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OF A SURVIVALIST TONE ADOPTED IN LITERARY STUDIES

VINCENT BRUYERE

What do survivalists have to teach us? Useful things obviously: to anticipate, to pack up, and get ready for the tough times ahead. They deliver life lessons for those who dwell in a state of emergency. In *Dancing at Armageddon*, Richard Mitchell extends their lesson to the domain of cultural inquiry. Relying on a Weberian narrative of *entzauberung*, a Simmelian narrative of modern alienation, and informed by symbolic interactionism, he describes what I will read as survivalist literacies: modes of storytelling, modes of relating to fiction, both as form of charismatic agency and as circulating object (flyers, magazines, recorded tapes, personal diary, novelistic imitation of personal diary), and modes of acting out. Survivalist literacies compose a set of answers to the question: "Who shall create? Who shall have a hand in crafting culture for the twenty-first century?" (2002, 5). In that respect, survivalism constitutes, in the history of the modern political imagination, a form of social contractuality "centered on the continuing task of constructing "what if" scenarios in which survival preparations will be at once necessary and sufficient" (13). These storylines turned lifelines anchor forms of agency (hoarding, hiding, budgeting) and values (autonomy, family, craftsmanship) in a geography of safety (mountains, woods, camps) and threats (invasion, cyber-attack, recession, fuel depletion, racial secession) whose borders and territorial entities belong to a geopolitical order soon to be overthrown (what once was Colorado and what is now known as...). A future anteriority inhabits a present made of autonomous cells ready to move to their bunker, or already on the move as they rehearse for the Event, building shelters, hoarding weapons, stockpiling bottled water, canned food, and spare batteries.

What does the survivalist fable say? Precisely, it tells stories blurring the distinction between words and deeds, life and fiction (hence the disturbing dimension of some of Mitchell's first-hand accounts). It tells one story in particular: the last one, as the one that counts and recounts from the end. The survivalist fable retells from the end how a community became radically minoritarian because it will have been the last one — or one of the last ones — standing and telling, therefore entrusting itself with a task, the literary task par excellence explains Jacques Derrida, of being the social memory assuming "the burden of every death" (1984, 28). We shall then speak of a survivalist tone to talk about a certain logic of cultural sustainability, in the wake of Bill Readings' apocalyptic demand in *The University in Ruins* urging post-historical students of literary culture, to find other ways to understand how what we say about literary texts and culture participates in culture, once:

the decline of the nation-state as the primary instance of capitalism's self-reproduction has effectively voided the social mission of the modern university. That mission used to be the production of national subjects under the guise of research into and the inculcation of "culture," a "culture" which has always been thought, since Humboldt, in terms inseparable from national identity. The strong idea of "culture" arises with the nation-state, and we now face its disappearance as the locus of social meaning. (1996, 89)

Aranye Fradenburg is an astute listener of this survivalist tone, especially as it goes medieval. She writes:

The neomedievalism of our period often takes the form of a fantastic relocation of "medieval" privation and risk in a future that prophesies certain aspects of the Real of the present: the fragility of the child as image of our own destructivity, the pleasure we take in mutation; survivalism, the fantasy of culture *as* survival, cult *as* and cult of preparedness; postplague, postapocalypse, technological bricolage, monkish techniques of preservation of knowledge, fully militarized hypermasculine vigilance, living to fight and tell. (1997, 209-210)

In that sense, survival is not merely what's left when dire necessity has removed the ornamental, the surplus of qualifiers, the foam of the unnecessary, the froth of the literary — whatever the name and the categories epics of futurity reserve for irrelevance and unfitness to endure post-apocalyptic freedom. It is but a pattern in the defaulting to austerity measures, exceptional means, and unusual cruelty. As it is, Didier Fassin, Elizabeth Povinelli, and Kathleen Stewart, among others, have shown in their ethnographies of exhaustion and social abandonment, the extent to which survival is enabled, even as a letting die, or a forcing to live. The study of survivalist literacies thus assumes the form of a provocation to reconsider the distribution of bodies, cultural areas, and competencies (ethnographical, philological,

military...etc.) that shaped and continues to shape the agenda of cultural and humanistic inquiry after the Cold War (Appadurai 1996, 16-18; Chow 2006).

