

The Humanities Connection: Fiction and the Virus

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Abstract

This essay considers aspects of how COVID-19 inflects debate about the trenchancy of the humanities. It does so through reference to Jacques Derrida's 'The University Without Condition', which invokes the 'New Humanities'. In counterpoint, reference is made also to Ali Smith's *Summer* (2020), the last novel in the Seasonal Quartet, set in the real-time present. The essay proceeds through thirty discrete sections keyed to the style of a journal, offering commentary and inevitably interim reflection on the 'X Humanities' and their current plausibility, as well as on the representability and critique of the contemporaneous in fiction, theory and beyond.

Keywords: *New Humanities, Jacques Derrida, 'The University without Condition', Ali Smith's Summer, COVID-19, pandemic, literary humanities, viral turn*

All manner of virulent things are happening.¹

Are you prejudging the *Is it happening?*²

[T]he debate we had was: *Should the Artist Portray His Own Age. [...]*
*I spoke up and said, but what about the artist portraying her own age, [...].*³

Take your time but be quick about it, because you do not know what awaits you.⁴

I

There were going to be three titles, which would have been extravagant. But we'll come to that.

II

At the University where I teach is a wing called the 'Old Humanities Building'. This building, referred to in conversation as 'Oh-Aitch', is often designated in documentation by an abbreviation, 'OH'. Or, as one might think of it when that documentation provokes some exclamatory emotion, 'Oh' – or rather, 'Oh!' How and why it was that

¹ Ali Smith, *Summer* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2020), 42.

² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988 [1983]), 181.

³ Smith, *Summer*, 189. Hereafter cited as *S*, with page numbers in the text.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'The University Without Condition', in *Without Alibi*, ed. and trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 237. In French, the essay appears as *L'Université sans condition* (Paris: Galilée, 2001). Hereafter cited as *UWC* with page numbers in the text.

on the comparatively new campus of this more than 400-year-old institution that word, ‘Old’, arose is a rare theme (OH was among the first buildings to be constructed when the campus was built in the sixties). There are doubtless layers to the name, but names tend to be taken as they come.

Few other campus buildings or disciplinary areas seem to come with an age descriptor. Extensions to the campus in the nineties yielded a ‘Humanities A’ and ‘Humanities B’ a few hundred metres away, but there is no New Humanities Building (or a new Humanities building) in immediate spatial or temporal prospect. In any case: these are pedantries, helping no ‘outcomes’. But the very fact that ‘Old Humanities’ exists as a designation is curiously emblematic of what this number of *Word and Text* addresses when studying issues concerning the ‘New Humanities’. Without wanting to overread the allegorical overtones of my situatedness (which would be a strange vanity), I happen to have started writing this piece in my office in that building itself (OH/Oh/Oh!), and, I’m aware, with a mindset sympathetic at some level to the quaintness suggested, unwittingly, by the label: by ‘Old’. Against more sophisticated and more experienced knowledge there lingers the nostalgia for an ideality of the humanities. That ideality can be a little too beguiling, even corrosive: as it was for Thomas Hardy’s Jude, busy at his Latin and Greek, sullen and damaged for never making it to Christminster.

The thought is of an odd (in)appropriateness in this siting in OH of reflections on the New Humanities and what the latter open onto in this unideal time of crisis and suspension, retrenchment and re-vision. ‘Old’ and ‘new’, timeless and opportune, overtaken and renewed (or, at least, renewable): these are dialectics it is almost too tempting to bring into play. They will, indeed, have some role in the reflections below, which are organised into the kind of sections that may mildly recall the structure of works like David Shields’s *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (2010) or, longer ago, Roland Barthes’s *S/Z* (1970), themselves emblematic of attempts to cease and re-seize, stand aside and apart from – *and yet by and with* – aspects of what goes on, solidly or (as the view might be) stolidly, in the Humanities. To thereby rethink. To re-assay the old.

‘*Plus ça change ...*,’ it is impossible to not say and regret having said, if this is to have any point or edge.

Meanwhile, everyone is sure that the ‘Old’ of OH qualifies the Building, not the Humanities.

III

The work on this *essay* – styled to *not* have the correctness of an *article* or *paper* (what would the New Humanities be without the essayistic, without the wagers and whimsies of its pitches and its forms stealing upon the protocols of the academy?) – started at a time of talk on ‘the *novel* coronavirus’. A journalling modality, offering inevitably interim reflection on viral inflections across the humanities and beyond, seemed the appropriate, *rigorous* choice.

Quickly, there was tired play everywhere on a title of Gabriel García Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), in the style of which one might say, for instance, ‘The New Humanities in a Time of “The Novel Coronavirus”’.

I look at the website of the World Health Organization, from which in this time of all times funding has been withdrawn by the United States of Donald Trump (who as I write is on his unmasked re-election trail that, in one of its you-couldn’t-script-it

episodes, chances his own infection by a virus now more overfamiliar than novel). The website, on a page with the title ‘Naming the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the virus that causes it’, says the following (the phrases in *square* brackets represent my interjections: one might as well commit to the theme of the exclamatory).

Official names have been announced [there’s the duly officious tone of this unmetaphysical foundation of authority,⁵ this World-now-without-Half-a-Continent Health Organisation] for the virus responsible for COVID-19 (previously known as ‘2019 novel coronavirus’) [so, year-stamped – and thereby novel no more] and the disease it causes. The official names are:

Disease

coronavirus disease
(COVID-19)

Virus

severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)⁶

Good: clearer. Irrelevantly I note that ‘SARS-CoV-2’ is, as far as short-form usages go, ponderous. Nothing like ‘OH’. I read on. The page explains (the explanatory and the exclamatory – one could almost write another essay on how they are and are not in step) that ‘the ICTV announced “severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)” as the name of the new virus on 11 February 2020’. A date, then, for this officialisation set by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (to go with the full name rather than the ICTV acronym); a date, too, that seals the sense of the epochal. Of course, it had been around before then, this virus: at least for seven weeks since 24/7 media reports started first picking it up. A month later, on the 11th March, the more searing definiteness of the event-al occurs – and not only because the date could be rendered, according to US convention and in another short-form usage, as ‘3/11’. WHO declares a pandemic that day. In a media briefing, the Director-General says:

WHO has been assessing this outbreak around the clock and we are deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity, and by the alarming levels of inaction.

We have therefore made the assessment that COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic.

Pandemic is not a word to use lightly or carelessly. It is a word that, if misused, can cause unreasonable fear, or unjustified acceptance that the fight is over, leading to unnecessary suffering and death.

Describing the situation as a pandemic does not change WHO’s assessment of the threat posed by this virus. It doesn’t change what WHO is doing, and it doesn’t change what countries should do.

We have never before seen a pandemic sparked by a coronavirus. This is the first pandemic caused by a coronavirus.

And we have never before seen a pandemic that can be controlled, at the same time.⁷

⁵ See Jacques Derrida, ‘Force of Law: The Metaphysical Foundation of Authority’, trans. Mary Quintance, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3-67.

⁶ World Health Organisation, ‘Naming the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) and the Virus that Causes It’; available at [https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-2019\)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-2019)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it) [accessed 17 October 2020].

⁷ See the entry for 11 March 2020, ‘WHO Characterizes COVID-19 as a Pandemic’ at the World Health Organization webpage on ‘Rolling Updates on Coronavirus Disease’; available at

A fine short-form essay on semantics, this. The reference to ‘control’, upping the ante for humanity’s resourcefulness against the virus’s autopoietic force, leaps out. The ironies of the challenge not being asymmetrical, despite *and* because of the organism’s size and scale, are not lost on anyone. Many governments will insist in those early stages and even later that the situation is ‘under control’. ‘Control’ becomes one of those words, like ‘vulnerable’ or ‘restrictions’, ‘circuit breaker’ or ‘R rate’, that amplifies everyone’s sense of their own vocabulary and its elasticity.

Two days before, the Director-General had said:

Now that the coronavirus has a foothold in so many countries, the threat of a pandemic has become very real.
But it would be the first pandemic in history that could be controlled.⁸

That conditional.

