I take the phrase ‘the historicist/contextualist paradigm’ from Joseph North’s new book, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (North 2017). North is one of a number of recent scholars who are impatient with this paradigm – impatient with hearing, in North’s words, ‘what the text has to teach us about histories and cultures’ – and who are looking for ways of breaking out of it. North lists, as one way of breaking out of it, the emergence of world literature as a new disciplinary formation working in a new and enlarged temporal scale. World literature has been willing to link texts that are widely separated not just in space, but also in time, and this means that criticism’s usual choice of context, the local context of a particular period, becomes less decisive for any given act of interpretation, and may even be totally irrelevant. In leading with the term ‘cosmopolitanism’, which I understand as a moral and political engagement with the world, or rather with the worldliness of the world, I was trying to signal my disagreement with this line of argument – with world literature as an escape from historical context. My main focus here will be on answering the question of what kind of world history world literature needs, the assumption being that it does need one, and not the one (such as it is) that it already has. But I will also want to say some more about North’s book and about controversies over context that are not specifically about world literature.

In the days when world literature began with the ancient Greeks and bounded forward athleticism across the centuries from (Western) masterpiece to (Western) masterpiece, it was taken for granted that the field did not need world history at all. History in almost any extra-literary sense would have been an inconvenience. Great writers were assumed to
sit on figurative mountain tops communing by unspecified means with other great writers on other distant peaks. To have insisted that each masterpiece must be understood in terms of the ordinary life of its time, conducted as that life was far below (in more than one sense) on the farms and battlefields, in the streets and workshops and bedrooms, would have undercut the field’s unspoken premise: that literary greatness, defined by transcending time and space, makes its own history by addressing eternal human themes and dilemmas – that it is its own history. Pedagogically speaking, it makes sense that in so-called ‘Great Books’ courses, much class time has never been devoted to context.

How much has changed?

The new world literature, which has shifted away from the field’s old centre in Europe and therefore also away from its old origin in classical Greece, has done so in large part because of its sensitivity to its own historical context, which is of course postcolonial and highly suspicious of Eurocentrism. That sensitivity makes its way into its self-presentation. The Longman Anthology of World Literature (Damrosch et al. 2004), for example, of which I am one of the authors, declares in the general introduction to its first volume: ‘One important way to understand literary works in context is to read them in conjunction with the broader social and artistic culture in which they were created’ (Vol 1, xxi). One notices, however, that while the anthology is enthusiastic in its pursuit of transnational comparisons and the displaying of global connections and cross-currents, here the ‘broader social and artistic context’ offered is strictly local. What counts as context is only the society in which a given work was created. Actually, it is more the culture than the society. This is a context that any traditional history could have provided. One thing that is not meant by history here is the new scale or kind of context that might help explain, say, where the global cross-currents and connections come from, what significance they have, for whom, and so on – the issues raised in particular by historians working over the past two decades to create what is sometimes called global or world history.

It is theoretically possible, of course, that the new world literature has no real need for the new world history. That would follow from the assumption that literature by its nature enjoys considerable or even absolute autonomy from history. If the field’s practitioners believe, say, that literature is sufficiently autonomous of history so as to make historical contextualisation seem like a category mistake, then perhaps,
so the argument would go, the new world literature should continue to resist contextualisation in much the same way that the old world literature did. This line of reasoning would make sense of some of the Longman’s preliminary contextual materials. If ‘ancient writing is urban in origin’ (1), it says on page 1 of volume 1, even if ‘the great majority of all people in antiquity were engaged in growing crops and raising livestock’, then in a sense the point has already been made. How the majority of people make a living is something that can be safely ignored; it has nothing useful to tell us about writing, and the history of writing that will follow. From the first page, literature therefore disengages from how livings are made. Like pastoral, the first genre mentioned, literature may gesture back across the divide, but we are reminded that in pastoral it’s not shepherds who are doing the writing. The genre of pastoral has never been a genuine expression of material life. In this sense pastoral seems to stand for literature in general.

The reader of the Longman is then informed that creation myths, the first genre of which textual examples are given, tend to see their own age as ‘modern’ and as ‘sundered in basic ways from an earlier age when gods and goddesses walked the earth, people lived to great ages or never died, cities were not yet established, and humans and animals lived together on different terms’ (11). In this sense, the volume proposes, all ages are modern. If all ages are modern, if that is the premise of the new world literature, or to the extent that it is, it makes sense that, like the old Western masterpieces format, the new format too will resist at least a portion of the new world history – specifically, that portion that takes the modern as a real and significant break in values and attitudes and, depending on how one interprets that break, perhaps even as cultural progress. The Longman takes modernity as a construct or periodising fiction; it sees all period designations as fundamentally arbitrary. To reject these assumptions, insisting that modernity is real, anchored in material reality, and perhaps in some ways (one says this with hesitation) even morally and materially superior to the past, would be to open up a possibly subversive conversation about the benefit for modern readers of reading pre-modern texts. This is a conversation that literary criticism has never been eager to host.