Literary and cultural studies as we tend to understand them now within research universities, as we declare ourselves researchers, and that our work is evaluated in those terms, designed to be sanctioned in those terms, became products of a culture of research. They were—in a past whose exact limits remain to be determined but that is nevertheless operative as a hypothesis—linked to a project of *Bildung* and sanctioned by an organic process of self-formation instrumental to a class of self-determining rulers. As cautious objections will debate its historical and contextual terms, I only intend this hypothesis to emphasize the fact that in a regime of governance ruled by social sciences, literary culture as a division of literature within the modern university, had to become, for better or for worse, research in literary studies, or by default a branch of cultural area studies.

Bill Readings warned us. The point of posthistorical literary studies cannot be to mend a lost continuity between the rational destiny of the individual subjectivity and the collective objectification of a human universal. As he notes:

New texts will continue to be added and attention will be paid to neglected writers. But that attention will not be the same, since the whole does not add up any longer to an organic vision of national literature, nor does anything within the system of knowledge requires that it should. The function of the literary canon requires a secular religion of literature." (1996, 86)

Building on Mitchell's sociography of survivalism in *Dancing at Armageddon*, but moving away from methodological problems involving group identity, the determination of what constitutes a critical mass of significant evidence and auditable thresholds, the collection and treatment of data, and questions of research ethics raised by his fieldwork, I intend the notion of survivalist literacy as a disruption of a model of literary understanding which, according to Terry Cochran's genealogy:

presumes that scripture or sacred literature derives initially from a carefully balanced relationship among language, ethnic identity, cultural unity, and the certainty of a specific ethnic group's election as the ideal interlocutor of a singular God. In this rendering, literature—which at its emergence is therefore sacred by definition—exists as the material giving testimony to a transcendental voice leaving its residue in the text that recounts its utterances.... Modern literary monotheism, secular in faith but sacred in concept, fuels the idea that the invisible force of collective identity reveals itself through time in the dominant medium diffusing the written word. (2007, 127-128)

Modern literary monotheisms frame the evidencing of a causal, topical and local relationship of belonging. As a result, and like in Chris Miller's *Theories of Africans* with the literary conversion of Mande's ethnicity, the literary object in its historical and cultural design reflects the speculative congruence of a community, an idiom, a territory, a past, and even a metaphysical election in the case of Gustave Lanson's "French Spirit" (cited in McDonald and Suleiman 2010), or the literary election of the Mande "composed of descendants of the medieval Mali empire, famous for their griots' oral traditions and producers of some [of] the francophone Africa's finest writers.... My hope is that the accumulation of information about this one culture will translate into lucid readings of the texts in question (Miller 1990, 29). At stake in Miller's mediation of difference is the possibility to bridge the discrete series of divisions in literary history to the expanded field of their discontinuity in the domain of anthropology. Not only must the text be restored to its anthropological truth because the history of cultural identity in West Africa is thoroughly informed by anthropological knowledge produced during the imperial era and by its rhetoric of otherness, but also because the text's identity *is* essentially to be read, that is transformed through scholarship and commented upon in order to extract its cultural content. The truth of the text is therefore found in its objectification of a discourse of knowledge on cultural difference that reveals the literary object in its identitarian vocation while consecrating it as an isolatable entity in a system of cultural participation.

With the ongoing demise of a project of literary history producing the coherence of a corpus, a collectivity, a language, a sovereignty, an authenticity, and in some case a spiritual election, comes into sight the end of a myth of literary culture in the University, and by contrast, the futurity of a task consisting in re-imagining "the notion of community itself" (Readings 1996, 127). In the language of *Death of a Discipline*, this task resonates with Spivak's attempt "to move away from a politics of hostility, fear, and half solutions" (2003, 4). There would be a lot to say about the disciplinarity of this task in a time where global answers to problems related to the planetary expandability of civil society are articulated by biostatistics and biotechnologies. One could also suggestively think about that problem and the revisionisms in literary history in terms of a negotiation of forms of belongings and monotheistic (as in Cochran's "monotheistic unconscious") attachment in a context of multi-cultural stranger sociality. It follows that as a reflexive practice, survivalism, like sociology for Norbert Elias, is a way to survive modernity (Smith 2001, 20). From the perspective of its impact on the definition of historicist or culturalist perspectives in literary studies, the critical movement inscribed in the "re" of "reimagine" facilitates, just as much as it is conditioned by it, the acknowledgment of the systemic impossibility "of combining in one *simultaneous* intellectual movement the elementary hermeneutic goal of getting to know a culture and the analytical goal of dissolving it into those techniques and conditions which constitute its meanings" (Gumbrecht 1995, 512).

