Introduction

Introduction

The essays collected here cover a wider range of topics and authors than such collections usually offer: from changes to the use of language made by a late medieval copyist to those made by the 45th president of the United States, from changes challenged or promoted in fiction, especially by women, to the challenge of change addressed in poetry and fiction at critical moments in the past, which offer ways of thinking about the challenge of changes in our own (similarly critical) moment. Diverse as they are then the essays all speak to the topic of the SAUTE conference held at the University of Neuchâtel in April 2017: the challenge of change. Many of the essays are based on papers given at the conference, while others have since been written especially for the volume. All testify to change as (paradoxically) a constant – that which "encompasses everything," "as it were, the default system of the universe," as one of the keynote speakers, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto puts it in his afterword to this volume. They also overlap and intersect in interesting and thought-provoking ways. We point out some of these connections here, confident that readers will find many more.

One figure that features prominently in the (very different) work of two female authors from different, if similarly turbulent, historical moments, Mary Shelley and Octavia Butler, discussed respectively by Scott Loren and Enit Steiner, is the classical figure of Prometheus. Representing as he does the change brought by human developments in technology and science obtained, as Loren puts its, by "breaking the frame of possibility," whether for good or evil, definitively altering conditions on planet earth, Prometheus is an obviously pertinent figure. For both female authors Prometheus is a damaging model of heroic masculinity, but while Shelley, whose novel of course carries the subtitle "or the modern Prometheus," mobilises the figure to expose "the radically disruptive" character of contemporary developments in science and technology (Franklin's experiments with electricity), as Loren points out, Oc-

The Challenge of Change. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 36. Ed. Margaret Tudeau-Clayton and Martin Hilpert. Tübingen: Narr, 2018. 11-17.

tavia Butler the late twentieth century African American author discussed by Enit Steiner, seeks rather to remodel the figure in her science fiction trilogy, *Xenogenesis*. This she does crucially "by attaching a persuasive strategy" to her Promethean figure of Akin, the offspring of black American humans and a non human alien race the Onkali, who works for the right to choose, specifically though arguing for the removal of non changed humans to Mars, a strategy which Steiner argues is "informed by Martin Luther King's non violent politics of change." "Hoping that a new life on Mars . . . can also produce positive socio-genetic change" the trilogy's "endorsement of the human," is "as Terry Eagleton puts it, 'hope without optimism'; sober and aware of unpredictable changes . . . both fearful and beneficiary," "about which Butler refuses to give calming certainties." Thus, Steiner concludes: "in order to be . . . life-affirming, the Promethean endeavour must reinvent itself in ways that resist what Réne Girard calls 'the mimetic attraction of violence'."

The stakes of reinventing (Butler) or interrogating (Shelley) received narratives are especially high for women since, as the feminist thinker Carol Gilligan, quoted by Steiner, points out: "structural transformation involves myth changing." The aspiration to bring change for women by challenging received narratives finds echo in the writing of a female author who is Mary Shelley's contemporary, though not usually thought of as such – Jane Austen. The relation of Austen's writing to change is indeed discussed in no less than three essays by female scholars in this volume. While the essay by linguist Anita Auer focuses on linguistic changes registered in Austen's writing that relate to issues of language ideology, the essay by Anne-Claire Michoux and Katrin Rupp and the essay by Margaret Tudeau-Clayton draw attention to how Austen calls for changes to possibilities for women especially as authors. In a bold historical leap, Michoux and Rupp argue that this aspiration to cultural recognition is shared by Geoffrey Chaucer, a non-elite male writer from a much earlier period, who, through the figure of the Wife of Bath in *The Canterbury Tales*, speaks as a vernacular author who seeks a cultural place for himself as well as for women. Indeed, Chaucer's figure of female anger and frustration may, they argue, be remembered by Austen, who similarly denounces cultural prejudices against female authors even as she bestows authority on her female protagonist, Anne Elliot, in the last of her completed novels *Persuasion*. In a crucial scene, added in revisions made during the summer of 1816 Austen, through Anne, not only denounces the prejudices propagated through cultural production from which women are excluded, since "the pen has been in [men's] hands," as Anne observes (echoing the Wife of Bath), but also effects a reversal

through the image of the dropping of his pen by the hero Captain Wentworth.

This scene is discussed too by Margaret Tudeau-Clayton, who connects it to a reference, added by Austen at the opening of this chapter, to Scheherazade, figure of a female story teller who succeeds in bringing about change in the Sultan, a figure of male tyranny and prejudice, who, thanks to her story telling, renounces even as he recognises the injustice of his view of women as fickle and his violence towards them. Wentworth is as captured by Anne's voice as the Sultan is by Scheherazade's, and his dropping of the pen signals not only a power reversal, but also a change of mind and a renunciation of prejudiced views both of women in general and of Anne in particular. For Tudeau-Clayton the reference to Scheherazade bears too on Austen's personal struggle with the changing signs of what would turn out to be a fatal illness, as this is recorded in letters written during the last year of her life. For the deferral of the end of the novel through these added scenes is explicitly associated with the deferral of death that Scheherazade achieves by telling more stories. Tudeau-Clayton discusses this in relation, on the one hand, to the end of the unfinished novel (later called *Sanditon*), which she suggests invites readers to take up the project of Scheherazade to defer death though continuing to tell (her) stories, and, on the other, to the ending of the novel that would be posthumously published with *Persuasion* as *Northanger Abbey* and that she was revising at the same time. As self consciously accelerated as the ending of *Persuasion* is deferred, this ending serves a critical purpose in its undercutting of the marriage plot. For, as Tudeau-Clayton argues, Austen thus implicitly calls for other possible narrative/life trajectories for women who, if they do not conform to the imperative of the marriage plot, are left "on the shelf," publicly invisible, as Austen suggests in one of her letters, like an unpublished book.

