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Dissecting Disciplinarity

Eva Kusher

The Living Prism: Itineraries in Comparative Literature. McGill-Queen's UP
n.p. [Order It!](#)

Peter Swirski

Between Literature and Science: Poe, Lem, and Explorations in Aesthetics, Cognitive Science, and Literary Knowledge. McGill-Queen's UP n.p. [Order It!](#)

Peder Anker

Imperial Ecology: Environmental Order in the British Empire, 1895-1945.
Harvard UP n.p. [Order It!](#)

Reviewed by Rachel Poliquin

The Living Prism collects twenty-seven essays previously published or presented by Eva Kusher, each of which investigates Comparative Literature's current role and responsibility "to serve all cultures in ways that will ensure and enhance their membership in the world system of literatures." Kusher claims Comparative Literature is ideally located to negotiate the plurality of voices, the fragmentation and the epistemological doubt present in contemporary academic discourse. Its youth, experimental impetus and identity crisis have not impaired the validity of Comparative Literature, but rather have prepared its students to cope with our increasingly complex and multivocal "global village."

Kusher calls for "*de facto* openness and diversity of the field of literary history," methodological and epistemological flexibility, and most importantly dialogue among models of interpretation and among cultures, disciplines and theoretical approaches. She advocates typology as an alternative to classifications of discourse that imply *a priori* centres, hierarchies, pre-established models. Typology calls for "inductive research into literary relationships within a given culture set in a given socio-historical situation, and from there into relationships among comparable cultures existing under similar conditions, without positing a preconceived unity." Kusher posits the contemporary rereading of the early modern period as a model exhibiting certain exemplary impulses for literary history in general, enabling us to look for difference and heterogeneity by listening to voices that previously have been neglected, and confirming how much the rewriting of history is "avowedly a historical discourse of our own time."

Taken as a whole, *The Living Prism* is somewhat dizzying in scope and aim. The essays admirably evince Kusher's expansive knowledge of theory, literature and historiography, and it is precisely the author's erudition that inspires and enables her vision for Comparative Literature. While her project is immensely appealing, its accessibility is limited somewhat to academics with a capacious scholarship similar to Kusher's. Yet, despite its intellectual idealism, *The Living Prism* presents a positive vision of what scholarship could and should be as the humanities struggle to come to terms with diversity without losing communication and unity. We are rewriting and rereading, Kusher explains, "because we are rewriting and rereading ourselves as humans."

Peter Swirski's *Between Literature and Science* tackles the works of Edgar Allen Poe and Stanislaw Lem in a manner somewhat like an intergalactic voyage for traditional literary studies, periodically landing in philosophy of science, game theory, pragmatics, futurology, bitic literature, cosmology, template programming and computer cognition — since according to Swirski, only a "genuinely interdisciplinary analysis, sympathetic to the speculative freedom of literary fiction and the analytical rigour of science" is able to capture the full breadth of Poe's and Lem's cognitive projects. The six essays cover a lot of ground, but are held together by Swirski's contention that literature, philosophy and science are "inseparable manifestations of the same creative human instinct."

Chapter one investigates game theory in Poe's "The Purloined Letter." For Swirski, game theory is a theoretical model of the reading process, and can therefore be extended to the larger "game" of literary interpretation, whereby the reader must be attuned to the author's reflexive intentions; as such game theory accentuates the pragmatic side of aesthetics and can be used for resolving the problem of truth in fiction. Swirski next turns to Poe's revolutionary epistemology in *Eureka*. Critics have focused on Poe's superb rhetorical skills to gloss over enigmatic points in his theory and have taken the text's inconsistencies, and misconceptions as evidence of Poe's ignorance of philosophy. However, Swirski claims *Eureka* demonstrates an unequalled cognitive project, "testimony to the almost boundless fertility of its author's philosophical imagination," a treatise that privileges poetic intuition and inspiration over deductive and inductive methods of inquiry.

Swirski continues his focus on the limitations of scientific reasoning by examining Lem's critic of epistemology in *The Invincible*, a futuristic adventure that pits scientists against the enigmatic Black Cloud on Regis III, a desert Earth-type planet abounding with unsettling mysteries. The scientists' inability to adapt Earth-based patterns and their insistence on anthropomorphic models accentuate the insufficiency and inflexibility of scientific inquiry when encountering the alien: new and innovative solutions are not sought out and the contingency of all scientific models is not grasped.

In his last two chapters, Swirski embarks on an analysis of Lem's "A History of Bitic Literature" (1984), which leads into a discussion of broader issues pertaining to computer thinking, learning, authorship and autonomy. If computers are able to spontaneously produce literature how do we need to redefine the limitations or largeness authorship, authorial intention, literary meaning, and artistic creativity? What are the implications of computerism for

academic communities, specifically literature departments? The answers to such interpretative and epistemological questions lie between literature, science and philosophy, and as long as fences continue to demarcate and divide as these fields of inquiry, our increasingly sophisticated world of intellection, in which robots build robots, computers win chess matches, program and reprogram themselves, will remain opaque.

A century ago, ecology was a likewise new and nebulous arena of concerns, straddling economics and life sciences, botanical morphology and race relations, and struggling to establish a language and methodology. Ecology, Peder Anker explains in *Imperial Ecology*, was not a pacifist quest for edenic harmony but emerged from and for imperial social and environmental administration in the first decades of the twentieth-century, expanding beyond botany to economic policies, population settlement and social control. Ultimately ecologists' success depended on their ability to demonstrate links between disciplines, entangling the aims of a national economy with an economy of nature, marrying environmental, economic, social, political and colonial management into a united discourse that engaged and acquired imperial patronage. Anker effectively argues that the history of British ecology is best understood as a product of debate between two patronage networks: British mechanists who thought the economy of nature could and should be planned and South African idealists who believed nature's economy was fixed. Anker crystallises the debate by focusing on the lives of a few highly influential scientists and politicians: their personal preferences, biases and disappointments, the technical limitations with which they struggled and the unprecedented and profound psychological impact of the world wars. *Imperial Ecology* admirably displays Anker's flair for biographical research, artfully evincing the significant and formative weight of individuals' idiosyncrasies, capricious historical circumstances, and political agendas in shaping ecology's maturation into a scientific discipline. A rightful winner of The History of Science Society's Forum for the History of Human Sciences Prize, *Imperial Ecology* is history and history of science at its best.

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