This impossibility finds its expression in the second chapter of *Theories of Africans*, "Ethnicity and Ethics," in which Miller questions the ethical implications attached to the validation of ethnicity as a critical category in literary studies. A philological commentary on *ethos/ethnos* sparked off his conclusion on the challenge of cultural mediation: "there is no real ethics without ethnicity, without the disquieting, untidy presence of the other. The relation to the other is the relation of ethnicity; it is also the relation between any theoretical discourse and Africa; claiming an ethical imperative does not exempt the Western critic from a relation of difference" (Miller 1990, 63-64). In his contribution to *Writing Culture*, Stephen Tyler has blended into his conception of "ethnography" the respective meanings of *ethnos* (nation or race), *ethos* ("the characteristic spirit of a people), and ethics (*ethika*). Miller rehearses notional and etymological distinctions between the three terms to show that Tyler's assemblage constitutes a false solution to the debate between gnosis and otherness: "once the *ethos* differs, ethnicity and ethics begin to go their separate ways" (1990, 34). His narrative of differentiation opens literary history to inquiries into the very nature of the dissentive articulation of *ethos*, *ethnos* et *ethika*.

The last section of *The University in Ruins* reads as a contribution to the defining of such a domain of inquiry (Readings 1996, 180-193). Fichte, Kant, Blanchot, Lyotard, Nancy, Derrida, and Agamben are mentioned throughout, and after all, inquiries in the sense of community are the mandate of philosophy. However, one may ask by comparison and when faced with the task to reimagine the notion of community itself, to what extent it is incumbent on historians of literature, or less exclusively to scholars in literary studies to deal with the postnational future of imagined communities? The recent edited collection *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History* maps the cultural relevance of literary history in the age of postnational formations by exploring alternatives to those which Gustave Lanson and Jean-Marie Napoléon Nisard's narratives designed in order to produce effects of spiritual, territorial, and national convergence. In response to these models of identification, Christie McDonald and Susan Rubin Suleiman marshal a transnational redistribution of French literary history organized in twenty-nine sections along three variables of contingency—spaces, mobilities, and multiplicities—reassembling what Bill Readings calls an "organic vision of national literature" through other metaphorical compasses: translational, geopolitical, environmental, ecological, and systemic.

While inscribing their own editorial project in the line of Denis Hollier, *A New History of French Literature* (1989), McDonald and Suleiman note that, out of its one hundred and sixty or so entries only a dozen of them were written by scholars working in French universities. In *French Global* the ratio is three out of thirty. The presidential reaction to the 2007 manifesto "Pour une littérature-monde en français" and to its rejection of the literary institutions of la Francophonie edges against a similar experience of the disjuncture between language, territoriality, sovereignty, literacy, and the

academic production of discourse on cultural identity: "The heart and the future of Francophonie are less and less French, but paradoxically, more and more Anglo-saxon. Will Francophonie be saved by America? That's the last straw!" (Sarkozy 2007 cited in Forsdick 2010). The jaunty outcry betrays the horizon of expectations the discourse of cultural and literary studies leaves unfulfilled in the ruins of the University of Culture—the global is only a scale for the observation of disjuncture, not a passport to a planetary sense of belonging—as it reveals the form taken by the epistemological problems that a grand-narrative of national continuity and cultural participation literary history was called upon to solve through consistent culturalist and historicist objectifications of texts and their literariness.

