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Editor's Note

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AUSTERITY

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EDITOR'S NOTE

JEFFREY R. DI LEO

Austerity has become one of the central myths of the new millennium. Particularly, after the market collapse in 2008, many economists and pundits have called for spending reductions and smaller government. There has also been a reluctance to forgive debt. The effects of austerity measures have been devastating and disruptive. Riots broke out in some countries such as Greece, Spain, and Portugal. But myths are not easily dismissed—and austerity continues to be a destructive force within the social and political realm.

It is the task of progressive philosophers and writers to respond to the central problems and issues of the day. To put their heads in the sand when difficult times are at hand or to simply accept standard responses to these social and political problems is to neglect one's responsibilities. However, the history of writers and philosophers responding to austerity goes back centuries. For example, one of the more literary figures to respond to austerity was the writer and thinker Daniel Defoe.

In 1692, over a quarter of a century before the publication of *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe was committed to King's Bench Prison in London for failure to pay his debts. He owed more than 17,000 pounds and while bankruptcy had been an English statute since 1542, the consequences for it were much the same as they were in the middle ages—and well into the nineteenth century: debtor's prison.

The conditions in debtor's prison were harsh. In 1729, some three hundred inmates died in a three-month period alone in London's Marshalsea Prison. Entire families were put in prison for debt with the children often sent out to beg or work. The response to debt forgiveness was cruel and harsh. Though Defoe had over 140 creditors, he was able to negotiate a prison sentence of only four months. Even after his time in debtor's prison, he spent years evading his creditors. The experience led him to become one of England's most passionate and articulate advocates for bankruptcy reform.

In 1697, Defoe published *Essay upon Projects* which proposed a solution to the problem of debt. It basically involved turning over the debtor's assets to the creditor's though leaving the debtor enough to carry on in society. At such point, the debt would be "discharged." "After a debtor was confined

in prison both he and his creditor lost through prolonged distress," wrote Defoe.¹ His solution was a better response to debt.

Though Defoe's solution was not enacted, it did prompt Parliament to take up a bankruptcy reform act, which was enacted in 1706. While it might be too much to ask of our contributors to engage in the contemporary problematic of austerity at the level of Defoe's engagement, it is not entirely unreasonable to see the work done in this issue as contributing toward a demystification of austerity as it is used and abused in the public arena. If our work affects legislation in Washington or statehouses around the country then we can count ourselves along with Defoe as effective philosophical and literary agents of social and political change.

The contributor's to this issue theoretically explore the referential and figural use of austerity. They ask, what is austerity? What are the social, political, economic and intellectual dimensions of austerity? Who is the paradigmatic subject of austerity? Is its meaning transhistorical and transcultural? Or is it imbued in ideology and thus irremediably discursive and historically contingent? Whose austerity is acknowledged and whose is ignored? Is austerity an ontological concern? Does austerity have an aesthetics? Can an inquiry into austerity ever be disentangled from neoliberalism? How have austerity measures affected the contemporary academic culture? While our contributors have not experienced conditions as harsh as debtor's prison like Defoe, they have lived and worked at a time when austerity measures have made economic life a lot more difficult for large segments of the world. It is my hope that their work contributes to radical changes in the repressive and destructive social and economic policies that accompany austerity and its measures today.

In a move that shows deep awareness of austerity measures in higher education and how they are effecting university support for journals in our field, the **American Comparative Literature Association** has agreed to help underwrite publication of a couple of the major journals in our field rather than only one. This is a major departure for the organization and one that shows their understanding that the lifeblood of comparative literature today are its journals.

To this end, I am pleased to announce that the American Comparative Literature Association has entered into an affiliation agreement with this journal. As one of the centrally recognized journals in the field of comparative literature, we were asked by the ACLA to make a proposal for a possible affiliation with them. Our affiliation proposal was recently approved by the Executive Board of the ACLA. One of the results of the agreement, is that *symplokē* will be regularly publishing a cluster of articles entitled **Interventions** that come from a seminar at the annual meeting of the ACLA. It also means that *symplokē* will officially recognize its affiliation with

¹Kuttner (2013, 5). See Kuttner (2013) and Quilter (2004) for accounts of Defoe's experience in debtor's prison and work on bankruptcy reform.

the ACLA on its masthead. I would like to thank **Ali Behdad**, President of the ACLA, and **Donna Shear**, Director of the University of Nebraska Press for their support of this agreement.

In addition to the ACLA inspired feature, which will begin in our next issue, we would like to announce another new feature entitled **Reformations**. This new feature is designed for established critics or writers to look back and reflect on the important role played in their formation by an earlier critic or writer, from any period or national literature, whom they see as still important for the future. Why this is so, how best to present that argument, from whatever perspective or approach, is left open to each critic or writer. The only (mild) constraints are for the resulting piece to be relatively short, connected in some way to current discussions, light on scholarly apparatus, and written in a style accessible to both non-experts and experts. We welcome short essays of this type. Daniel T. O'Hara's essay, "The Revisionary Muse in Virginia Woolf's *On Being Ill*: On Literary Politics, Modernist-Style," kicks off the feature in this issue.

Looking forward, the upcoming issue under preparation is entitled **Posthumanisms** (Vol. 23, Nos. 1-2 [2015]). Welcome are papers that engage posthumanism in ways that avoid flattening "the human" into a monolithic or homogenous problematic. We are especially interested in papers that take up posthumanism in relation to the crisis of the humanities and the ongoing crises faced by marginalized "humans" around the globe. How might posthumanist thought be symptomatic of the crisis of the humanities and (higher) education more broadly? How has posthumanist inquiry ignored the lived heterogeneities of humanness distributed across raced, classed, gendered, and differently abled bodies? How can posthumanism's critical political project benefit from being brought into intimate connection with critical race, queer, feminist, anti-colonial, and disability theories? **Deadline: 31 December 2014.**

I would like to thank the contributors to this issue for sharing their reflections on austerity with us. Special thanks also to Keri Farnsworth, our Managing Editor, for her extraordinary assistance in the production of this issue; to Vicki Fitzpatrick for keeping the books straight; and to UHV, for providing financial support for our editorial office and staff. Also, as always, I would like to thank the advisory board for their help in the preparation of this issue. Finally, I would like to welcome new advisory board members, **Sophia McClennen** from Penn State University, and **Daniel T. O'Hara** from Temple University – and thank them for agreeing to serve this journal in an official capacity.

References

Kuttner, Robert. *Debtors' Prison: The Politics of Austerity versus Possibility*. New York: Knopf, 2013.

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