The danger that what used to be called a ‘modernisation’ narrative will subvert the whole literary-critical enterprise is right up front in Steven Pinker’s The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined (Pinker 2011). In his first chapter, Pinker offers a selective survey of the old world-literature canon beginning with Homer and the Bible, in each case highlighting ‘the depravity of our ancestors’ way of life’ (1).
The depravity centres on violence: it involves divinely sanctioned or officially legitimised slaughter, pillage, rape, and other forms of mass cruelty, cruelty that even ingenious readers would be hard pressed to claim is questioned in any fundamental way by the texts themselves. The ethnic cleansing visited upon the Midianites in the Bible is one example. Another is the Homeric exchange of women as sexual booty. It is easy to pick holes in Pinker’s metanarrative of progress away from violence. It is less easy to know how to teach these texts if one does not decide to suspend one’s natural ethical concern, today, with the inflicting and suffering of violence. I suspect that Pinker’s book is not often taught in world literature classes. Perhaps it should be. The conversation might be about whether there is a history we can’t do without, and perhaps also about the history we have without acknowledging we have it. It’s a conversation worth having.

A second reason for assuming that world literature might have no need of world history is the further assumption that what the field is doing now, in its anti-Eurocentric moment, that it was not doing before is simply letting a hundred literary flowers bloom. Allowing for diversity of cultural self-expression, especially self-expression coming from outside Europe, is something so self-evidently desirable that no further justification seems called for. Indeed, from the moment when one rejects the concept of modernity as merely a periodising fiction, diversity comes to seem like its own justification. For some time now that has been the widespread public view, however self-contradictory it may prove on private inspection: modernity is a self-flattering European construct that unjustly consigns non-European cultures to backwardness and that therefore must be jettisoned in order for those cultures to be permitted to express themselves as equals. Jettisoning modernity is a shortcut to cultural equality, and that is an unquestionable good.

It is a good. But perhaps it is also a historical narrative. The achievement of greater diversity could of course be seen as progress, if somewhat disguised: a narrative of the increasing democratisation of cultural expression. And one speculates that it is in fact the version of world history – thin, culturalist, and heavily weighted towards the present, but a historical narrative nonetheless – to which practitioners of world literature may be most instinctively attracted. But it does not seem to have been embraced as an explicit version of history.

Ironically, literary critics who reach out to the new world history often seem to do so in the belief that they can thereby escape from history altogether. In Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time, for example, Susan Stanford Friedman references a number
of historians, including André Gunder Frank, William H. McNeill and the team of Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, in making an argument in favour of breaking ‘away from periodization altogether’ (Friedman 2015, 7). What these historians tell us, as she reads them, is that there has been a world system for many millennia, in Asia as well as the West, and therefore it makes no sense to organise a history around, say, the putatively recent rise of unequal core-periphery relations. Modernity is a recurrent phenomenon. It is defined by nothing more than moments of accelerated change. It too has happened outside as well as inside Europe. The idea that, thanks to a unique evolutionary trajectory, the West became even for a time the exclusive possessor of modernity has always been a myth, Friedman argues, though a myth that has found support in the everyday infrastructure of Eurocentric concepts, including the concept of periodisation itself. In Friedman’s view, periodisation must go.

I’m not sure that this slogan accurately reflects the new world history or indeed that the new world history can be lumped together in this way as a single entity. Just as different literary critics have their different takes on world literature, so different historians have their different takes on world history. Laura Doyle calls on literary critics to ‘incorporate the new historical scholarship on early world systems and states’ (Doyle 2015, 336), as if this scholarship possessed a collective unity and, accordingly, an unquestionable authority, so that the only thing for literary critics to do with it is to ‘incorporate’ it. None of this goes without saying. It might be preferable, therefore, to begin taking a closer look at the particular histories on offer and to evaluate them critically rather than citing them as authorities who must be obeyed. In any event, we certainly do not gain anything if we announce our rejection of triumphalist Eurocentric narrative, congratulate ourselves on a job well done, and stop there, proud to have demonstrated, say, how much change came from outside rather than inside Europe or simply that things were more diverse, complicated, and heterogeneous in pre-modernity than we used to think. As an answer, ‘it’s more complicated’ is always right and therefore always extremely inadequate. The next step, and it is a very necessary one, is to consider with a critical eye what has taken the place of that triumphalism or is being proposed to fill the gap. As with the subterranean narrative of cultural democratisation that, as I suggest, is secreted within much allegiance to diversity, it seems likely that the refusal of triumphalist metanarrative or of narrative as such will often replace these with other narratives, just as problematic and perhaps even just as triumphalist. These other narratives will not
appear to require or elicit critical concern because they do not seem to claim European centrality, superiority, or exceptionality, or simply because they are still invisible.

