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Wai Chee Dimock: Through Other Continents

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Introduction: Planet as Duration and Extension

ON APRIL 14, 2003, the Iraqi National Library and the Islamic library in the Religious Ministry were burned to the ground. For months before this happened, archaeologists had been warning the United States government that an invasion of Iraq would pose the gravest threat to legacies from the Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian civilizations, going back ten thousand years. After the invasion, the same archaeologists urged the U.S.-led coalition to observe the “international law of belligerent occupation” and protect the artifacts and archives left vulnerable by the conduct of war.¹ The coalition forces had in fact been protecting a number of selective sites, notably the oilfields. But buildings housing ancient manuscripts were not on that valued list. No military personnel was present when the looters and arsonists came. When a journalist, Robert Fisk of the *London Independent*, ran over to report the attack to the U.S. Marines Civil Affairs Bureau, mentioning that the buildings were only five minutes away, easily identifiable by the hundred-foot flames leaping from the windows and the smoke visible from a distance of three miles, still no action was taken.²

The entire contents of the two libraries were reduced to ashes. According to the Associated Press, these included one of the oldest surviving copies of the Qur’an, ancient Arabic linguistic treatises, records from the caliphate when Iraq was part of the Ottoman Empire, as well as records from the Abbasid period, an archive “dating back a millennium.” These documents, produced when Baghdad was the cultural center of the Arab world, had survived by sheer luck for a length of time that said something about the human species as a whole: its extended sojourn on this earth, its ability to care for objects in its safekeeping. The destruction of these records in 2003 says something about the human species as well, in ways we might not care to think about.

The marines certainly did not think about it. Operating under a military timetable, and under the short chronology of a young nation, they were largely indifferent to the history of the world. That history, in existence long before the United States came into being, has an uncanny way of multiplying references for current events. For the archives of Baghdad had in fact been destroyed once before. In 1258, the Mongols, led by Genghis

Khan's grandson Hulegu, had sacked the city and emptied the contents of its libraries into the Tigris River, so much so that the water turned black. Modern Iraqis see the actions of the United States as yet another installment of that long-running saga: "The modern Mongols, the new Mongols did that. The Americans did that."³ All of these made no sense to the marines. The year 1258 was long ago and far away. It is separated by 745 years from 2003. The United States has nothing to do with it.

This book is an extended argument against that view, and against the all-too-common image of time underwriting it. This is a spatialized image: time here looks a bit like a measuring tape, with fixed segments, fixed unit lengths, each assignable to a number. The distance between any two events is measured by the distance between these numbers, telling us whether they are remote or proximate, pertinent or not pertinent. Standardization reigns. Benedict Anderson and Anthony Giddens see this as the mark of modernity, linked to the rise of the nation-state and the rule of the mechanical clock. These two, the nation and the clock, not only unify time but also "dis-embed" it, removing it from local contexts, local irregularities, and abstracting it into a metric, at once "empty and homogeneous."⁴ The guiding spirit is serial numbers, doubling here as chronological dates.⁵ On the strength of these dates, the ancient and the modern can be certified to be worlds apart, never to be in contact. An immutable gulf separates them, as immutable as, say, the gulf between 1258 and 2003.

Is this always the case? Are the properties of time truly identical to the properties of number?⁶ And do modern human beings always experience time as a measuring tape, uniform and abstract, untouched by locality, and untouched by the differential weight of the past? I would like to argue not. The uneven pace of modernity suggests that standardization is not everywhere the rule. In many parts of the non-Western world, a very different ontology of time prevails.⁷ And since, thanks to global military ventures, this non-Western world is now inexorably present to the West, these alternate durations are inexorably present as well. For an Iraqi, the distance between 1258 and 2003 is nothing like the distance between these dates for an American. There is nothing empty about this stretch of time. It cannot be rationalized and fitted into the semantic scope of American English. The dates are not just numbers; they are bound up with Arabic, with the long history of a turbulent locale, and saturated by its passions. The short chronology of the United States is not adequate to that history, just as its numerical order is not adequate to those passions.