Alongside, the Director-General also said:

Let hope be the antidote to fear.
Let solidarity be the antidote to blame.
Let our shared humanity be the antidote to our shared threat.⁹

These are rising tones. They ring again: ‘We are not at the mercy of this virus.’

Well. It’s certainly no longer novel, this virus. It hasn’t been novel since it was named on 2/11, or since the pandemic was declared. ‘This is a truly global story,’ a trailer for BBC World intones. The news comes with trailers now.

And then, or well ahead of the Director-General’s rallying call in the face of the novel coronavirus, the talk elsewhere was turning to *novels*.

To literature, films and TV series.

To *fiction*. Which had kind of been here before.

IV

Viruses are subject-matter for virologists, of course; for epidemiology and medicine’s other denominations – including its extensions in the Medical Humanities.

‘Trust the science.’

Science has majorly impacted the Humanities: think ‘Science Studies’, or the Medical Humanities themselves, or the Environmental Humanities and indeed the Digital Humanities, with their ‘literary labs’. Whether the influence runs prevalently in one direction is not so much the issue here as the perception that now, in the very immediate COVID-19-conditioned present, these *X* Humanities – these hyphenated humanities (for even without the mark that is what they are, with the emphasis heard to fall on whichever term precedes ‘Humanities’) – compel more intuitively and intensely.

The ‘New Humanities’, as a label, will struggle to slot in well alongside these newish humanities. From what I remember of the ‘The University Without Condition’,

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen> [accessed 17 October 2020].

⁸ See the entry for 9 March on the webpage indicated above.

⁹ See the entry for 9 March on the webpage indicated above.

from which the label derives, it is all quite speculative, *theoretical*, especially because of the embeddings in a rhetoric of the *à venir*. ‘To come’: not today. That would be early, silly. Perhaps tomorrow, improbably. Later, eventually, in the fullness of. But only if ...

I look again at Jacques Derrida’s ‘The University Without Condition’. It does away with the subtitle of the lecture from which it sprang: ‘The Future of the Profession; or, The University Without Condition (Thanks to the “Humanities”, What *Could Take Place Tomorrow*)’.¹⁰

As was noted at the start, above: three titles can seem excessive. There *are* three to Derrida’s lecture. There is the one before the semi-colon. There is the one after the ‘or’. Then there is the one nestled in parenthesis, with the Humanities in scare quotes, as if – there will be a lot about ‘as if’ in Derrida’s lecture – the term can only be inexact, its ascriptions unstable. This last title resorts to italics, as if to heighten the paradox in the use of the conditional, ‘*Could Take Place*’, when it is the idea of the *unconditioned* University that is being upheld.

Derrida truncated the titles to one. He chose the second (one can see why). I did the same with the three titles I had originally. The first, ‘Peak Humanities or Peak Humanities?: Predictability, Prescience, Pre-judgement in Literature’s Virology’, and the third, ‘The Viral Summer of Ali Smith’, were withdrawn. The echoes remain.

Derrida’s title and its versions will have had various circumstances determining them. One could dig, just as one could dig for the origins of the names of University buildings. But sometimes that intentness can be precious, overlooking the significance of things as we find them. For instance: it is doubtless important to establish where SARS-CoV-2 originated from. Tracing the hyper-globally-superspreading initial organism is not inconsequential. Everyday matters have dimensions of their own, however, with often canner sense of what is immediately *and* lastingly pressing.

On campus, the immediately pressing task in lockdown is to impart continuity to the teaching.

V

A month or so before 3/11, I had started teaching a course that surveys current debates in literary criticism and theory. In a previous year we had looked, in two of the sessions, at ‘30@30: The Future of Literary Thinking’, a set of short reflections by thirty ‘theorists, critics, novelists, and poets’ on ‘the state of literature, criticism, and the arts and humanities’, edited by Peter Boxall and Michael Jonik to mark the thirtieth anniversary of *Textual Practice*.¹¹ Like *Angelaki* (which was launched in 1993), *Textual Practice* is associated with what the latter journal in its subtitle designates as ‘the theoretical humanities’.

Angelaki does not use upper case for the initials of these *X* Humanities. Somehow, it seems significant.

The theoretical humanities: the label has purchase and resonances in a lot of contexts; not, however, the presence or reach of the Medical Humanities or the Digital Humanities or the Environmental Humanities. It is not likely that the theoretical humanities will have their own building (‘TH’, presumably) anywhere soon.

¹⁰ See Derrida, *Without Alibi*, 300, n. 1.

¹¹ Peter Boxall, and Michael Jonik, ‘Introduction: The Time Is Propitious’, in ‘30@30: The Future of Literary Thinking’, eds. Peter Boxall, and Michael Jonik, *Textual Practice* 30.7 (2016): 1149.

In any case, the students and I resolve that in 2020 we must rather look at what critics and writers are saying about the virus: it is almost too obvious. The students, good and sharp, understand that this is both liberating and constrained. It is in keeping with what might too predictably go on in a University without condition and a University that responds to the conditions now overwriting it: one in which, before long, our *Mitsein* is Zoomed.

The students' perceptiveness runs to suspicion of the urge to study the immediately contemporary in its moment, and not only because they had read 'What Is the Contemporary?', by Giorgio Agamben, which critiques the impulse. They are disappointed in a lot of the philosophers, critics and theorists they read on the virus. The feeling is that the being-written humanities are not incisively helpful to thinking through what's happening. The tradition, it is observed, has equal and tried point and purchase. 'Oh! – the Old Humanities,' one could say.

We presume upon the inductive reasoning turned to COVID-19's impacts upon the humanities and the arts that is premised upon our reading, impressions, conclusions. There is the sense that what is done in a class like this is *representative*: it *relates* (to) the sense of its own relevance *vis-à-vis* broader experience.

Vis-à-vis: face to face. No face-to-face teaching modalities in this lockdown discussion of the real-time-changing Humanities in the *mondialisation* (Derrida's word, in the 'The University Without Condition') of pandemic-wrought transformation, even if never more than in a course like this does what we do seem trenchant *vis-à-vis* everything else.

We talk about time, we talk about lead times. We talk about immediacy and detachment, experience and memoir, the life and the writing. We talk about prefiguration in literature and the arts, and depiction after the event. We talk about documentation and imagination, chronicle and fiction.

Predictably, Boccaccio and Defoe and Camus come up a lot. So does journalling as a genre, or the genre of the philosophical tale. Suddenly and clearly, allegory seems deeply relevant.

Novels come up a lot too. As do films. There's a theme emerging here, on fiction and its diverse forms and casts. Together we ask how long it is before we have the first fictions set around this time. We note that this guileless question is being asked everywhere.

Again we refer to those fictions that appear to prefigure these times, to pre-stage them. This is the opportunity to talk about prescience and predictability. Literature and the humanities, their writing and their teaching, will fall into the familiar before they stir newly, and renewed, in the midst and wake of what's happening.

Inevitably, Lyotard's question: 'Is it happening?'¹²

We read the relevant pages in the *LRB* and the *LARB* and the *TLS* and in *THE* and the *New Yorker* and *The Atlantic* and well beyond.

It means that we feel that we must ask the question about differences and complementarities across the humanities and the arts.

The Old Humanities Building (not where we're located for the course, which proceeds elsewhere in the Gateway Building, as it's called) houses the Faculty dedicated to the humanities. Which, as it happens, is called the Faculty of Arts.

¹² See Lyotard, *passim*.

We could stop on that a little, on the University with and without condition(s) and its gateways.

VI

The Faculty of Arts, in the Old Humanities Building.

In ‘The University Without Condition’ Derrida refers to the relation between the humanities and the arts. He recalls that ‘[i]n the classical tradition, the Humanities define a field of knowledge, sometimes of knowledge production, but without engendering signed works or *oeuvres*, whether these are works of art or not’ (*UWC*, 219). However they are defined, the newish humanities might wish to collapse the distinction between critique and (in this instance) literary effect/art. Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot saw that prefigured in ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’ (1865) and ‘The Perfect Critic’ (1920); Barthes and Derrida practised the collapse in, for instance, *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977) and *Glas* (1974). But in ‘The University Without Condition,’ Derrida notes how Kant ‘sees there [in “the traditional Humanities”] first of all a “propaedeutic” to the Fine Arts rather than a practice of the arts. “Propaedeutic” is his word.’

