction of the logic of epochal difference rather than a proof of continuity. But his early metaphorology still implies a peculiar view of beauty; it is not subject to epistemological and historical rupture, especially not to those who wish that modernity be a *Stunde Null* in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance or from the 'feelings' of romanticism to the 'rationality' of realism.

Another way to formulate that is to claim that the alleged shift towards modernity's mature rationality would make us blind to that which makes literature an autonomous source of knowledge. Bruno Latour can here be taken into account for a description of the paradox and a key definition of modernity. The moderns are, so Latour, all those people, no matter where they were born, who feel themselves pushed by time's arrow in such a way that behind them

lies an archaic past unhappily combining Facts and Values, and before them lies a more or less radiant future in which the distinction between Facts and Values will finally be sharp and clear. The modern ideal type is the one who is heading – who was heading – from that past to that future by way of a “modernization front” whose advance could not be stopped. It was thanks to such a pioneering front, such a Frontier, that one could allow oneself to qualify as “irrational” everything that had to be torn away, and as “rational” everything toward which it was necessary to move in order to progress. Thus the Moderns were those who were freeing themselves of attachments to the past in order to advance toward freedom. In short, who were heading from darkness into light – into Enlightenment. (Latour 2013, 8f)

If it is correct that we have transferred this pattern to the way we write literary history, it is self-evident that it must get rid of all that that which is ‘irrational.’ And all of the mentioned Blumenbergian metaphors are. That is why they are absolute. It would also constitute an explanation as to why William Shakespeare or Henrik Pontoppidan necessarily must be placed on the modern side of history: Otherwise, we would have to part with them. They could and would no longer be our kindred spirits.⁹

New Friends

Medievalists have as mentioned long sensed the problems when a divide is established between their period and the Renaissance. But oddly, it is within another discipline that the criticism has reached a broader audience: anthropological science studies with a seemingly hypermodern thinker as the above quoted Latour. Latour is without a doubt the contemporaneous philosopher who has shown the greatest sense of this urge to identify a radical break in history. He reminds us that anthropology can document that the passage of time can – and has been – interpreted in a number of ways. The moderns have found their own:

⁹ Patterson’s sarcastic expression for why we like Hamlet so much: “We recognize Hamlet as a kindred spirit: he expresses our modernity.” (Patterson 1990, 98)

The moderns have a peculiar propensity for understanding time that passes as if it were really abolishing the past behind it. They all take themselves for Attila, in whose footsteps no grass grows back. They do not feel that they are removed from the Middle Ages by a certain number of centuries, but that they are separated by Copernican revolutions, epistemological breaks, epistemic ruptures so radical that nothing of that past survives in them – nothing of that past ought to survive in them. (Latour 1993, 68f)

The powerful image of the modern Attilatic self-understanding is an efficient comparison and has a future within comparative literature but has not yet been developed as a diagnostic tool for the way literary history is written. Rita Felski, who never tires of quoting Latour, is probably the literary scholar who has come closest to an application of the term, but as her goal is systematical, not historical, there is still potential for further use. At the same time, Felski appears to be mostly concerned with the experimental avantgarde and the new pop art, but seldomly with the European canon. As she notes in the increasingly popular “Context stinks!” from 2011:

The trick is to think temporal interdependency without telos, movement without supersession: pastness is part of who we are, not an archaic residue, a regressive force, a source of nostalgia, or a return of the repressed. Latour’s notorious assertion that we have never been modern does not dispute the fact that our lives differ from those of medieval peasants or Renaissance courtiers, but insists that these differences can be absurdly overdrawn, thanks to our fondness for fables of rationalization, the disenchantment of the world, the sundering of subjects from objects, the radicalism of modern critique, and other testimonies to our own exceptional status. (Felski 2011, 578f)

Even if it is a question that is not likely to interest Felski, it is relevant to consider which literary histories would have emerged from such an understanding of works of art, here especially those already canonized. When ‘pastness’ is part of what we are, and not that which must be overcome, it could be that the same truth was observable in masterpieces which have become common to all Europe. The point in this case is that this could be a canonical perspective on a Felski idea on how best to deal with works of art. In this way, the new and quite widespread actor-network theory within the humanities becomes an odd couple together with a more traditional paradigm of historical continuity. Felski would perhaps herself be against that very concept of canon, but it is an example of her dream of ‘new friends:’

Artworks can only survive and thrive by making friends, creating allies, attracting disciples, inciting attachments, latching on to receptive hosts. If they are not to fade quickly from view, they must persuade people to hang them on walls, watch them in movie theaters, purchase them on Amazon, dissect them in reviews, debate them with their friends. (Felski 2011, 584)

It is paradoxical that the Felski who wanted to remind us that ‘pastness’ is part of our existence here only seems to be thinking in spatial networks. A factor almost entirely forgotten again is temporality, historical continuity, coherence, but the above-mentioned network expressions are of course applicable to the Bible, *The Aeneid* and *The Divine Comedy*. Felski’s main focus lies elsewhere, but might it not be a fruitful alliance with modern theory if historians of literature could show the relevance of a translation to the *Anschauungsform* of time?