It is in this context, against the glaring inadequacy of a nation-based model in world politics, that I would like to point to its parallel inadequacy in literary studies. For too long, American literature has been seen as a world apart, sufficient unto itself, not burdened by the chronol-

ogy and geography outside the nation, and not making any intellectual demands on that score. An Americanist hardly needs any knowledge of English literature, let alone Persian literature, Hindu literature, Chinese literature. It is as if the borders of knowledge were simply the replicas of national borders. And yet, what does it mean to set aside a body of writing as “American”? What assumptions enable us to take an adjective derived from a territorial jurisdiction and turn it into a mode of literary causality, making the latter reflexive of and indeed coincidental with the former?

Nationhood, on this view, is endlessly reproduced in all spheres of life. This reproductive logic assumes that there is a seamless correspondence between the temporal and spatial boundaries of the nation and the boundaries of all other expressive domains. And, because this correspondence takes the form of a strict entailment—because its causality goes all the way up and all the way down—it is also assumed that there is a literary domain lining up in just the same way. This is why the adjective “American” can serve as a literary epithet. Using it, we limit ourselves, with or without explicit acknowledgment, to an analytic domain foreclosed by definition, a kind of scholarly unilateralism. Literature here is the product of one nation and one nation alone, analyzable within its confines.

American literary studies as a discipline began with this premise. And yet, as witnessed by the recent outpouring of work aspiring to the “transnational” and the “postnational,” the analytic adequacy of the sovereign state has been increasingly called into question.⁸ *Through Other Continents* reflects this sea change. The preposition “through” is especially important to my argument. I have in mind a form of indebtedness: what we called “American” literature is quite often a shorthand, a simplified name for a much more complex tangle of relations. Rather than being a discrete entity, it is better seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures. These are input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment—connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world. Active on both ends, they thread America texts into the topical events of other cultures, while also threading the long durations of those cultures into the short chronology of the United States. This double threading thickens time, lengthens it, shadowing in its midst the abiding traces of the planet’s multitudinous life.

I would like to propose a new term—“deep time”—to capture this phenomenon. What this highlights is a set of longitudinal frames, at once projective and recessional, with input going both ways, and binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations, a densely

interactive fabric. Restored to this, American literature emerges with a much longer history than one might think. This elongation is effected partly through its off-center circulation in the world and partly through the presence of alternate measures—African, Asian, and European—unfolding in its midst. Literature is the home of nonstandard space and time. Against the official borders of the nation and against the fixed intervals of the clock, what flourishes here is irregular duration and extension, some extending for thousands of years or thousands of miles, each occasioned by a different tie and varying with that tie, and each loosening up the chronology and geography of the nation.

Dates such as 1776 are misleading for just reason, for the temporal duration for American literature surely did not begin at just that point, that upper limit. Nor did it begin at 1620, when the Plymouth Colony was settled. These putative beginnings, monumentalized and held up like so many bulwarks against the long histories of other continents and the long history of America as a Native American habitat, cannot in fact fulfill their insulating function. The continuum of historical life does not grant the privilege of autonomy to any spatial locale; it does not grant the privilege of autonomy to any temporal segment. The nation, as a segmenting device, is vulnerable for just that reason. It is constantly stretched, punctured, and infiltrated. Territorial sovereignty is poor prophylactic.

This book explores some of the consequences of this breakdown in sovereignty. As an associative form, the nation-state is a late arrival in human history; it had a finite beginning and, just conceivably, it might also have a finite end. Rather than naturalizing its clock and its border, I try to loosen up both. What would happen if we go beyond 1776 and 1620, if we trace threads of relation to the world that antedate these allegedly founding moments? What would American literature look like then, restored to a *longue durée*, a scale enlargement along the temporal axis that also enlarges its spatial compass?