Resisting one particular historical context, which is usually what is happening when one says no to historical context as such, does not preclude a disguised embrace of another historical context, one that perhaps doesn’t look like historical context at all and therefore can pass without scrutiny. Consider Alexander Beecroft’s summary of the relation between world literature and empire:

The prestige of Akkadian and Greek as literary languages in the eastern Mediterranean so long outlives the conquests of Sargon and Alexander as to undermine the role of political hegemony in establishing that prestige, while the enduring and complex status of Chinese literature in Japan, Korea and Vietnam, like that of Persian literature at the Mughal and Ottoman courts, can again hardly be explained in terms of conquest, colonization or trade alone. The cultural prestige of Latin in the European Middle Ages likewise has little to do with imperial power (Beecroft 2008, 95).

Here Beecroft, inspired by Sheldon Pollock on the Sanskrit cosmopolis, is both making a valuable observation about several world literatures and also, for better or worse, reproducing an ideological tenet of literary criticism as a discipline: that literature enjoys a certain independence from the societies in which it happens to emerge or be received, not total of course but nonetheless decisive, and that what it conveys (to put this crudely) cannot be reduced, therefore, to the time-bound values of those societies, for example violent and anti-egalitarian values.

This looks like the same freedom from historical contextualisation that would result, without all the research that went into Beecroft’s elegant ecological classification of scales and his account of world empires in particular, merely from adopting the standard view of literature as decisively if incompletely autonomous. But it’s not hard to see another historical narrative peeking out from behind it. The empire is the historical context Beecroft is discussing. Is literature equally insubordinate when it is created and received not in empires but in modern nation states? Or does Beecroft think literature’s remarkable independence from material power holds true only when the society around it is an empire? If literature is less independent from power when it inhabits the modern nation state than it is under an empire, as one might conjecture, though the point is not made explicitly, then in fact
we seem to have a history here after all – one in which literature, proudly independent when nurtured by pre-modern empire, fatally succumbs to the characteristic historical context of modernity: the nation state. In other words, the nation state serves in modern times as the vehicle for ‘political hegemony’ that literature had miraculously avoided succumbing to before. Here world literature is in fact generating a world history for itself: a narrative of decline into modernity, or modernity as decline.

If we were to replace a narrative of progress with a narrative of decline, would we gain by the substitution? I don’t see how. One is not more open-minded or open-ended than the other. I note, however, that the nation state is not the terminus for Beecroft. He leaves open the enticing possibility that today’s ‘global literature’, arising on the far side of the nation state, will reproduce the same freedom from ‘political hegemony’ that literature enjoyed under pre-modern empire. The narratively pleasing peripeteia may not be verifiable or even plausible history, but it does have the effect of enabling neo-medievalism, with its regression from secular to religious values and its backhanded rationale for the value of the canon, to seem both up to date and trendily transnational.

It may be that the only world history world literature wants is one that reinforces its sense of literature’s autonomy from the social, economic, political and military structures around it – its autonomy from context as such. I hope not. This is why. To make literature autonomous of context is to make literature seem innocent while making all social structures seem irredeemably guilty. The effect is to make social structures seem incapable of performing any positive service for humanity; it is to make those structures seem unworthy of investing ourselves in. In that case, all human efforts that have gone into changing these structures for the better would of course have been wasted. And the moral would be not to waste any more effort on them. Don’t act on the world; instead, spend your time innocently reading and writing. Reading and writing are excellent activities, but we should not make the case for them by denigrating all others. The history implicit here is pleasantly self-serving for literary critics and impossibly bleak for everyone else. Does the field really want it? Whatever we think we want, what the field needs is a history that makes our work more intimate with the work of others – in other words, one that rejects or compromises literature’s autonomy. It is the compromises with and contaminations by historical context that demonstrate why people who are themselves structurally constrained, contaminated, and compromised by the contexts in which they live should care about literature in the first place.
– why they should think literature can understand *them*. Otherwise, why bother? But that is an argument for another place.