The one hundred and twenty sections of François Paré's essay on the literatures of exiguity can be situated at the same level. They propose an alternative visualization of an organic totality in literary history considering the historical and intellectual commodifications of the literary object from the vantage point of literatures that, for various reasons—but mostly because of their linguistic and cultural insularity—have not received the privilege to enter the circuits of literary studies. Paré's assemblage of a corpus of text that spans Joachim du Bellay, Jean-Marc Dalpé, Herménégilde Chiasson, and Kamau Brathwaite, does not rely on assumptions of linguistic, territorial or national co-implication of a text and community. Rather, it exposes its fragility.¹ Contemplating a morphing environment of sand subjected to the contrary forces of wind and water, Paré dreams a literary ecology of resistance to territorial and even terrestrial closure:

Also in front of me, between the sea and the first houses in the town, a narrow strip of wild dunes, barely two or three metres high, rises up like a grassy rampart against the invading waters.... This paradoxical, silt laden and yet wonderfully resistant earth must, I tell myself today, serve as a living metaphor, destined to shed light on what I shall try to define here, and call me to order on that which resists knowledge and what is, in the final analysis, the knowledge of resistance.... In the Netherlands, the wild dunes are sacred places, protected with meticulous care from any intrusion which might uproot or imperil their precious vegetation. This is not so much futile glorification as a kind sacralisation of the margins perceived both as a vital crossroads and a pure no man's land. Beyond the dunes begins the tormented zone of writing. (1997, 1; modified translation)

Finally, in Margaret Atwood's guide to Canadian literature, *Survival*, Canada figures as an inner limit of literary history from where to observe a literary history in the making as well as in its world-making properties:

¹A liminal statement in one of Paré's other essays reads as follows: "Literature is always a work on the fragile" (1994, 9).

Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind. Our literature is one such map, if we can learn to read it as our literature, as the product of who and where we have been. We need such a map desperately, we need to know about here, because here is where we live. For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive. (1972, 18-19)

What is at stake in Atwood's narrative of the non-qualification of a Nation by literary history is the myth of the qualification of the group by a narrative. As such, *Survival* is less a speculative staging of the birth of literary history – *pace* its relative historical depth – than the Canadian apocalypse of what François Paré describes in *Les Littératures de l'exigüité* as the ethno-redemptive function of literary history (2001, 195). Here is the paradox: "bare survival" (32) – at the point where *bare* equates "Canadian" – becomes the degree zero of qualification – the literary qualification of a collectivity as community. A task remains, the narrative task articulated from within the empty shell of Canadian literary history:

But back to my original question. The first part of that question, "What's Canadian about Canadian literature," is answered, I hope, by the rest of this book. The second part, "Why should we bothered," shouldn't have to be answered at all because, in any self-respecting nation, it would never even be asked. But that's one of the problems: Canada isn't a self-respecting nation and the question does get asked. Therefore. (1972, 14)

The last word is crucial as it entrusts CanLit with the survival of the nation. *Therefore* sets the tone. It gives you a sense of the burden to be assumed: here comes the future that has already entrusted CanLit. It is the remainder from the very beginning. Namely, what's left of literary history after culture, and therefore left with the task to think survival *after* Culture, mourning a project of *Bildung*. In its obsession with apocalyptic fables, camouflage, proofed shelter, sealed arks, and concealed architectures, survivalism interiorizes an ending to keep it from ending.

"North" is the last section of *Dancing At Armageddon*. Mitchell's last report on his expeditions into the world of American survivalism brings him to Canada where he visits a gigantic anti-nuclear shelter in Ontario, twice. The first visit ends on a striking vision:

We emerge into the sunset, time travelers back from a possible future.... [Thomas] Sand's ark to the postapocalypse had already safely carried precious cargo to the future. The whole complex honeycombing the hillside, unit by unit welded together, entrance to entrance, back to front, right and left, was made from forty-two

wheelless, cement-encased, faded yellow school busses, ready for one last hopeful trip toward a better tomorrow. (2002, 228)

Years later Mitchell comes back for a second visit. The ark has been vandalized. It is rusting away still waiting for the future that left it behind as the emptied shell of its narratives. In its obsession with apocalyptic fables, camouflage, proofed shelter, sealed arks, and concealed architectures, survivalism interiorizes an ending to keep it from ending.