Scale enlargement is, of course, most eloquently proposed by Fernand Braudel and by historians of the *Annales* school, as an alternative to standard national histories, organized by dates and periodized by decades, if not by years. Against such thin slices of time, Braudel proposes “a history to be measured in centuries this time: the history of the long, even of the very long time span, of the *longue durée*.”⁹ This *longue durée* yields a different archive, data of different nature and scope. It also brings to light a different analytic fabric, throwing into relief trajectories and connections that might otherwise have been obscured:

For the historian, accepting the *longue durée* entails a readiness to change his style, his attitudes, a whole reversal in his thinking, a whole new way of conceiving of social affairs. It means becoming used to a

slower tempo, which sometimes almost borders on the motionless . . . [I]t is in relation to these expanses of slow-moving history that the whole of history is to be rethought, as if on the basis of an infrastructure. All the stages, all the thousands of stages, all the thousand explosions of historical time can be understood on the basis of these depths, this semistillness.¹⁰

For Braudel, it is the slow tempo of time that gives a true sense of history: a structure of evolving relations, a structure of everyday ties, rather than a few executive dates. Scale enlargement along the temporal axis changes our very sense of the connectedness among human beings. It also suggests that different investigative contexts might need different time frames, with no single one serving as an all-purpose metric. Some historical phenomena need large-scale analysis. They need hundreds, thousands, or even billions of years to be recognized for what they are: phenomena constituted by their temporal extension, with a genealogy much longer than the life span of any biological individual, and interesting for just that reason.¹¹ A shorter time frame would have cut them off in midstream, would have obscured the fact of their cumulation.

In the hands of Immanuel Wallerstein, the *longue durée* has served as a pivot to lay bare the folly of shoehorning large-scale developments into the chronology of a single nation. Only a “world-system” can bear the explanatory weight of deep structural transformations. Of course, for Wallerstein, the emergence of capitalism is the prime example of such deep structural transformations; his large-scale model is geared specifically toward this analytic object.¹² Without disagreeing with him, I would like to suggest, nonetheless, that there are other phenomena, not reducible to capitalism, that also unfold against long durations, requiring scale enlargement for their analysis. World religions, for one, invite us to think of the world’s populations as a locally inflected and yet globally connected unit. The morphology of language, especially a language as diverse and dispersed as English, likewise presents us with an array of vernaculars, creolized forms developed through centuries and spread across continents. Then there are categories of experience, such as beauty or death, that seem not entirely predicated on the temporal and spatial boundaries of the nation-state. This is also the case with long-lasting genres, such as epic and novel, with thousands of years behind them, and demanding analytic frames of comparable magnitude. Finally, the concept of a global civil society, by its very nature, invites us to think of the planet as a plausible whole, a whole that, I suggest, needs to be mapped along the temporal axis as well as the spatial, its membership open not only to contemporaries but also to those centuries apart.

The question is very much a question of scale. Gayatri Spivak speaks of “planetarity” as a never-to-be-realized horizon, a “catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility.”¹³ She urges us to hazard it for just that reason. This book takes that risk. It is an attempt to rethink the shape of literature against the history and habitat of the human species, against the “deep time” of the planet Earth, as described by two scientific disciplines, geology and astronomy.¹⁴ The former works with a geological record of some 600 million years, and the latter with a record still more staggering, 14 billion light-years. The humanities have no time frame of comparable length. What we do have are written records going back five or six thousand years, and oral, musical, and visual material going back further. Since American authors have made a point of engaging this material, drawing on it and incorporating it in their own writings, the least we can do, as scholars and readers, is to do likewise. These old records and their modern transpositions give us a “deep time” in human terms. They alert us to our long sojourn on this planet, a sojourn marked by layers of relations, weaving our history into our dwelling place, and making us what we are, a species with a sedimented imprint. Honoring that imprint, and honoring also the imprints of other creatures evolving as we do, we take our place as one species among others, inhabiting a shared ecology, a shared continuum.