The case for literary autonomy that underlies Beecroft’s ambitious and indeed unrivalled synthesis has its true centre in the nation state. It seems worth generalising this logic to world literature as a whole, at least as a hypothesis: it is the context of the nation state that organises the field, but it organises the field *negatively*. What world literature generally seeks and what it generally values is anything and everything that is *not* the nation state. The rule seems to function equally well in time and in space: literature that crosses national borders today has the same presumptive virtue of worldliness as literature that emerged before national borders in the modern sense had come into existence. This virtue of course depends on the assumption that the nation state is, if not evil, then some secular equivalent of evil. Why else would the avoidance of nationality be instinctively accepted as a precious commodity?

Wai Chee Dimock’s *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*, a valuable meditation of the expanded temporal dimension of literary studies, spells out the link between special pleading for literary autonomy, on the one hand, and a special animus against the nation state, on the other:

> Literature is the home of nonstandard space and time. Against the official borders of the nation and against the fixed intervals of the clock, what flourishes here is irregular duration and extension, some extending for thousands of years or thousands of miles, each occasioned by a different tie and varying with that tie, and each loosening up the chronology and geography of the nation (Dimock 2008, 4).

Nothing is said about why we should prefer to have the chronology and geography looser rather than tighter.

There is more of an explanation in Jane Burbank and Fredrick Cooper’s *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*, which offers a rationale for the new world history’s impulse to revalue empires, typical inhabitants of Dimock’s looser and deeper time, over modern nation states: ‘the nation-state tends to homogenize those within inside its borders and exclude those who do not belong, while the empire reaches outward and draws, usually coercively, peoples whose difference is made explicit under its rule. The concept of empire presumes that different peoples within the polity will be governed differently’ (Burbank...
What is distinctive about empire, in other words, is that it accepts diversity as its very substance, not as an anomaly that must be rejected, and therefore finds ways of managing that diversity. Burbank and Cooper are trying to get away, as they write, from ‘the usual – and we think misleading – shorthands and signposts: a transition from empire to nation-state, a distinction between premodern and modern states, a focus on Europe and the west as uniquely powerful agents of change, for good or for evil’ (xi). To value the empire as a distinct mode of governance, for them, is to avoid Eurocentrism. Unfortunately, it is also to take the focus off imperial violence. As in the passage above, Burbank and Cooper know that empires cannot be made or sustained without violence. ‘Empires, of course, hardly represented a spontaneous embrace of diversity. Violence and day-to-day coercion,’ they recognise, ‘were fundamental to how empires were built and how they operated’ (2). But that is not their emphasis: ‘as successful empires turned their conquests into profit, they had to manage their unlike populations, in the process producing a variety of ways to both exploit and rule’ (2). Yes, there is both exploitation and coercion, but their real point, looking forward to the present, is successful management of difference.

In effect, this history is based on an ethical contrast between empires and nation states in which empires are assigned the moral high ground: they embrace heterogeneity, whereas nation states insist on homogeneity. It’s a fascinating and valuable argument. But to be responsible about the ethical contrast, one would have to pursue it further. For example, by comparing their characteristic recourse to and need for violence. Burbank and Cooper don’t appear to concede that nation states, however much violence they may be guilty of, are not forced to use violence by their very principle of being. For empires, on the other hand, they admit that violence is constitutive; the law of survival of the empire is expansion. Is it irrelevant that, though the nation state excludes, by their own admission it need not exploit, enslave, or massacre those it excludes, as empires do? Isn’t it at least worth fleshing out the implicit comparison between the ethics of the two social units and weighing up the pros as well as the cons?

Some readers who are drawn to world literature have no doubt lost patience with the sanguinary aesthetic of postcolonial studies, which of course makes frequent and not always instructive use of the violence and suffering involved in modern European imperialism. Still, this is not a sufficient reason for neglecting the violence of either pre-modern or non-European empire-building. I note, for example, the relative absence
of piled-up corpses and burned and pillaged cities from Susan Stanford Friedman’s programmatically non-Eurocentric account of world history. Talking about the Mongol Empire with only the barest mention of massacre is like talking about *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* without the sex. The closest Friedman comes to a statement on imperial coercion is as follows: ‘empires typically intensify the rate of rupture and accelerate change in ways that are both dystopic and utopic’ (337). What she calls ‘brutalities’ (337) can of course be recognised, but only as a general phenomenon that 1) is balanced in advance by the ‘utopic’ aspects of empire and, in part for that reason, 2) is not especially interesting or worthy of being investigated.

Friedman’s case against periods is a case against the single violent rupture by which modernity has heretofore been defined. It can also be seen as a case against violence as such. The assumption seems to be that to pay too much attention to bloodshed can only be provincial, the result of an uncritical embrace of values like democracy and human rights that seem to be universal but in fact are centred in the West and in the present. But this assumption is highly questionable. Surely there are less provincial, more polyphonic grounds for attending to the large role violence plays in so much world history and in so much world literature. Whitewashing history by leaving its violence out is not the only alternative.