Posthistorical literary studies are caught in a paradox: "History itself, as a primarily literary phenomenon that inventively seeks to discern and express the continuity of mind in time, becomes yet another version of a thought experiment that allows for thinking the present's relationship to a constructed past" (Cochran 2007, 141). Cochran opposes two types of solicitation that make sense of the literary object, one aiming at the historicist transparency of its cultural identity, the other oriented toward speculation and identified to the (forgotten) sacred or transcendental dimension of literary writing, which he revisits through the concept of *Gedankenexperiment*. This functional differentiation between historicist and speculative modes of reasoning is somehow datable and indeed coincides with what Michel de Certeau identified to the birth of modern historiography in Western Europe: "For my part, born historian within religious history, and formed by the dialect of that discipline, I asked myself what role religious productions and institutions might have had in the organization of the modern 'scriptural' society that has replaced them by transforming them" (1988, 14). Rereading *The German Ideology*, De Certeau argues that the historiographical operation—what defines discourse of history as a discourse of knowledge and what defines its modernity—has in part been developed and cultivated in the Christian West as an efficient way to answer the philosophical question of beginnings, a question which therefore assumes in the discourse of history the form of its paradoxical productivity in the history of thought and thought experiments. Concerning the shift from religion to modern historiography, he writes: "this repressed [metaphysical] dimension returns endlessly in...[the] labor [of historiography]; it can be seen, among other signs, in that which inscribes into it the reference to a 'production' and/or in the questioning that can be placed under the sign of an 'archaeology'" (1988, 12). The fact of production identified as the first historical fact ("*die erste geschichtliche Tat*") and on which model historical factuality will be identified in retrospect, is only conceivable from the speculative point of view that conceives of it in the modern discourse of history as a regulatory fiction.

It follows that historicist and culturalist demands and their fulfillment by literary studies and inquiry in cultural sustainability mark a limit. They are demands for closure: "This history seems to have arrived at its end when 'literature' is determined predominantly as an ideological tool that must be contained in the past, as a history that must be left behind. The end of literary study is history. And as such, it has no future, at least not in that name"

(Kamuf 1997, 165). But another timeline emerges from this end, in which survivalism commemorates—with all the piety and the discipline that such a commemoration entails—the translatability of imaginary forms and fictional scenarios into forms of power and violence, thus remembering a time when discipline and piety were to be found and sourced in a particular arrangement of narratives and bodies. In that sense, a survivalist tone challenges what it means to make time to engage in close readings, to remember classics or to mourn literary culture, but also to conceive of emergent forms of social life living off this work of mourning. Eve Sedgwick confides in *Tendencies*:

I think that for many of us in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival.... This can't help coloring the adult relation to cultural texts and objects; in fact, it's almost hard for me to imagine another way of coming to care enough about literature to give a lifetime to it. (1993, 3)

Signaled by the “enough,” a threshold of care defines—just as it is defined through—a form of attachment rather than a set references to a predetermined object of inquiry and expertise—namely literature, named after a series of culturalist and historicist objectifications of literariness. Jacques Derrida writes in one the missives/missiles of “No Apocalypse Not Now”: “The events known by the name of literature are definable; and there is in principle a possible history of this name and of conventions attached to the naming. But the same cannot be said of the structural possibilities of what goes by the name literature, which is not limited to the events already known under this name” (1984, 27). The gift of a lifetime and her survival are two of these events. And so is her potential exhaustion.

Survivalism is thus emergent not in relation to a predetermined present (a decade, a century, a period, an era...etc.) from which it departs chronologically, but in a projective relation to the determining or determinative future anteriority through which the present feels, or starts to feel like something (Stewart 2007). It is felt in the difference between a “not yet” and an “always already.” It is felt as it is endured on the sacrificial mode of actuarial projections, austerity measures, survivalist epics, and conservationist programs. Survivalism is emergent as a culture of fiction (Foucault 1984, 118-119) insofar as those projections, measures, and program are to be understood both as ambulatory discursive practices and as reflexive forms. In that sense, austerity is a modal category. Modal categories, writes Giorgio Agamben, “are ontological operators, that is, the devastating weapons used in the biopolitical struggle for Being, in which a decision is made each time on the human and the inhuman, on ‘making live’ and ‘letting die.’ The field of this battle is subjectivity” (2002, 146-147). In the particular context of survivalism, the battle is fought on the front of futurity.