To the historical dimension of comparative literature, the concept of ‘new friends’ is simultaneously constructive. If comparative literary criticism is to gain new insight into the classics, which are part of what and who we are, it must have them make new friends. It is also in those odd couples that the division between ‘reaction’ and ‘progressivity’ in the critique of dreams of modernity could be overcome. Felski’s vocabulary makes it sound as if the self-proclaimed dinosaur and ‘reactionary’ historian of literature C.S. Lewis has been transformed into one of her ‘new friends.’ In his inaugural lecture at Cambridge in 1954, he declared that:

I do not think you need fear that the study of a dead period, however prolonged and however sympathetic, need prove an indulgence in nostalgia or an enslavement to the past. In the individual life, as the psychologists have taught us, it is not the remembered but the forgotten past that enslaves us. I think the same is true of society. (Lewis 1969, 12)

At the same time, Lewis used his lecture for just such an exercise in creating new friendships in literary history. For instance, he suggested that even though Gibbon saw the Christianization of the Roman Empire as the ultimate fall of cadence and thus was able to insert a great divide between the Antique and the Middle Ages, it would today be more relevant to see the kinship between *The Aeneid* and *The Beowulf*. They both describe a *translation imperii* in a literal and a spiritual sense respectively: From Troy to Rome, from life in the hall to life in Paradise. Lewis recognized the need for periodization but reshaped it through the idea of ‘new friends.’ It was not as radical as it could have been,

but the point remains: “Between Jane Austen and us, but not between her and Shakespeare, Chaucer, Alfred, Virgil, Homer, or the Pharaohs, comes the birth of the machines.” (Lewis 1969, 10) This was obviously a new ‘great divide,’ as Lewis himself would have said, but it was also an expression of new flirts in the great canonical circle of friends.

This little secret connection between Latour-Felski and Lewis is supposed to suggest two questions and a fact. Question 1. Which ‘new friends’ would the canonical texts make if we began to look for affinity and forgot the belief in the agents of history as prototypes of Attila the Hun? Question 2. Would such an approach not contribute to the reestablishment of a common-European frame of reference across the generations? Fact 1. We are here dealing with a possibility of staying within the tradition of canon thinking and ‘Great Books’ without being liable to accusations of reaction. In contrast to the common accusations against ‘the reactionaries,’ such a history of literature would enable a common-European experience of geographical and intellectual coherence. Moscow is after all only holy because it is connected to Jerusalem or Rome. And the idea of Rome was conceived on the shores of Troy – in present-day Turkey.

A focus on the temporal aspect of the network would in itself not be original or new and is as such the expression of an older, Continental pattern of thought. The literary historiography of the German romantics practiced the idea of the power of imagination to create coherence across time. An example could be A.W. Schlegel’s lectures on dramatic art and literature (Schlegel 1817) or it could be the late romantic Joseph von Eichendorff’s literary history. (Eichendorff 1854) Another dynamic and cohesive idea of literary history can be found in Walter Benjamin’s theory of the German *Trauerspiel* (Benjamin 1928), in E.R. Curtius’ transition history between Latin Middle Ages and European modernity (Curtius 1948) and in Erich Auerbach’s thinking on *figura* and *mimesis*. (Auerbach 1938; 1946).

That also gives reason to another clarification. A stronger consciousness of continuity rather than break does not necessarily lead to the cultivation of a new metaphysics of presence where the immediate and unmitigated presence of meaning is worshipped. In the mentioned examples, we are rather dealing

with the suggestion that certain patterns, typologies, motifs and metaphors collide over time. It is in the encounter of texts between that which is foreign *and* that which is like that continuity arises. Just like a reader's encounter with historical texts will be an experience of distance and closeness, present and past, at the same time.