The anti-periodisation argument is also incoherent in its own terms. Friedman tells us that there are multiple modernities, each of them a moment of accelerated technological and social change. If so, doesn’t each of her modernities transmit exactly the same disrespectful or denigrating message to its own ‘before’ that Friedman finds unacceptable when transmitted to non-Western befores by the West’s modern ‘after’? Wouldn’t each moment that was *not* designated modern have exactly the same grounds for complaint, grounds for complaint that Friedman otherwise accepts as legitimate? Pluralising the problem of modernity doesn’t solve it. If Friedman wants to defend the existence of multiple modernities, she is committed by definition to positing the existence of multiple traditions. But each tradition would have the same right to demand a better grade – that is, a grade higher on the scale of modernity – that she acknowledges in relation to countries and cultures. No matter how many modernities you posit, there will be a tradition it is defined against, and that tradition’s feelings are going to be hurt. Everyone cannot always be above average.

Modernity, supposed to be the highest state achieved by human society, is generally understood as a source of cultural capital for the
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West, a reason for envy on the part of those anywhere else in the world who see themselves, or feel they are seen by others, as not yet having achieved it. Friedman’s argument is a grand gesture of Western self-divestment. It surrenders that prestige, or at any rate makes a good-faith effort to surrender it – one might argue that the gesture itself can’t help but retain some of the prestige it tries to push away. In my own view, it is better to ignore everyone’s feelings, whether hurt (tradition) or puffed up with false pride (modern) and instead try as hard as possible to ascertain what has actually happened in history, for better or for worse.

The premise that modernity has always existed reposes, Friedman says, on historian André Gunder Frank’s hypothesis that there has always been a world system – ‘always’ meaning for 5000 years. No one disputes that there has always been some degree of commercial and cultural connection across borders. But how much? If you want to describe these interactions as instances of modernity, as Sebastian Conrad argues in What Is Global History?, you have to show that their effects went deep – that there are not just connections, but genuine integration (Conrad 2016). It is true that Periclean Athens imported much of its grain from the tribes north of the Black Sea. It is very uncertain, on the other hand, that this commercial exchange produced significant cultural impact on either population. One of Friedman’s examples of modernity is the Tang and Song dynasties in China between 618 and 1279 CE. Socially and culturally this was clearly a period of great dynamism. But what proportion of the inhabitants would have been affected by it? What percentage of the Chinese population would have been literate during those 600 years? Let’s suppose it was somewhere between 5 and 10 per cent (1 and 2 per cent for women). In Europe, the 500 years from 1500 to 2000 saw a precipitous rise from somewhere between 10 and 20 per cent literacy in around 1500 to nearly 100 per cent today. If the term ‘modernity’ is not to be so broad as to be useless, it must refer to this sort of change: a wholesale transformation of society from top to bottom. There is no disrespect to the social, cultural, and technological innovations of any other time or place to say that otherwise the term modernity no longer makes any sense.

Does a properly non-Eurocentric world history have to proceed without reference to modernity as a reality or to breaks of similar magnitude? This is by no means the assumption made by all practitioners of the new world history. ‘I focus on population growth’, David Christian writes in Maps of Time, ‘in the hope that a successful explanation of the astonishing population growth of modern times may also help to make clear many other aspects of modernity’ (Christian 2004, 362). Like its
astonishing population growth, modernity does indeed have other aspects for Christian:

It is important to remember that even in the seventeenth century, just 300 years ago, state systems controlled no more than one-third of the lands incorporated within states in the twenty-first century. Even if they had come to dominate networks of exchange throughout the world and include most of the world’s population, they never controlled the world in the way of modern capitalist states (304).

The fact that there are firmly established characteristics of modernity, like a more intensive and intrusive mode of rule or for that matter rule that requires legitimation, takes nothing away from Christian’s (Malthusian) model of recurrent or non-linear change: populations outrunning the available resources, as for the Mayans or on Easter Island.