Propaedeutic: ‘Relating to or of the nature of preliminary instruction; supplying the knowledge or discipline introductory or preliminary to the study of an art or science; preliminarily educational; introductory,’ the *OED* explains. ‘[P]edagogic preparation’, as perceived in the *Critique of Judgment*, Derrida reports, ‘must not involve any “prescriptions” (*Vorschriften*). The Humanities (*Humaniora*) must prepare without prescribing: they would propose forms of knowledge that remain merely preliminary (*Vorkenntnisse*)’ (*UWC*, 219).

Possibly the arts, *fiction* in this case, could act reciprocally, preliminarily, upon the humanities. Derrida’s readings, the exemplarity found in ‘this strange institution called literature’, are typically premised on this. The *récit* is propaedeutic to the interpretation; critique allows itself to be read by the *récit*.

Finding the *récit* for the time, propaedeutic to the critique of the time, is no small exercise.

Derrida observes that what he finds in Kant is ‘more archaic and imaginary than ever’, if the idea is that ‘an unconditional freedom’ rests ‘in the faculty of philosophy’, in the freedom to say ‘what is true and to conclude concerning the subject of truth, provided that it does so *in the inside* of the university’ (*UWC*, 219-20; italics in the original). By extension, is what *he* has to say about the university without condition and the New Humanities overtaken by events? Is it ‘archaic and imaginary’ too? If Kant’s idea on this freedom is overtaken by ‘the transformation under way in public cyberspace’ (*UWC*, 220) and in ‘the cyberworld of worldwide-ization’, which changes in turn ‘the communitary *place* and the social bond of a “campus” in the cyberspatial age’ (*UWC*, 210), what accelerated effects to that superannuation, including to Derrida’s own reading, are wrought by a pandemic?

The ‘campus’, ‘the communitary place’ of the university, is now ‘remote’: online.

The *mondialisation* of the viral undoes the economy that possibilises the reading of *le travail* and the contrastive work of the New Humanities in ‘The University Without Condition’. The fits across then and now cannot fall tidily. Thought of *plus ça change* really doesn’t cut it for critique and rethinking. There is singularity in this novel

coronavirus. It can displace, archaise, what is received, old, recent, new in the humanities.

Even if the novel we shall read, and its author, will problematise this.

VII

I think again of how this novel coronavirus has no longer been novel for a long time now. It is very much like a familiar; one might think of rereading also Sheridan LeFanu.

VIII

The last and shortest entry in the ‘30@30’ series of reflections is by Ali Smith. It starts off by observing:

The future of literature is always anchored in its past, and especially in the way that the contemporaneous, the present, becomes past immediately on publication.¹³

There’s life in the old literature then, life in the old humanities. And it seems, in the class, that we are rehearsing Smith’s other observations: ‘[B]ooks make books. They make the books that come after them possible, in reaction to, in agreement and in disagreement with what’s gone before, formally and conceptually.’ (*LF*, 1185)

We discuss the specifics of the present and whether the contagions in books past quite prefigure this pandemic. We talk of whether the attempt to discover if they do is too predictable. Arnold, again: what *is* ‘The Function of Criticism for the Present Time?’ We talk about whether the temptations and reductions of analogical thinking blind against the particularities and singularities of what is happening now.

What, how, to conclude?

Smith concludes *her* reflection, and thence ‘30@30’, with a profession of faith. ‘I keep faith with the book in all its forms,’ she declares (*LF*, 1185). There is ample professing of this kind elsewhere: Derrida’s deconstruction of the act and the faith in ‘The University without Condition’; Gerald Graff’s book-length study of it, *Professing Literature* (1987); Marjorie Garber’s description of *Academic Instincts* (2001) as a ‘love letter [...] passionate, addressed to a lifelong partner and companion, the profession of literary study’;¹⁴ Shauna Deidre Lynch’s historicisation and characterisation of the affectivity involved, in *Loving Literature* (2015).

Vitality of the book, even amidst virality of all kinds.

Smith’s professed faith is in the vitality of the novel. This is surely the form she has in mind when she notes that ‘people will come more and more in search of the long and stratified form, and also the ink form’. This will occur ‘even as our synapses adapt to and cope with widespread synchronic screen time, screen surface and spatial screen focus. We’re developing a speed of response which will serve us well in the technologically shifting world, but being the versatile creatures we are we’ll soon learn to pair this with the more diachronic dimensionality of knowledge itself as time-stratified.’ (*LF*, 1185).

What could be more time-stratified – yet more cyclical – than the seasons? The discussion turns to Smith’s Seasonal Quartet. At the time of the course, *Autumn* (2016),

¹³ Ali Smith, ‘Leap of form’, in ‘30@30’, 1185. Hereafter cited as *LF*, with page number in the text.

¹⁴ Marjorie Garber, *Academic Instincts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), ix.

Winter (2017) and *Spring* (2019) had already been published. *Summer* was not out; summer seemed distant. The final novel of the quartet, in its final composition (or must it have been re-composition, given everything that was happening?) and final production was coinciding with the time after 3/11. If ever there was a novel that might refer to its time in real-time this, surely, would be it. We resolve to read it when it's out, which will not be until August.

IX

Mortality dominates winter and spring. COVID-19 deaths across the world reach the thousands, then the millions. By the time this essay nears completion, six months later, talk of a second wave is everywhere.

Winter, published before this was glimpsable, itemises other mortalities. The first chapter, across three already famed pages, performs-and-debunks the contemporary trend to announce the death of everything. 'God was dead: to begin with,' runs the novel's first sentence.¹⁵ 'Poetry, the novel, painting, they were all dead, and art was dead.' (*W*, 3) So much for the arts; not much hope or cause for the Humanities then, which are strangely overlooked in this inventory of what has passed on, even as 'The book was dead. Modernism, postmodernism, realism and surrealism were dead.' (*W*, 3) More holistically, 'Culture was dead.' (*W*, 3) So was 'History', 'Politics', 'Democracy', 'Religion', and also, 'Communism, fascism, neoliberalism, capitalism, all dead, and marxism, dead, feminism, also dead. Political correctness, dead. Racism was dead.' (*W*, 3) Other absolutes: 'Thought was dead. Hope was dead. Truth *and fiction* were both dead [italics added].' Also, 'the media', 'the internet', 'Twitter, instagram, facebook, google, dead.' (*W*, 4)

'Love was dead.' Possibly more unsettlingly, 'Death was dead' (*W*, 4), recalling José Saramago's *Death at Intervals* (2005), about a country where death does not come, working stranger damage as a result.

Some things are specified as *not* dead: 'Life', 'Revolution', 'Racial equality', 'Hatred'. But not so many to as dispel the reflection, 'Imagine being haunted by the ghosts of all these dead things' (*W*, 4). The humanities (who, what better?), since they are not reportably dead (the list does not include them, perhaps because they're omittable), could attend to what opens up there in this novel that spells out the conceit of real-time narration of the contemporary:

[...] forget ghosts, [...] because this isn't a ghost story, though it's the dead of winter when it happens, a bright sunny post-millennial global-warming Christmas Eve morning (Christmas, too, dead), and *it's about real things really happening in the real world involving real people in real time on the real earth* (uh huh, earth, also dead): (*W*, 5, italics added).

The novel can't really be dead, can it, nor fiction, when this livens their openings, when *now* is placed and storied *now*? This might be literature to think with, even if poetry and the novel are dead, as *Winter* has it.

The virus is not dead. Viruses, everyone tiresomely seems to know, are neither alive nor dead.

¹⁵ Ali Smith, *Winter* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017), 3. Hereafter cited as *W*, with page numbers in the text.

X

Suspicion of the attempts to capture contemporaneity contemporaneously is irrepressible. Smith's *Summer* internalises this. Taken from the novel, the third epigraph, above, on whether artists should depict their time, is bang on theme. Indeed, the novel is a performance upon that theme.

