

"I am conservative and I like change"

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Afterword: “I Am Conservative and I Like Change”

Felipe Fernández-Armesto

“I am conservative,” said John Sparrow (fingering the velum binding he had just plucked from uniformly creamy rows of spines on his bookshelves in the Warden’s study at All Souls College, Oxford), “and I like change.” The paradox made the sentiment sound quirky, but almost everyone might say it without self-misrepresentation. Humans typically have moments of nostalgia and cling to fragments of the past; we idealise memories or supposed memories – of a golden age, or a lost youth, or a first love, or, as Peter Sellers sang to Sophia Loren, “the bangers and mash me Muvver used to make” (“Bangers and Mash”). We are the world’s most imaginative species, constantly re-picturing our environments and labouring to turn our fantasies into reality (Fuentes). Yet we find the results so unsettling that we reach for stasis, or revert to the familiar, or vote, in flight from accelerating change, for purported simplifiers of life (Fernández-Armesto). Even revolutionaries commonly want to revolve the world back to primitive equality or innocence or apostolic poverty or some other long frayed or misremembered pattern of life, and radicalism and reaction often almost touch, like the apparently opposite but tantalisingly close ends of a horseshoe. Tastes in food are notoriously hard to prise out of ruts; yet “new” cuisines and exotic food-styles are easy to market. We think of technology as one of our most madcap practices; yet new thinking regularly gets binned and exciting blueprints rarely make it into production (Edgerton). Art turns over new “isms” with bewildering rapidity, yet relishes revivals and retrospectives. Fashion is frantic for novelty and fixated on the past. While we yearn for continuity, and recognise tradition as the foundation of progress, we crave innovation. Ironically, innovations depend on mimesis to propagate (Rogers) – and imitation is a way of keeping the world the way it already is.

The paradox of change goes even deeper than these ironic inconsistencies. Because change is ineluctable, if we managed to avoid it we should have achieved a stunning innovation in the way the world works. Because nature imposes change on us, the idea of circumventing it is as attractive as any form of resistance to tyranny. Because change, as it were, is the default system of the universe, it is itself a form of stasis – inescapable and therefore frustrating. We can imagine changeless states – eternity, infinity, God – only imperfectly, because we have no experience of anything unchanging. But we wonder furiously what they might be like and every thought we have about them is itself a change from the preceding thought.

Until I had the pleasure of attending a SAUTE conference, I had never considered how the principal disciplines of SAUTE members – literature and linguistics – are peculiarly suited to exploring the paradox of change. All academic disciplines study change: my own, which is history, can be defined as the study of change. All the problems historians broach can be formulated as those of why and how situation x at moment y transforms into situation y at moment z . Literary studies commonly revolve around the kind of change I call cultural divergence: why behaviours (in the case of literature, the behaviour concerned is writing) grow unlike from time to time and place to place: specifically, in literature, how norms or “canons” get established and overturned; why a writer defers to or drops a convention or tradition; what makes an element or component of writing work in one place or at one moment and not another; or why it might form part of an enduring tradition or disappear from view. Students of language also juggle with changes and the relatively unchanged states that precede and survive them. Typically linguistics scholars want to know where languages or lexicons or usages come from and go to, and nowadays they are often interested in whether, under the shifting, shimmering groundstate of sounds and symbols, there is a substratum or “deep structure” that is always the same.

SAUTE is an exceptionally adventurous band of scholars, perhaps because it is liberating to study a foreign language and literature in a land as inwardly diverse linguistically as Switzerland. *Sauter* is a dynamic activity. SAUTE’s is not over yet. Even so, “Change” seemed a bold choice of conference theme for the 2017 get-together. Because it encompasses everything we know about, and excludes nothing except, perhaps, the perspective of the dot that thinks itself the universe (Abbott), change is hardly a theme at all: one might almost as well choose “life” or “the world”. Yet as I listened to the papers and read those selected for the

present volume, I realised that many, perhaps most or all of my fellow-*conférenciants* had a sense of the interplay of change and stasis much richer than my own.