The denial of a possible charge of 'presentism' can also be supported by the affinity to modes of thought in modern Hermeneutical philosophy from Heidegger to Gadamer. The argument that we need more continuity and less rupture echoes Gadamer's claim that "in Wahrheit gehört die Geschichte nicht uns, sondern wir gehören ihr." (Gadamer 2010, 281) It might also seem to be a continuation of Heidegger's insistence that "das Sein dieses Seienden [i.e. *Dasein*] durch Geschichtlichkeit konstituiert wird." (Heidegger 2006, 382) The reason for an explication of this philosophical kinship is that Gadamer's hermeneutics (if not always Heidegger's phenomenology) are not liable to charges of neither 'presentism' in the sense that it is contemporary interests which drive the interpretation of texts nor of claims of interpretational subjectivism. The temporal logic of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics as developed throughout *Wahrheit und Methode* is not the dominion of the present over past or future but an elaborate attempt to understand how the moment of interpretation is one of 'deep temporality,' where the temporalities of past, present and future enrich each other. This is for example made clear in the lucid section on "Die Zeitlichkeit des Ästhetischen" in *Wahrheit und Methode* (Gadamer 2010, 126-133) and later on explicated in the essay on "Die Aktualität des Schönen" (Gadamer 1993, 94-142).¹⁰ In the wake of the publication of *Wahrheit und Methode*, E.D. Hirsch suggested that Gadamer's use of the term "Applikation" (e.g. Gadamer 2010, 316) could lead to subjectivism. (Hirsch 1967, 251) That is not correct. Gadamer's hermeneutics presuppose the possibility that the foreignness of the text and its "überlegener Anspruch" (Gadamer 2010, 316) function as an exchange between past and present rather than the latter's subjugation of the former. The same would go for the notorious concept of 'prejudice.' Along with application and the "Vorgriff der

¹⁰ Heidegger's phenomenology equally operates with such a unity of the 'ecstasies of time.' See e.g. Heidegger 2006, 328: "Die Zeitigung in der Einheit der Ekstasen."

Vollkommenheit,” they are neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad,’ they rather constitute the transcendental preconditions of “das Wunder des Verstehens.” (316).¹¹ I conclude this consideration about ‘new friends’ with Gadamer and Heidegger because they show a way to see that an enhanced sense of historical continuity does not (necessarily) imply metaphysics or presence or straight-forward subjectivist presentism. They do however show there is no need to think of modernity as the annihilation of the past or the dominion of the present.

Conclusion

The point does not have to be that we have never been modern. But the point *is* that this modernity is ascribed wrong predicates when modernity means Attilatic trampling, for the past so clearly lives in us. Perhaps we have been modern, but this has not made history come to an end. History is inevitable, also within the humanities, and that is a good thing. It is not about generally accusing the moderns of lacking historicity. Greenblatt’s new historicism also has a concept of historicity – Jacob Burckhardt and Jules Michelet are the explicit role models. In Greenblatt, it is just sign systems and social energies which make out the contextualization. In 1871, Brandes thought that there were *historical* reasons for the fact that Danish literature had remained reactionary and not yet swam in the dialectical wave which would unavoidably absorb the reaction and then lead to more realism. The historian Oswald Spengler was attentive to this determinism: “Auch die Verlagerung des Anfangspunktes ‘der Neuzeit’ von den Kreuzzügen zur Renaissance und von da zum Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts beweist nur, dass man das Schema selbst für unerschütterlich hielt.“ (Spengler 2017, 45)

The problem is thus not a lack of historicity but the urge towards a hurtful version of it in form of hard historicism. To follow Rita Felski’s line of thinking: History does not consist in a series of closed boxes lined up next to each other. “History is not a box [...] conventional models of historicizing and contextualizing prove deficient in accounting for the transtemporal movement and affective resonance of particular texts.” (Felski 2011, 574) In short:

¹¹ I have written more extensively (if essayistic) on this ‘Hermeneutical problem.’ See Vangshardt 2016.

Historicism is rarely able to explain why certain texts, especially those which have become classics, have spoken and do speak to people across the centuries because historicism is essentially the closing of boxes. Thus, highly different historicist strategies – from Burckhardt over Greenblatt to the Danish tradition – paradoxically weaken the experience of historical continuity.

The urge to see oneself separated from the past, both from the classical era and even more so from the pre-industrial, through epistemological breaks and Copernican revolutions (Latour), hurts our possibilities for true appreciation of the artworks handed down to us through history. It weakens the sense of the fact that the past is part of what we are. It is of greater importance to exercise the feeling of historical continuity than to teach the boxes of historicist contexts. Or, to put it in another way, as it is implied in Tarantino's generational classic: Don't be square.

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