It's a recurring debate. It isn't only about the distaste for opportunism. There's the dissatisfaction with how these things conclude. Inconclusively. All the surrounding reflection is interim. There's no rounded musing, no resolving thought, not when things are still happening and when, to echo the epigraph from Lyotard, only pre-judgement is possible.

The students respond to a satirical take by Simon Critchley on the felt obligation of philosophy to ponder what's taking place. Critchley's piece (it is longer than Smith's in '30@30', but well short of 1500 words) can be found in *The Quarantine Files: Thinkers in Self-Isolation*, edited by Brad Evans for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and available online. Critchley starts by explaining that he

understand[s] the implicit contract or assumption in contributing to a forum like this, where various more or less well-known 'public intellectuals' [...] make some sort [of] 'critical intervention', which shows the spectacular relevance of their theoretical perspectives in illuminating our current, rather ghastly, situation and perhaps allows them to simulate some sort of sympathy with others through overly dramatic and self-aggrandizing prose.

But can I just say that the whole thing irritates me a bit?¹⁶

The students nod when they see the next lines: 'I was thinking of calling this little poop of prose "Capitalizing on coronavirus in order to confirm the massive relevance of all my previous work"; but that struck me as going a little far.' The nods get more pronounced: 'I have found the various texts that I've read by philosophers on coronavirus either drearily predictable [that word again], emptily empathetic, scandalously opportunistic or simply ludicrous'. And this draws the greatest fervency to the nodding: '[M]aybe a moment's pause would be advisable. Maybe even a few years or a decade or two.' The humanities, this presumes, work truest and best on slow burn. After the chill. The present continuous unsettles them.

I am prompted to look at other texts by philosophers and writers on the theme and, most closely, at their conclusions. There is only the space to report here that the conclusions do often dissatisfy. The conclusions are often irrefragable, but somehow it is not enough.

The underwhelmed response probably has something to do with the fantasy of a work, still unissued, that could yet prompt the collective, consensual sense that it is the definitive effort of imagination *or* critique *or* critical imagination about and for the times. If not from within the humanities *and/or* the arts, where is such a work to spring from?

¹⁶ Simon Critchley, 'Sorry to Disappoint (I knew I should have been a hairdresser)', in *The Quarantine Files: Thinkers in Self-Isolation*, *London Review of Books*, 14 April 2020; available at https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/quarantine-files-thinkers-self-isolation/#_ftn6 [accessed 17 October 2020].

It is a beguiling fantasy, prone to speculation about what might arrive first: the work or the vaccine.

XI

Predictably, some reviews install *Summer* as the first great coronavirus novel, just as *Autumn* had been hailed as the great Brexit novel: fiction's trumpings and trumpeting, precedence and prescience.

More to the point is this exchange from the book:

How does it feel now, then? he said.
Now then, she said. An interesting verbal construct. (S, 207, italics added)

Now then, and soon after:

[...] I'll ask of you the same question you asked of me.
 What question? he said.
 What you're making of it all, she said.
 [...]
 What will you make of it all?
 [...]
 (Also, she was particularly proud of her use there, of the future tense.) (S, 207-8)

It's all there.

XII

Now then. This is the time for the Humanities to come into their own. Peak humanities is what's needed, not peakiness. Against the backdrop cast by the deepening precarity around them, or by news from Australia about arts courses being made more expensive than STEM subjects, this seems optimistic.¹⁷

There is a tedious regularity to debates about the humanities and about their precarious traditions, presents and futures. It enables a poetics of what is, in effect, a genre in itself: one that also risks becoming predictable to itself. But the novel coronavirus instils some novelty into those debates: different urgencies.

Nothing ever happens from which the humanities benefit, it might be quipped. But that's whiny and couldn't be true. If it were, they must forever renew themselves otherwise. This, at least, would be one conventional, predictable perspective. It is not any less trenchant than the follow-up quip: virology is too important for the humanities to leave it to the scientists, the epidemiologists, the politicians, the economists, the statisticians, and other cadres of *non*-humanities-referencing thinking.

After the linguistic turn and the subsequent veerings, the predictability of a viral turn.

¹⁷ See Paul Karp, 'Australian university fees to double for some arts courses, but fall for Stem subjects', *The Guardian*, 18 June 2020; available at <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/19/australian-university-fees-arts-stem-science-maths-nursing-teaching-humanities> [accessed 17 October 2020].

XIII

Derrida, so integral to the linguistic turn, spoke about virology when taking autoimmunity as a guiding metaphor for his reflections on different forms of terroristic seizures of what would otherwise be considered constitutive, preserving.¹⁸ He returned to the theme of the University and the Humanities in various contexts. If fuller reference is not being made to those other texts here it is not only because of space. It is because the interest is rather in how the stance(s) and tense(s) that determine ‘The University without Condition’ – prospective, subjunctive, conditional, dependent on auxiliaries – is likely to be strained by the present continuous of a pandemic. What could be more discordant than talking about what the University could self-surpassingly be, when the viral condition makes survival rather than self-transcendence the priority?

Bluntly: how COVID-19-proof is ‘The University without Condition’? Is it times-dimmed?

Returning to ‘The University without Condition’ while reading, alongside, Smith’s *Summer* reveals affinities between something of no moment (in the sense that Derrida’s essay asserts principles for the humanities to operate by in all moments and all seasons) and something of the moment and the season, as it were.

This is how this alongside-reading of ‘The University without Condition’ and *Summer* is going to proceed: off alternating, sometimes merged, observations in respective sections. Reflection, pointedness, will arise from the juxtaposition.

‘As if’ alongside ‘as is’. Hypothesis and fiction, around how we find ourselves now.

It’s ok. ‘Trust the text[s].’ *Just let them talk.*

XIV

‘The University without Condition’ has been extensively studied. It has been influential around writings on deconstruction, higher education and the humanities. There is little I can add to the commentaries. To repeat: the interest is rather in how the essay comes across when reread in the midst of a pandemic, in whether it comes across as visionary or prescient or, contrarily, as out of synch with the current moment and mood around the humanities.

Smith’s *Summer* has not been extensively studied. It has only been out for two months as I write this. This will not be a regular engagement with the novel. The characters will not even be particularised in what follows. The events will not be lingered over. Instead the attention falls upon *Summer*’s renderings of 2020 crises, and upon any bearings for the humanities.

XV

The first resonant word and question in *Summer* is ‘so?’ ‘Everybody said: so?’ (S, 3). It captures the strategizing querulousness pitched by those dug in against dismay that the deplorable, the unconscionable, could be contemplated, *is* happening.

¹⁸ See Jacques Derrida, ‘Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides – A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida’, in Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 85-136.

This occurs in the opening three pages to the novel. For instance:

And when a government shut down its own parliament because it couldn't get the result it wanted: *so?*

When so many people voted people into power who looked them straight in the eye and lied to them: *so?*

When a continent burned and another melted: *so?* (S, 4)

To which we could ourselves add:

There's a pandemic: *so?*

The pandemic's not going to be good to the Humanities: *so?* There's a *pandemic* and you're worried about the *Humanities*?

Get a life (actually, make sure you hold on to and keep the one you have). Get out more (actually, no, stay in).

Hands, face, space.

XVI

Tonal discordance around overweening concern for the humanities' today's and tomorrow's is not for downplaying. It could undermine earlier attempts to advocate for the humanities in the present. If an essay as exhortatory about the *New Humanities* as Derrida's seems *old*, or too shaped by different pre-viral idioms and concerns, new articulations are going to be necessary for the advocacy. Co-articulating *Summer* and 'The University without Condition', whatever the insights that may emerge from this kind of exercise, is not going to be sufficiently pertinacious.

Already, even before COVID-19, morale around the humanities was peaky. The reasons are well-documented: higher-education policies unamenable to the humanities; stunted resourcing and research funding; indifferent student numbers; dependence on harried, anxious casualised staff.

'*So?*'

So let's reread. To start with.

XVII

Let us agree to not be contriving.