Contributors of papers on historical linguistics – exemplified in this volume by Tino Oudesluijs’s piece on the changes in orthography or usage made by Middle English copyists in Coventry – confront one of the most pervasive problems of ontology: how can something change without ceasing to be itself? How can personality outlast growth, or the continuities of history overleap revolutions, or communities survive conquest or conversion or cultural hybridisation or genetic dilution? Curiously, adaptation to new forms of speech, or translation into those of a culture different from the one in which a given text originates can make a text better fitted for survival than formerly. Change and continuity conspire. Nothing human can last without sacrificing some inessential part of itself. The argument has been wielded in recent times in favour of some risky interventions in hallowed texts: dumbing down classics, adulterating liturgies, and bowdlerising work deemed politically incorrect or sexually sensitive by fashionable standards: Cranmer’s prayers have been turned into modish gobbledegook in the Church of England; the Catholic Church has revised some of the vernacular liturgy in English backwards, as it were, to be closer to the Latin from which it began in retreat; even the pop music industry – not usually regarded as a place of purity of morals any more than of integrity of text – has been assailed, for instance, by versions of the charming Frank Loesser duet, *Baby It’s Cold Outside*, to eliminate references to alcohol, masculinity, and supposedly over-insistent seduction (Cashin). Cases like these make one wonder at what point textual change makes for unrecognisability or ontological extinction. It seems, on the other hand, that a good deal of English texts depended for survival on the scribal modifications that eased them through transition via and from Middle English. I recall from my boyhood how Neville Coghill’s modern-English version of *The Canterbury Tales* excited obloquy from fellow-scholars; but was he doing anything that scribes of Chaucer’s day would not have regarded as within the normal range of editorialisation that Oudesluijs studies?

In the case of SAUTE’s literature specialists, two features of imaginative writing account for the freedom with which they contemplate change. First, one way of defying change is by writing down the idea of the moment – embodying it for all time, casting it in a kind of written or spoken bronze, like Horace’s *monumentum aere perennius*, or embedding it in imperishable matter, as paleolithic artists did with images they confided to rock. Of course even literature so good as to be called “immor-

tal” is not really exempt from change, as any elementary course in literary theory now proclaims. The reader, misprinter, editor, expurgator, plagiarist and all their cognates are there, competing and conspiring with the text, constantly reinterpreting and often refashioning it. Yet writers, because their works are relatively easily reproduced and diffused, do successfully challenge sculptors, painters and architects in creating enduring work that retains, for every re-interpreter, its original state or at least something of its original spirit. Reading Margaret Tudeau-Clayton’s vivid depiction of Jane Austen’s mysterious sickness, for instance, I was struck by Austen’s hopes of an “afterlife” for her novels – a translation to a kind of bookshelf-heaven where a beatific vision, face to face with readers, can be indefinitely resumed. Ewan Fernie’s fascinating study of the appropriation of Shakespeare by radicals and Chartists shows how re-interpretation itself can sometimes freeze a feature or supposed feature of a text or group of texts and protect it from change by isolating it from challenge. Was Wilkes really anything like Shakespeare in any meaningful sense, or were Whitmore’s freemen “consciously allied to England’s Shakespeare” other than by accident or illusion, and did Kosuth really take “from Shakespeare” politics the bard would recognise as his own? Probably not, but the Shakespeare the appropriators revered has been, as Fernie shows, an enduring presence in English rhetoric. Fragments of language sometimes have a magical resistance to extinction, even though they may be recycled in highly mutable contexts. Yeats, as we see from an essay in this volume, was as convinced as Heraclitus of the ubiquity of flux, but, like those of other great word-smiths, some of his phrases seem stuck in a kind of collective memory, ossified and applicable to everything “from the Post Office in what was then Sackville Street (now O’Connell Street), Dublin in April 1916 to Tahrir Square in Cairo and Syntagma Square in Athens, to the demonstrations in Dar’aa in March 2011, which launched the Arab Spring in Syria, the brutal repression by the Assad regime and a Civil War, which seems to be ending with the Assad regime killing or driving out half its own population.”

Writers’ second way of eluding change is to create a world outside the mutable universe. Enit K. Steiner’s essay above quotes Octavia Butler’s version of the Heraclitus vision (“Truth is change. God is change”) but suggests how science fiction can create a world with its own time and, therefore, changeless with respect to ours. Simon Swift’s incisive piece on Coleridge makes the most of change as a framework of study by comparing widely separated moments in the history of literature (as do Anne-Claire Michoux and Katrin Rupp, juggling Austen with the

Wife of Bath) but isolates the poet's "interval" as "a now which is timeless." Swift draws attention to the use of "still" to interrupt time as well as to represent continuity that transcends change. Boris Vejdovsky shows how Donald Trump's mercuriality ironically matches the reality that the president seems to traduce; but the essay helps to convince us that truth is outside time: what is true is always true, if only of the moment it describes or reflects. The same truth applies to truths about lies: if a Cretan really did say, "All Cretans are liars," it is and ever will be true that he said so. *Pace* Kant, myths are lies that ape truth by aspiring to universality and immortality. Sometimes they are nearly successful. Vejdovsky's paper, with special force but in a way reflected throughout SAUTE's 2017 conference, reminds me of a truth that is uncomfortable: lies drive history. Changes unfold not only or chiefly in consequence of facts that happen – which are often ignored – but of falsehoods people believe, which are at least equally often upheld, pursued and defended with passion. Truth is changeless. Lying is dynamic. So are that delusive art – literature – and that mercurial medium – language.

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