Why should literary scholars need to deny that ruptures in history can be as real as populations outrunning their resources? We seem to have no trouble accepting the linearity of history when the subject on the table is climate change, whether conceived as a resource problem or not, or when we discuss other sorts of environmental damage. But if linearity is acceptable in the case of climate change, surely one of the most important contexts for the understanding of literature and art in our own time, why reject linearity elsewhere? Unlike Friedman, Dimock, Doyle, and others, many of the new world historians not only embrace periodisation but provide it with a solid material basis. For Christian, a good deal of history’s epoch-making bloodshed has occurred at the fault line between populations utilising resources differently, like pastoralists and agriculturalists. Yuval Noah Harari’s Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind follows a series of revolutionary ruptures and is confident, as Christian is, that they happened because they corresponded to a history of violence (Harari 2015). For Harari, the determining gift that language bestows on humankind is a vastly multiplied capacity to commit violence, initially in arranging the extinction of other species and then, of course, against other humans. Sven Beckert’s Empire of Cotton: A Global History (Beckert 2014) is animated by a desire to show how modern capitalism continued to depend on violence and coercion, but also by some doubt as to whether that dependence could ever be overcome. The fact that some of the global historians, like Jared Diamond, prefer an explanatory scheme centred on disease (Diamond 2005), which is to say on unintentional violence, does not disqualify the
method but merely underlines, for the present at least, the persistence of controversy within the field about the causal significance of organised violence.

Over and over, the critique of Eurocentrism serves as an excuse for evading the particular context of coercion, for marginalising concepts like power and domination. Some world historians are apparently prepared to see these concepts as provincially presentist and Western – in other words, concerns that are merely masquerading as universals, even when they are invoked against the misconduct of the West. Unlike those who focus on ‘dominance’, Patrick Manning writes in *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past*, he prefers to look for ‘system’:

I find more interesting and more representative the tales of more complex interactions. Even for stories of popular culture in our own century, I prefer versions that stress the interplay of musicians in the Caribbean, Central Africa, and South Asia with those in Paris, London, and Los Angeles, rather than assume that a US-based juggernaut of MTV is carrying all before it (Manning 2003, xi).

The example is not neutral, of course. It usefully reminds us of non-Western origins for important zones of Western culture, thereby reversing the old assumption that influence flowed uni-directionally from the European centre to the non-European periphery. But notice how, in so doing, it also dissolves anyone’s dominance over anyone else by speaking of ‘interplay’ and ‘complex interactions’ in which no one seems to lose and perhaps everyone can be assumed to win. What ‘system’ means to Manning is interconnection *without power* (xi).

Fortunately, a younger generation of world or global historians (there is some uncertainty as to the terminology) seems to be saying no to this laundering of history so that contexts of power and domination are washed away. In *What Is Global History?*, Sebastian Conrad argues that the field has been too caught up in making ‘token gestures towards connectivity’ and needs to pay more attention to what he calls integration (Conrad 2016, 6). This means that the ‘infatuation with connectivity’ (6), with exchanges and networks as such, has to give way to the study of exchanges that were ‘regular and sustained, and thus able to shape society in profound ways’ (9). Conrad is emphatic: most exchanges and networks, including those that both historians and literary critics are spending much time on, did *not* shape society in profound ways. The key to global history is not merely ‘interactions’ (67) but ‘structured
transformations on a global level’ (62). ‘A global history that aspires to more than an ecumenical and welcoming repository of happy stories of cross-border encounters […] needs to engage systematically with the issue of structured global transformations and their impact on social change’ (70 –71).

The fashion for talking about interactions and, in literary studies especially, about networks, a fashion obviously influenced by digital technology and perhaps also buoyed by a certain techo-optimism, is a way of fudging the all-important question of causality. Conrad writes:

Usually there is little systematic reflection on what actually constitutes a network and distinguishes it from a loose sequence of contacts. How dense need the web of interactions be in order to qualify as a network? What level of consolidation and stability can be observed? What is the frequency and duration of interactions? […] Such studies do not always pay sufficient attention to the fact that networks are parts of broader power structures. The remote outpost of an empire still draws its authority from contexts that cannot be satisfactorily characterized as simple network effects: differences in military power, market-induced dependencies, or discursive structures that legitimize and shore up the hegemony. (126)

Bruno Latour, he notes, ‘sees networks as operating from the bottom up’ (127). Thus Latour and his followers willingly blind themselves to world-scale power that, old-fashioned as it may seem, works from the top down.

Conclusion

I want to turn in conclusion to the issue of context outside the specific area of world history – to context as a general issue, and as an issue in particular for literary studies, where Bruno Latour has had considerable influence. There is a whole chapter on context in Rita Felski’s The Limits of Critique (Felski 2015). The chapter takes the metaphor of the network as its alternative to contextualisation as it is popularly practised. The title of the chapter (borrowed from Bruno Latour) makes Felski's position pretty clear: ‘Context Stinks!’ I will not say anything more about the metaphor of the network, about which I think I’ve said enough already. What I’m interested in is why Felski, Latour, and their allies
dislike and distrust context so much – what context is or does that makes them so angry.