A revanchist rereading of 'The University without Condition' is not what is needed. There is little point in going back to that essay with the intent of holding up rediscovered relevance in the *New Humanities* as Derrida sought to characterise and potentiate them. Of course, topical resonances do emerge. But the effect is not such that the urging must be for the essay to be revisited *now*.

With virality everywhere, it does not necessarily seem vital.

XVIII

Smith's quartet is in tune with recent fiction working with 'an anthropology of the contemporary', to quote a phrase echoing across Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island* (2015). In their different ways, Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018), Lucy Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport* (2019) and Michel Houellebecq's *Serotonin* (2019) are other examples of the trend. The historiographic metafiction of high postmodernism is evolving into a

sociofictive metacontemporary mode. *Summer*'s variation on the trend works in the anticipated renderings of COVID-19 circumstances. 'All manner of virulent things are happening' (*S*, 89) says it all.

About that happening, *Summer* has biting satire. But Smith got the memo from Italo Calvino. In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* [*Lezioni americane*, 1988], Calvino explains how *leggerezza*, lightness, is not to be disdained. In the first memo, specifically about 'Lightness', Calvino refers to the representation of the contemporaneous. 'When I began my career, the categorical imperative of every young writer was to represent his own time.'¹⁹ This palled. 'Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don't mean escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world *from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification*' (*SMNM*, 7; italics added). For a fiction to this purpose, *leggerezza* is a resource.

The novels in the *Seasonal Quartet* are *leggeri* in this sense. They are fables – critical fables on the contemporary, to be sure, since Smith commits to the categorical imperative that Calvino is dubious about – but they have air and invention, whimsicality and comedy, weight without heaviness.

An example is the episode that follows *Summer*'s opening fretting on 'what happens when we're indifferent, and what the consequences are of the political cultivation of indifference, which whoever wants to disavow will dismiss in an instant with their punchy little *so?*' (*S*, 5). Upon that earnestness segues a delightful vignette. It is a conversation between a mother and her daughter about going to the source. In other words, that thing that wasn't done, above, when remarking upon the Old Humanities Building and the provenance of its name: dig doggedly, ascribe exactly, document reliably. The mother is trying to remember a quotation (the opening of *David Copperfield*), meanwhile noticing that her daughter has used a quotation in a school essay – 'Forgiveness is the only way to reverse the irreversible flow of history.' 'I like that,' she says. 'Who wrote it?' Typing into Startpage, the undocumenting daughter finds the answer. 'Someone european-sounding [*sic*],' she replies. 'It's Hannah Arendt,' the mother reads. And then: 'What's the source?' (*S*, 8-9) – and a good-humoured argument ensues about why Brainyquote and other 'top sources' don't cut it and do.

The New Humanities.

XIX

I keep returning to 'The University Without Condition.' Was I disloyal earlier to the essay's affirmation of the lasting, timeless relevance of the humanities?

Derrida himself plays upon disloyalty in the opening to 'The University without Condition'. The essay could read, he writes, '*as if* [it] were [...] asking your permission to be unfaithful or a traitor to [...] habitual practice' (*UWC*, 202). Yet in the opening words is 'a declarative engagement, an appeal in the form of a profession of faith: faith in the university and, within the university, faith in the Humanities of tomorrow' (*UWC*, 202). This looks recognisably Derridean in idiom and sentiment. One could, admittedly,

¹⁹ Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Patrick Creagh (London: Penguin, 2009 [1988]), 7. Hereafter cited as *SMNM*, with page numbers in the text. Penguin's online publicity for the book, as it happens, bears a tribute from Smith: 'The book I give to most people is *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*'.

be impatient with the ‘tomorrow’: actually, *especially now*, we need the humanities *now*. But the legacy of the ‘declarative engagement’ is strong. If anything in ‘The University without Condition’, when reread, seems commonplace or even self-evident it is because it is easy to overlook just how definitive and internalised a go-to statement the essay is on the humanities’ timeless task and their conception of themselves:

The university *professes* the truth, and that is its profession. It declares and promises an unlimited commitment to the truth.

No doubt the status and the changes in the value of truth can be discussed ad infinitum (truth as adequation or truth as revelation, truth as the object of theoretico-constative discourses or as poetico-performative events, and so forth). But these are discussed, precisely, *in* the university and in Departments that belong to the Humanities. (*UWC*, 202-3)

But the *New* Humanities, specifically? Here is how they are projected:

The principle of unconditional resistance is a right that the university itself should at the same time reflect, invent, and pose, whether it does so through its law faculties or in the new Humanities capable of working on these questions of right and law – in other words, and again why not say it without detour, the Humanities capable of taking on the tasks of deconstruction, beginning with the deconstruction of their own history and their own axioms. (*UWC*, 205)

It will come down to Derrida listing ‘in a dry and telegraphic manner’, as he puts it, ‘seven theses, seven propositions, or seven professions of faith’ (*UWC*, 230) involving the New Humanities. They uphold the New Humanities’ study of (1) “‘what is proper to man””, (2) democracy, (3) the history of professing, (4) literature (5) profession, (6) the history of the “‘as if”, (7) what it is that can ‘put to rout the very authority that is attached, in the Humanities’ to ‘knowledge’, to ‘the profession of faith (or at least to its model of performative language’, to ‘the *mise en oeuvre*, the putting to work [...] of the “‘as if”’ (*UWC*, 231-5).²⁰

This *projet* is *grand*. One cannot but want to affirm all this, but it all seems a little inert for contemporary immediacies. The exhortation speaks of turn-of-the-millennium challenges and concerns. It is reminiscent of high and late poststructuralism. Nothing wrong in that, nor is it a question of datedness. It is more a question of (in)congruity. It does not ring happily to read about the *à venir*, the to-come, the event: not in the midst of a pandemic. Not during *this event*, an ‘airborne toxic event’, as Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1984) famously had it, of another kind and magnitude. There is no evident rightness about the essay now.

And yet. ‘Democracy’, ‘literature’ ...

XX

In *Professing Literature*, Gerald Graff recalls William Lyon Phelps, the self-proclaimed initiator of “‘the first course in any university in the world confined wholly to

²⁰ I am summarising Derrida’s ‘dry and telegraphic’ language across these itemisations, which run across four pages.

contemporary fiction”²¹. One set text on that course was, as it happened, *Jude the Obscure*. Doubtless Phelps would have understood a focus on *Summer*. But, to requote the mother in *Summer*, ‘What’s the source?’ (*S*, 9) Who started this thing about studying contemporary literature about the contemporaneous, or indeed, contemporary literature about any time at all?

Graff points to others who may have primacy: Brander Matthews at Columbia ‘in 1891’ and Bliss Perry ‘at Williams in the 1890s’ (*PL*, 124). They were not, however, superspreaders: ‘academic interest in the literature of the present or recent past was at best hesitant and sporadic’ (*PL*, 124). Perry wrote in *PMLA* in 1896 to advocate ‘fiction as a college study’ (cited in *PL*, 125), but that new work for the humanities found slow purchase. The ‘literary humanities’, unacknowledged by that name, have always been institutionally prone to downplay the most contemporary and contemporaneity-representing work.

XXI

Initially in *Summer*, this biting yet *leggerezza*-toned narrative, the virus is distant from the UK-centric, Brighton-set action that later travels afield in space and time: ‘The net is all photos of people in other countries with masks over their mouths and noses’ (*S*, 40). Quickly, masks and awareness of virality and contagion tinge everything: a seagull’s beak ‘sticks out like the masks people wore centuries ago in Venice in the plague’ (*S*, 41). One character

thinks of the pictures of the virus online, [...]. They all look a bit like little planets with trumpets coming out of the surface, or little worlds covered in spikes of growth, a little world that’s been shot all over its surface by those fairground darts with tuft tails from the old-fashioned rifle ranges, or like mines in the sea in films about WW2. (*S*, 40)

Before long the answer to ‘What’s in the paper today?’ is, ‘Thugs and showmen in power, [...]. Nothing new. A clever virus. That’s news. The stocks and shares will shake. There’ll be people who do very well out of that. One more time we’ll find out what worth more, people or money’ (*S*, 160). Apprehensiveness is natural and has its poignancies: ‘Whatever age you are, he says, you still die young’. Also, it has its long-view humour: ‘My father lived through the Spanish flu, he says. [...]. He said you had to remember not to take it personally’ (*S*, 160).