It is symptomatic in that respect, that a demand for histories of sustainability, formalized, for instance, by the book series published by the MIT press, "History for a Sustainable Future," under the editorship of Michael Egan, could find its rationale in the fact that sustainability demands history, thus extending the histories of self-formation to the domain of forensic/bio/nano-technologies that extract life from the dead, the liminal and the non-human, and into an environmentally challenged present. This is how it goes: "historicizing sustainable and unsustainable futures is based less on the notion that we should learn from past mistakes than on the premise that solving the environmental crisis will demand the most and best information available, and history provides valuable insight into the creation and proliferation of the environmental ills we hope to curb."²

The web-document "Humanities and Sustainability—What Do the Humanities Contribute?" published by the Institute for Humanities Research at Arizona State University, contains the following statement of purpose: "To sustain our human communities, our natural resources, and our rich global biological and cultural heritage, we must explore humans' beliefs about their relationship to nature and integrate knowledge and policy across the disciplines in order to understand, inform, and direct human development toward a responsible, sustainable future."³ The document then proceeds to methodically map out ASU departments contributing to the initiative and provides a list of the experts in each field and sub-field on the ASU faculty. The directory is extended to scholars from other universities. Through this interdisciplinary declension, the notion of sustainability retains a minimal definition, while it functions as an occasion for describing the curricular offering and rehearsing its relevance in the guise of a new organicity without any apparent conflicts of faculties. On the model of the rhetoric of "Excellence" flattening the question of value in higher education once "Culture" in its German idealist sense had ceased to be the regulatory principle of its *Bildung* project (Readings 1997, 21-43), the turn toward sustainability serves the function of agreeable narrative explaining what "will repay the costs in time and capital expended" by humanistic disciplines in the name of liberal education? (Readings 1996, 151). If sustainability can be viewed as an opportunistic move of the corporate University, it comes into play with the widely shared sense of a civilizational and institutional crisis of the humanities. In Readings' accounts, the two coalesced into a conservation conundrum:

It is not a question of coming to terms with the market, establishing a ratio of marginal utility that will provide a sanctuary—such a policy will only produce the persistent shrinking of that sanctuary, as in the case of old-growth timber in the United States. How many philosophers, or redwoods, are required for purposes of

²For a comparable claim, see Libby Robin (2011) arguing that with the Anthropocene history attains the status of first order observation.

³"humanities & sustainability" (n.d.)

museification? If both the grand project of research and the minimal argument of species preservation are likely to prove unsuccessful, it seems to me necessary that our argument for certain practices of thought and pedagogy must measure up to the situation and accept that the existing disciplinary model of the humanities is on the road to extinction. (1995, 489)

In other words, if research will not save the humanities, as Readings made it clear earlier in the same article (488), will generous gifts, estate donations, and private endowments do the job when public institutions fail – on financial grounds – to foster, or support a culture of humanistic inquiry?⁴ Maybe. If not, maybe survivalism will.

But in any case, rhetoric of salvage and austerity – constituting themselves as the ensemble of actual or potential answers to Harpham’s question: “What claim do the humanities, or scholarship generally, have on increasingly limited resources?” (2009, B6) – seem to be missing a most exacting point previously made by Readings: “Thought is nonproductive labor, and hence does not show up as such on balance sheets except as waste” (1995, 488). Then the question is not just: “Do the humanities have a future?” (Paulson 2001, 1; Weber 2001, 236). But *also* – not rather – under which form and outlook, waste and non-productive labor show up or could show up on the balance sheets of biocapitalist ventures? In return, this open question locates circumstances in which to imagine and capacitate alternative forms of expenditures and forms of life. A form, for instance, that would not respond to – in modal terms that is, that wouldn’t have to respond to – a problem of transmissibility inscribing the transmission and the transmissible productivity of a humanistic tradition in the very possibility of its betrayal by another tradition, by another form of expenditures (R&D for instance), or even by another species or other speciesist claims.

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⁴On philanthropy and humanistic inquiry in American institution, see Harpham (2009).

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