Felski’s account of how historical context has been functioning goes like this: ‘After a long period of historically oriented scholarship, scholars of literature are returning to aesthetics, beauty, and form. Are we not missing something crucial, they ask, when we treat works of art as nothing more than virtual symptoms of a historical moment, as moribund matter immured in the past?’ (Felski 2015, 154). Virtually everything that can be wrong with a statement is wrong with this one. But most obviously this: there was no long period in which works of art were treated as moribund matter immured in the past. How could it have been so treated, when there is no more universally honoured principle in the profession than the principle that the literature of the past remains capable of speaking to readers in the present? I would challenge Felski to produce even one critic of any reputation at all who has in fact treated literature as ‘moribund matter immured in the past’. In order to make her case, she would need not just one critic, but a majority of critics.

As a longtime member of the discipline, I admit I’m personally bothered by this wilful misrepresentation of its common sense. Consider, for example, as Felski does not, the old deconstructive argument that yes, of course, there is context, but who is to say where context ends? And if contexts are infinite, then of course no one context can ever be final or definitive. A similar point was made many decades ago by the historian Hayden White, who said that literary critics should not pretend that history is not as full of controversy about the past as literary criticism is (White 1978). Again, the moral is that historians cannot properly be asked to settle criticism’s interpretive questions for it simply by putting a text into context. The meaning and force of context are themselves open to perpetual re-contextualisation, which is to say perpetually open to reinterpretation. It may seem strange to associate deconstruction with common sense, but that’s been common sense in the discipline for a long time.

In an effort to be more sympathetic than I feel to the Latourian ‘context stinks!’ phenomenon, I have considered another new book, called Critique and Postcritique, edited by Felski and Elizabeth Anker, and in particular a very smart essay in it by Jennifer Fleissner (Fleissner 2017). Fleissner notices one important oddity about the postcritique phenomenon – one might even call it a paradox. On the one hand, the postcritique critics appeal for a return to aesthetics, which they see criticism as having abandoned. On the other hand, they also often appeal for a reconciliation with science, as when Sharon Marcus and Steven Best
try to get literary studies back to (in their words) ‘objectivity, validity, and truth’ (Best and Marcus 2009), or more explicitly when Heather Love calls for a return to ‘description’ (Love 2010). Aesthetics and science: could any two terms be more contradictory? How can postcritique be in favour of both science and aesthetics at the same time?

The answer to this question leads to a quick hypothesis about what ‘context’ means in literary criticism and in the cultural disciplines generally and why the recent proposal to reject it has won a small but passionate following. The answer – maybe this is obvious – is that both aesthetics and science are universalistic perspectives. Each offers judgements which are understood to be independent of time and place. In other words, they are perspectives for which context is not significant. At any rate, that seems one useful hypothesis: context is a relativiser, a code word for some version of historical relativism, and it is that relativism – the antithesis of universalism – that is being rejected.

This is something that could easily be missed. When Felski denounces context, she does not explain that what she wants, rather than judgements which are contextual in the sense of being socially relative or dependent on time and place, is the universal. The words ‘universality’ and ‘universalism’ are missing from the index of Felski’s book. Does this mean she thinks that universality and universalism cannot be openly announced or defended? I wonder. There would seem to be a necessary and nuanced conversation that demands to be had on the subject.

Joseph North’s book is also anti-context, and it too omits any mention of the universalism to which it seems committed. But it offers, so to speak, a context for the turn against context – a context for the turn to universalism. According to North, ‘the historicist/contextualist paradigm’ came into being in the 1960s and 1970s and as a result, roughly speaking, of the liberation movements of that period. The liberation movements – the women’s liberation movement, the movement for sexual liberation, the civil rights movement, movements of national independence from colonialism and so on – were objecting to a criticism that was in the unconscious habit of pretending it had the right to speak for everyone. Women and minorities were just then making it clear that they had not been consulted, that those who were in the habit of speaking for everyone were not necessarily speaking for them. And, by a logic that I’m not sure was ever articulated, the social pressure women and minorities exerted on criticism in the present was little by little also applied to historical context in the past. In the literature of the past, too, it was felt that attention now had to be paid to voices that had been silenced or marginalised. This explains how ‘close reading’ (which
definitely did claim to speak for everyone) came to be displaced by ‘the historicist/contextualist paradigm’.

There is a lovely irony, therefore, in the fact that the postcritiquers claim for themselves and for the criticism they want the virtue of humility. In their polemics, the words ‘modest’ and ‘humble’ are repeated loudly and often. But from the perspective of the 1960s and 1970s, it was the turn to context that was the real humbling of criticism, its surrender of its claim to universality. From this perspective, what postcritique really wants to retrieve is criticism’s lost confidence, some would say its lost arrogance: the old, pre-1960s right to speak for everyone, the claim that everyone was obliged to share in its moral and aesthetic judgements. Judgements that were understood to be universal.