Categorisable as a ‘condition of England’ novel (and thence the world’s), the novel chronicles much more than the virus. There are mentions of Greta Thunberg (*S*, 32); of cancel culture (*S*, 81) and of the educated elite (*passim*); of George Floyd (*S*, 247); of zoombombing (*S*, 248). Inevitably and throughout, of Brexit (*passim*): of ‘geniuses of manipulation’ and ‘the adviser of the prime minister, who knows how to style politics so that it doesn’t look like politics’ (*S*, 54). The sense of deeper malaise is all-covering: ‘Everything is mask’ (*S*, 43). *So*, ‘everything needs to be unmasked right now’ (*S*, 43). Accordingly, a character is writing a book called *The Immoral Imagination*, which includes ‘An Updated Lexicon’. She catalogues and critiques politics’ contemporary redefinitions of common phraseology, her own reaction to that being a fall into aphasia. More resigned, another character ‘knows that there is no point

²¹ Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 124. Hereafter cited as *PL*, with page numbers in the text.

in making lists of the lies a PM or POTUS tells': not in the age of '*the authentic lie*' and '*emotional truth*' (S, 70, emphases in the original).

There is bitterness expressed about 'this government ... getting their data scientist pals and advisers and their friends at Google to *model pandemic data* while they talk a lot of Dunkirk spirit shit to the public they're selling down the river' (S, 336). The character saying this, an activist, had featured in *Winter*. So had another, peaceable, who reports how a 'line manager's been told to avoid accusations of inequality and to report shortages' in protective equipment: 'For some reason the government wants them all equally in danger' (S, 325).

The experience of the virus and 'the everyday nature of it' (S, 208) finds most direct expression in a letter written by one of the main characters, a sixteen-year-old girl. She relates how her brother 'hates lockdown' and how her 'father's business is garrotted' (S, 246), and mentions the postman, 'Sam', who

probably had it in March but he never had a test and still hasn't been able to get one. It means he can't go and see his family. His parents are elderly and away from here, in Blackpool. We also know more than fifty people in all who have had what sounds like it symptom-wise, but couldn't get tested by anyone. So they don't know, and they were really ill at home, [...], and no one helped them, and no official body has listed them in any statistics. A lot of my friends know a lot of people this happened to. Now the government wants them for antibodies and plasma but then nobody wanted to know, they were just left on their own thinking they were dying. And some of them did die. (S, 246; underlining in the original)

'Now' and 'then', again.

The girl writes a letter, rather than anything social-mediatic, because she is communicating with a virologist from Vietnam detained while waiting for asylum. This theme of internment, with its own play of thens and nows, is key to *Summer's* – and the Seasonal Quartet's – vision of the synchronous and the returning, as will become apparent.

XXII

Summer is a condition-of-England-and-the-world novel; 'The University Without Condition' is a condition-of-the[-impossible]-university essay.

What does 'Without Condition' mean anyway? Derrida himself concedes that

[t]his university without conditions does not, *in fact*, exist. Nevertheless, [...], [the university] should remain *an ultimate place of critical resistance* – and more than critical – to all the powers of dogmatic and unjust appropriation (*UWC*, 204; italics added).

It is why he distinguishes 'the university' from 'all research institutions that are in the service of economic goals and interests of all sorts' (*UWC*, 206). This university is coextensive with the humanities, which *are* critique. The 'principle of conditionality', which is itself coextensive with the institution's 'impotence, the fragility of its defences against all the powers that command it, besiege it, and attempt to appropriate it', is one that 'has an originary and privileged place of *presentation*, of manifestation, of safekeeping in the Humanities' (*UWC*, 206, 207). Presumably, the humanities are new to the extent that they renew this in themselves for every next situation, including in the

time of the novel coronavirus. But even then they will, in another sense, always be compromised, because this university ‘is heterogeneous to the principle of power, [...] is also without any power of its own’: an ‘exposed, tendered citadel, to be taken, often destined to capitulate without condition, to surrender unconditionally’ (*UWC*, 206). What is then needed is ‘a force of resistance – of dissidence’ (*UWC*, 206-7).

But also, the grace to see that, ‘The university without conditions is not situated necessarily or exclusively within the walls of what is today called the university’ (*UWC*, 236)

XXIII

The character with whom Smith’s *Autumn* opens reappears in *Summer*. He is one hundred and four years old, a benign figure, but one on whom the histories of the twentieth and twenty-first-century have left a heavy mark. Here is synchronousness and repetition, memories returning across both books and merging with the present, characters (mis)taken by the old man for each other: a girl in a photograph for his *fetch*, a boy who visits him for his sister. He, too, had been an internee, in Ascot in the war. One character says of him, ‘I have a theory that he hears the word *internet* and thinks the word *internment*’ (*S*, 124). Allegorical, this, of how the overactively hyperconnecting technologies of the contemporary cannot allay historical and contemporary traumas of confinement.

It’s the longer perspective on lockdown.

XXIV

Nagging at me again is the thought that there is more to ‘The University Without Condition’ than meets the immediate re-encounter and re-situating.

I look yet again, noticing this.

These new Humanities would treat [...] the history of literature [...] the history of the *concept* of literature, of the modern institution named “literature,” of its links with fiction and the performative force of the “as if,” [...], of its link with the right to say everything (or not to say everything), which founds both democracy and the idea of the unconditional sovereignty claimed by the university and within it by what is called, inside and outside departments, the humanities. (*UWC*, 232)

That link to fiction, to “as if” and its operativity in imagination and story, one might say, had figured earlier. Note the colon here in this assertion, the mark of co-identity: ‘the unconditional university or the university without condition: the principal right to say everything, even if it be under the heading of fiction and the experimentation of knowledge, [...]’ (*UWC*, 205). Derrida’s work, one recalls, is shot through with readings that turn upon exemplary fictions.

(Across these viral seasons, *Summer* could do.)

But it’s not that. That’s familiar from other texts of Derrida: ‘Demeure’, certainly. Fiction can be critique. The twist is the link to unconditional sovereignty and the humanities. The university without condition is premised upon that: ‘The university should thus also be the place in which nothing is beyond question, [...], not even the theoretical idea of critique, *meaning traditional critique, meaning theoretical critique*, and not even the authority of the “question” form, meaning thinking as “questioning”’

(*UWC*, 205; emphasis added, if only because fiction can fill in). Deconstruction self-deconstructed, *as ever*.

But there is more. The following passage on immunity rings relevantly in pathogenic times.

[...] I maintain that the idea of this space of the academic type has to be symbolically protected by a kind of absolute immunity, as if its interior were inviolable; I believe [...] that this is an idea we must affirm, declare, and profess endlessly—even if the protection of this academic immunity (in the sense in which we speak of biological, diplomatic, or parliamentary immunity) is never pure, even if it can always develop dangerous processes of auto-immunity, even if and especially if *it must not prevent us from addressing ourselves to the university's outside*—without any utopic neutrality. This freedom or immunity of the university and par excellence of the Humanities is something to which we must lay claim, while committing ourselves to it with all our might. Not only in a verbal and declarative fashion, but in work, in act, and in what we make happen with events. (*UWC*, 220)

But again (and stirring though the call to action is), the ringing relevance dissipates though analogy's limitations. Immunity, integral to discussions about virality, is metaphor-generalised: scant point for COVID-19-intent discussions.

The more crucial point is the reference to that 'outside'. For all the essay's reference to *travail*, retained in French, what determines Derrida's essay is the idea of the event, the to-come, the *à venir* – a tomorrow – unencumbered by any fine-and-hard-grained representation of travails today. The event, which can be *disaster*, is not envisaged as such. Elsewhere, when Derrida speaks of the monstrous, that arguably occurs.²² But not here in this essay, not even when the 'as if' is linked to

the unconditional, the eventual, or the possible event of the impossible unconditional, the *altogether other* – which we should from now on [...] dissociate from the theological idea of sovereignty. (*UWC*, 235; emphasis added)

Now then. It will need co-articulation with Derrida's other work for his reflections on the New Humanities to find trenchancy for the besetting conditions of virality and virulence. For instance, his work about the monstrous, as mentioned; or about the animal; but also that in the posthumously published writing about 'the beast and the sovereign' (see the Bibliography), seeing as there are distinct agencies of sovereignty in SARS-CoV-2, which is a beastly big bully and a beastly big spoilsport (let us be *leggeri* too), one whose autopoiesis and agency comes ready-dissociated 'from the theological idea of sovereignty'. For what from deconstruction and its figures and feints is rather needed in the humanities newly repurposed for the present is, in fact, not the prospectiveness in 'The University without Condition' about any *X* Humanities or New Humanities and their imminent or hypothetical tomorrows, but the inflections from and articulations with posthumanism's work on the figure of the posthuman, the nonhuman, in its event-ualities that seem to have come upon us in the imminences and immediacies of today.

²² For a reading of the monstrous and its extensions in deconstruction, see Laurent Milesi, 'Demonstrating Monsters: Unmastering (in) Derrida and Cixous', *Parallax* 25.3 (2019): 269-87.

XXV

Derrida's *à venir* is vulnerable to irony. That recurrent but never-arrived tomorrow invites the idiom about jam. But the worse vulnerability is to vigil-ance before the event being overwhelmed by *events*, the disaster – or, in his sense, the monstrous, as the inconceivability of what comes to apprehension. ‘What’s coming’s stuff’s we can’t even imagine,’ as *Summer* has it (*S*, 95). ‘Things can change fast. [...] The whole world’s learning that lesson now, one way or another’ (*S*, 320). Reflection on *mondialisation* in the midst of a pandemic is extraordinarily, ironically timely, but not to the key of ‘The University without Condition’. It’s *unseasonal*. More than for the New Humanities, it’s like another wind for philosopher-novelists like Sartre and Iris Murdoch, with their interest in contingency and necessity.

Summer bears that interest. At one point, two of the characters involved in an amateur performance of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* discuss if, in the play, ‘What’s really happened is as random as, I don’t know, a plague.’ ‘*It’s just what happens*’ (*S*, 283-4; italics in the original). That conversation happens years before the present, within which another two characters (both of whom featured in *Winter*) argue whether they should have ‘a lockdown argument about art’, hinging, precisely, on ‘[r]andomness, [...] contingency’, and ‘finding the big word for what’s happening to us all so that you won’t have to think about what’s happening to us all, yeah?’ (*S*, 330).

Lockdown arguments about art – and thence the humanities at their aptest and otherwise – is what this is all about.

XXVI

The two characters in *Summer* having their lockdown argument about art run a website called ‘Art in Nature’. One of them wants out. ‘Art Inertia,’ she tells the other (*S*, 328). They argue about ‘what art, lower case a’, is about. ‘[I]t’s about the moment you’re met by and so changed by something that it uh takes you both into and beyond yourself, gives you back your senses. It’s a, a shock that brings us back to ourselves,’ says one. To which, not unreasonably, the other retorts: ‘If that were true there’s enough shock happening all across the world to make this whole of the world right now biggest ever art project that’s ever fucking been’ (*S*, 329).

And that’s when they argue about ‘mortality’ and ‘randomness’ and ‘contingency’. As well might the New Humanities themselves, upper case n and h, propaedeutic to the Arts, upper case a.

‘The university without conditions [*sic*] is [...] not necessarily, exclusively, exemplarily represented in the figure of the professor,’ Derrida writes in his essay (*UWC*, 236). The work of the New Humanities at their critical, resistant, uncompromised best is not the exclusive province of the humanities professor, either. There are trenchant engagements and connections in those tending to their Art in Nature/Art Inertia spaces. Amply more, certainly, in fiction. If the clunky label used previously, the sociofictive metacontemporary, has any edge, it’s there.

XXVII

Talk about the humanities is always chimerical. It is ridiculous to speak of them as if they were coordinated and coordinating, undifferentiated across localisms, or as if, beyond their cynicisms, they were mission-prone and ideality-focused.

Across their various disciplinary and interdisciplinary settlements and alignments, the humanities have their societies and associations, conventions and meetings. But there is no Humanities Central, no directing energy to make the Humanities cohesive and concerted, strategized and incisive in the main and in the instance. '[T]he humanities have become disablingly incoherent,' Graff writes (*PL*, 15). There is no International of and for the Humanities. Nor, it goes without saying, should there be. Otherwise they would be conditioned from within and by their own. And that's not very good for the University without condition.

What does appear to retain consensus is the belief, or investment (not the same thing), in interdisciplinarity. Graff, for his part, considers the consequences that stem from the fact that

what academic literary studies have had to work with is not a coherent cultural tradition, but a series of conflicts that have remained unresolved, unacknowledged, and assumed to be outside the proper sphere of literary education. To bring these conflicts inside that sphere will mean thinking of literary education as part of a larger cultural history that includes the other humanities as well as the sciences even while acknowledging that terms like 'humanities', 'science', 'culture', and 'history' are contested. (*PL*, 15)

A belief in this kind of literary education, or indeed in the New Humanities, is not evidently more quaint or quixotic than an interest in, for instance, 'civics', which the novelist Richard Powers, contemplating the stakes of the 2020 US election, recently placed some trust in.²³

And, as part of 'literary education', is attention to fiction's spectra now timely? The 'larger cultural history' of fiction in our time could be quite the handle on the contemporary and, given how it's been occasionally denegated, on the virus.

As if.

XXVIII

In the end it comes down to connection.

By the last page of Smith's *Summer*, the reader sees a distinctive, singular aesthetic of connection at work. It is discernible both if this four-novel *cycle* has been read in *sequence* and if *Summer* has been read alone.

For the reader who has read all four in good order (*Autumn*: brown cover; *Winter*: grey cover; *Spring*: green cover; *Summer*: yellow cover – these critical fables of the contemporary are very Andrew Lang in this respect), the connections across the books will carry thematic, symbolic, formal resonances. A good number of the characters in *Winter* themselves reappear in *Summer*. SA4A, a security company, has sinister internment-enforcing presence across *Spring* and *Summer*. A book on a meeting

²³ Richard Powers et al. 'How do we become a serious people again?', *The Guardian*, 24 October 2020; available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/24/how-do-we-become-a-serious-people-again-dave-eggers-annie-proulx-and-more-on-the-2020-election> [accessed 24 October 2020].

between Rilke and Katherine Mansfield, key to *Spring*, gets a mention in *Summer*. Other echoes and connections could be inventoried. Among the most vital and structuring are references to female artists: Pauline Boty in *Autumn*, Tacita Dean in *Spring*, Barbara Hepworth in *Winter* and *Summer*, Lorenza Mazzetti (who passed away in February 2020) in *Summer*. Each artist's work helps set the tone and key to the respective narrative. The same applies to cinematic reference (Linder and Chaplin in *Summer*, for instance, film-making and script-writing in *Spring*), or to Shakespearean drama (*The Tempest* in *Autumn*, *Cymbeline* in *Winter*). Running throughout is a whimsical wit to the narration and a joyous punceptuality, often counterpointed in each book by the freshness, the contrary language and outlook of an innocent: an idealist character (at least one) for whom the world is daftly wrong and in need of transformation.²⁴ And as these are fables, the fantastical occurs: a girl walks through prison walls in *Spring*, an elderly woman speaks to a companionable disembodied head, a familiar, in *Winter*.

Of core importance too are the seemingly stray and serendipitous associations between names and conversations, episodes and characters: observing them becomes tantamount to a principle and *ethic* of connection, the discernment of which opens the possibility for responsible, even affirmative, thought and conduct. In a Smith novel, connections abound or are looked for. More so even than in E. M. Forster ('Only connect'), discerning the connections becomes the condition for emotional, empathetic intelligence.