In saying this, I will sound as if I am 100 per cent against universalistic arrogance. I’m not – though I am definitely against arrogance that disguises itself as humility. And I do wish the postcritiquers would admit that (like certain political figures today) they are trying to roll back the accomplishments of the 1960s and 1970s, to destroy the scholarly institutions in which those accomplishments have been preserved. But as I suggested above, the universalism debate is a real, a necessary, and a multi-sided debate. One can begin on one side and then find oneself on the other. Joseph North, explaining what the historicist/contextualist paradigm means to him, says he is fed up with being told what the text has to teach us about histories and cultures, and wants to focus instead on what it has to teach us about ourselves. The implication, however unintended, is that what we are ourselves as individuals somehow exist outside histories and cultures. That is one unrepentantly regressive way to understand universalism. It’s a note that is struck again and again by the postcritiquers. In the Critique and Postcritique volume, Toril Moi uses Wittgenstein to suggest that the problem is not in the world, as ‘critique’ suggests, but ‘in me, in us’ (Moi 2017, 37). In other words, don’t whine about the state of the world; change yourself. Change yourself, not the world: that is a lesson you might well hear in church. In that case there’s no need to attend university. Talal Asad, who is much cited as one of postcritique’s seminal thinkers, consistently speaks from the point of view of religion (Asad 2009). Critique, for him, is secular, as it was for Edward Said. For Asad, therefore, secularism is the enemy. One would have liked someone in this collection to have engaged with that argument, an especially interesting one for Americans under a president who would not have been elected without the overwhelming vote of Christian evangelicals and whose supporters routinely argue that human-caused climate change, say, is only a belief or attachment like any other.
Only one essay in the *Critique and Postcritique* volume mentions the salient fact that Latour himself, the movement’s patron saint, has recently come out as a defender of religion (Fleissner 2017).

But notice that as far as universalism is concerned, we have suddenly come full circle: what Latour is defending is not universalism, but particularism. Latour and his followers reject ‘critique’, as they reject ‘modernity’, because these terms set up standards against which such traditions and particularisms as religion can be judged. On the other hand, it is just such standards that many women and minorities are now standing up for. Recognition of their difference is not all that woman and minorities wanted in the 1960s and 1970s and recognition of difference is certainly not all they want now. After some decades of enjoying the privilege of self-representation, they have noticed that this privilege can become an obligation and a burden. For a writer, it is not always a treat to be taken as mandatorily representing your identity or the identity of your group rather than, say, producing something of independent value. Independent value, meaning value for others, value in other times and places as well as one’s own. I might hesitate to call this aesthetic universalism, but there is a clear overlap here with some of what Felski and her allies seem to mean when they refer to beauty, form, and the aesthetic. The difference, at least as I would like to express it, is that this is not a position that ‘context stinks!’ On the contrary, it’s a demand for a *larger sense* of context, a context big enough to be shared by different social groups and different times and places.

It has not always been noticed that the period in which the historicist/contextualist paradigm arose is also the period of the fall of so-called ‘grand narratives’, *grands récits*, metanarratives like those of enlightenment and emancipation, which Jean-François Lyotard claimed (like Latour some time later) had ‘run out of steam’. In both cases, the result was the belief, to put this crudely, that the universal is dead, and now ‘everything is particular’. But ‘everything is particular’ is an incoherent position, subject to an infinite regress in which every particular must then be broken down into still smaller particulars until finally nothing is left except, eventually, relativism about relativism itself. History, however, is not all differences; it is also composed of samenesses. In that sense, it is entirely consistent with history that literary texts should be, so to speak, transhistorical, capable of transcending their immediate context in order to make themselves heard in another context, different but also linked to it within a common narrative.

In my own opinion, universalism is back on the table because we have realised that, like Trump’s ‘climate change is only a theory’,
relativism can be a mode of hegemony. That is what I was suggesting when, apropos of world literature, I described how respect for cultural diversity can erase the atrocities committed by non-European empires. Universalism is back on the table because, in the era of climate change, we are once again feeling the need for a shared narrative that matters to us all, despite our differences. And it is because universalism is back on the table that we now ought to be able to see the compatibility of cosmopolitanism with the historicist/contextualist paradigm – that is, to see cosmopolitanism as one context among other contexts.

Note

1 This is roughly the same point that Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori make in the introduction to their *Global Intellectual History*: the best cases for such a history ‘skew toward the modern, that is, toward a period in which patterns of interconnectedness have deepened enough to be deemed global’ (Moyn and Sartori 2013, 16).

Works cited