One example. In *Summer*, beyond the Brexit fallout that undoes bonds and worsens virulence, 'something family happens' (*S*, 202). The reader will notice just how many interacting and diverse family groups move and rediscover each other across Smith's Quartet, and more so still in this final novel. There are keen poignancies around people who were absent from memory but who are traced, their events remembered. In *Summer*, for whom a prominent motif is Albert Einstein's work on relativity *and* his month-long stay in Roughton Heath in September 1933 when escaping Nazi persecution, the keener emotion rises from the more compressed reference to Robert Einstein, a cousin in Tuscany, who, fleeing Nazi pursuit, conceals himself, the reprisal being that 'the Wehrmacht officers ... wrecked the house', 'killed all the Einsteins they could find', and 'decided not to kill Lorenza Mazzetti [then a child staying with the murdered family] or her sister because their surname was not Einstein' (*S*, 256).

But, through the will to remember and connect,

a live person takes the dead name on. Life happens for someone whose life will otherwise end. Life happens to a life that didn't happen. Life enters, graciously, with respect, the un-lived life. With luck, with one eye on surviving the cold and the other on rethinking the heat [...] the reborn person will withstand a few more seasons. (*S*, 202)

Good fictions of connection – in all the senses, positive and negative, of the phrase.

²⁴ For a fine reading of these attributes of Smith's narrating, see James Wood, 'The Power of the Literary Pun', *The New Yorker*, 22 January 2018; available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/29/the-power-of-the-literary-pun> [accessed 17 October 2020]. See also Gregory L. Ulmer, 'The Punctum in Grammatology', in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. Jonathan Culler (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 164-89.

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In the end it *will* come down to connection.

The *X* Humanities are not as fiction(s)-minded as the Derridean attention to the ‘as if’ in the New Humanities suggests. Odd – for the escape to, of, fiction in these viral times, as well as the ruses of fiction in these post-truth times, reassert the thought that a vast new undertaking for the humanities’ study is the irruption of fiction’s modalities and modulations upon the world. The larger ‘fictional humanities’, lower case f lower case h: this would be their time. But the phrase will not catch on, nor what it invokes. It has an unfortunate ring to it. Like fiction, it is not *serious*. It is a fantastical, fantasising title for a fantastical, fantasising conception.

This does not dispel the thought that the trick of (re)connection through a fictive turn is being missed by the humanities. The New Humanities were, for Derrida, to have the focus of, on, profession. Professing fiction: he, for one, would have countenanced the oxymoron. *Without Alibi*, in which ‘The University Without Condition’ is collected, grounds the supposition. The other essays consider, among other themes, lying, confession, the profession of faith, perjury: all linked by ‘performatives’ and the ‘as if’, as the blurb has it. In other words, the continuum between fiction and truth, dissimulation and *parrēsia* (the latter a Foucault interest). The made up and the real: the indistinctness across the line and the indistinguishability and coextensiveness between the two poles. The *métier* of the Humanities now: deconstructing that binary opposition.

Before their neglect or underplaying of the fictional, the humanities’ alibi that they were with the real will not do.

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The imperative of social distance is the backdrop to rethinking the imperative of critical distance, ‘the humanities disciplines’ long investment in the notion that there may be a special epistemic virtue in practicing criticism from a position of alienation’.²⁵

Perhaps an abiding principle is for the diverse professings of the Humanities to each find themselves better down their way, closest to home.

In my case, around the Old Humanities Building.

So: in conclusion, I want to bring this back to where it started (very ‘Little Gidding’): to the Old Humanities Building. I go there: masked and hand-sanitised. It is the early evening.

I sit down. I Google ‘Old Humanities Building’. Ours comes up. No other one does. Am I within a last bastion of the old humanities, in one of their keeps?

In for the long haul.

The Faculty of Arts occupies the Old Humanities Building together with the Faculty of Education. More could always be made of the neighbouring. That Kantian/Derridean thing about the propaedeutic, referred to above: the thought arises that alliances for the New Humanities need more than the affordances of architecture.

I’ll Google ‘New Humanities Building’ later. First, foolishly, I want to try to pronounce the abbreviation for that: ‘NH’. As ‘En-Aitch’ it works. But the alternative to ‘OH/Oh!’ doesn’t. It’s unutterable. Only an ‘Ungh’ comes out, like the exclamation of someone slugging it out in a comic and getting the worst of it, or like a sharp taking in

²⁵ Shauna Deidre Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 10.

of breath, or like articulation of disgust or disapproval. Without the N – what *is* all this palaver about old and new, anyway? – it's much easier. Aitch. Intone that, the 'H' without the 'O' or the 'N', the Old or the New. It's like breathing out. Or expiry.

Is there an expiry date for the Humanities?

I look out over the quadrangle. There is no snow here: it's not that sort of climate, and this is not a Stoner moment at the end of Chapter 11 in John Williams's novel. William Stoner: rather like Jude, beguiled, arguably undone, by the promise of literature and what takes place in the humanities.

The quadrangle would normally be busy, even at this hour (get with the backdrop and the trite symbolism, since we don't have snow). It's almost empty.

Now I Google 'New Humanities Building'. In the hits that come up, the 'New' clearly references the buildings more than the Humanities. There's investment. Some places are still investing. One must take what's going.

One must take, retake, what's going (or should that be take, pre-take, 'what's coming'?). Indeed: and one might have no option but to take the puns' implications by way of conclusion on what matters here and what's impending.

This suspension could all get very Beckettian. So I think of where to put in the final full stop. I can hear footsteps in the corridor. They're not too distracting. They're always here, familiar. People are busy. Good: the humanities keep on keeping on, as Alan Bennett had it. Beckett, Bennett: this *is* trite. Too staged: and it'll never be final, epilogic. For one thing, there will be proofs. That's assuming a favourable outcome to the discussion which will ensue with the editors, and with others who read this in pre-submitted form. The discussion will be over this essay's conviction, possibly not inexpedient, that a squarer article, a correctly well-made paper, would not have been right. Not for this topic, not for this year. Not now.

I look at Derrida's final sentence-paragraph from 'The University Without Condition'. That fourth epigraph. I think that's right. In the wait 'for what tomorrow', who would have thought that this awaited? Whatever happens from now and however many of us within and without don't get the virus, the Humanities, of indeterminate age, are in for a case of long COVID.

Bed, then. Bed in, for the viral turn. In which case, the Humanities are going to need their sustaining fictions. So, in 'a dry and telegraphic manner' after Derrida, but more briefly still, here are seven modes for that, none of which is exclusive of any other. (1) fictions the humanities wish to believe about themselves; (2) fictions that allow the humanities to carry on as they are, institutionally and hermeneutically; (3) fictions on the humanities' condition and (non)assertion of their (un)conditionality; (4) fictions propaedeutic to the humanities' critical resistance; (5) fictions, like Smith's, imaging-critiquing changes seasonal, eventual, singular; (6) fictions some way or a little away from truth and the *parrēsia*, but on the continuum; (7) fictions too outré to do anything with and almost beyond, and reshaping of, the humanities' repertoires, hence inexhaustible.

There's enough there for recovery, for cover. The humanities, like fiction and the virus, will be around – if peakily so, with fevered eye on peaks past and peaks tomorrow. Not as ever, not as in a case of *plus ça change*; not when, more than ever, they're under observation.

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Conexiunea dintre Științele umaniste. Ficțiune și virus

Rezumat

Acest eseu analizează modul în care criza COVID-19 provoacă debateri despre incisivitatea științelor umaniste. Această reflecție se bazează pe textul lui Jacques Derrida 'The University Without Condition' (Universitatea fără condiții), care invocă Noile Științe Umaniste. În contrapunct, articolul se referă și la romanul lui Ali Smith *Summer* (Vara, 2020), ultimul din Seasonal Quartet (Cvartetul Anotimpurilor), a cărui acțiune se desfășoară în prezentul real. Eseul este structurat în treizeci de secțiuni discrete adaptate stilului unui jurnal, oferind comentarii și inevitabil reflecții intermediare despre 'X Humanities' (Științele Umaniste + modificator variabil), despre plauzibilitatea lor la acest moment, și despre reprezentabilitatea lor, precum și critica contemporaneității din ficțiune, teorie și dincolo de acestea.