As many of the essays illustrate, the perception of change is a function of a species-specific sense of temporality – the sense of beginnings as well as of endings. Touched on in several essays, this is central to Simon Swift's very fine essay, which is at once wide ranging and sharply focused on what he calls a "kind of phenomenology of time" as this finds exemplary expression in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem of 1798 *Fears in Solitude*. Specifically, Swift looks at how "the peculiar relation between lag and catastrophe" finds expression in a poem that registers the "shock" of the "anticipation of war" and that also "shapes our experience of the present including the temporal phenomenon of climate change." Strikingly, this is done through temporal markers, notably the phrase "even now" and the use of grammatical tense. The poem mobi-

lises too the resources of poetic form, as Swift shows, pointing out, for instance, the effect of surprise when a new verse line gives us "a repetition of the same" "where we'd expect progress, turn or development," a surprise that "nothing has changed," though Coleridge "wants to say" too "that everything has changed."

The resources of poetic form are highlighted too in Martin Leer's reflections on another poem concerned with temporality and change "Easter 1916" by W. B. Yeats whose ambivalence towards the idea of revolutionary change and "vacillations" with respect to nationalist politics find expression in "the hesitations of the rhythm, the surprising line-breaks." For Leer indeed "the real subject of Yeats' poem is change itself, which may manifest itself in dreams of revolution before it reshapes the fabric of social thinking, and while the change is happening it is hard to identify what it is affecting." This is picked up, as he shows, by late twentieth century revisionist writing – both history and fiction – which revisits at once the insurrection and Yeats' poem to uncover a "psycho-underground of gender," a "change in the role of women," and the "outing of homosexuality as a 'life choice'." What emerges from this cogent analysis is an idea of literature/art as "a space of possibilities," a space, that is, for imagining not revolutionary political or social *programmes*, but new collective and personal ways of being, what Vaclav Havel called "*anti-political* politics."

Spaces of the possible, though also of the impossible, are explored by Mary Shelley through the form(s) of the novel, as Scott Loren shows in his tour de force on *Frankenstein* as a work of technography. Reflecting on how it reworks genres as well as exploring language and writing, Loren proposes that Shelley's novel performs disjuncture as "an aesthetic principle" in response to the context of radical techno-social changes, brought about by the dual political and industrial revolutions of the moment. The highly self conscious scenes, examined by Loren, of language acquisition (itself treated as a Promethean technology), and of reading and writing bear comparison with the equally self conscious scene of writing discussed earlier, which was added by Austen to the end of *Persuasion* during the very summer (of 1816) that Shelley was writing her novel. Though they do not appear to have known of each other's work,[1] Austen and Shelley, at this critical moment of radical change, both reflect on writing as a technology, the pen as a tool, hitherto wielded by men ("replaced," it is worth adding, by the "shuttle" in the alternative technology of female authorship proposed, as Rupp and

[1] We are grateful to David Spurr for this point.

Michoux argue, through Chaucer's figure of the Wife of Bath). The respective reflections are, however, very different. Austen, the *spin*ster, opens a prospect of possibilities for women, especially as authors, "spinning out . . . stories" (as Diana Parker in *Sanditon* puts it), which may bring "ameliorative change" (Steiner), as Scheherazade's story telling does, thwarting the injustice and violence done by men to women. Shelley, by contrast, is unremittingly bleak, especially, moreover, about possibilities for women, who, in her novel's world of radically disruptive change brought by (male) technologies, precisely suffer injustice and the violence of premature death, like the wives of the Sultan.

On the other hand, the emancipatory possibilities offered to women as well as men in the space of literature are energetically and unambivalently affirmed in Ewan Fernie's essay – undoubtedly the most upbeat in the collection – which looks at "how Shakespeare has functioned, and continues to function, as a vital agent for cultural and political change." Beginning with examples of male and female characters that illustrate the "breakthrough" "into a freer, specifically modern individuality," which Hegel saw as "characteristic of Shakespeare and modernity," Fernie goes on to argue that the change called for has, "for some at least," led "into activism in favour of political change." With absorbing detail he plots the lives of activists inspired by "Shakespearean characterisation" to work for "a pluralist politics" during the eighteenth and, especially, nineteenth centuries, urging that they in turn may serve as inspiration for us to take up the (incomplete) project of modernity. It is, of course, precisely this project that is put into question by Octavia Butler as well as Mary Shelley whose critique, it is worth adding, specifically takes the form of an intertextual engagement, as Loren shows, with the Hegelian model of selfhood.

As Steiner comments, Butler, in her critical engagement with "Enlightenment metaphysics," "cautions against the equation of change with progress." Implicit to several essays, this is most strikingly illustrated in Boris Vejdovsky's masterful essay on the 45th president of the United States. For Vejdovsky it is less the arrival of Donald Trump that is the significant change, but his damaging use of language – the habitual lies which "from day one as president" have been his "linguistic signature," and which undermine "the very base of community" as well as "the representational power of language that forms the core of modern representative democracies." Destroying the "horizon of truth" and dissolving community into a mere crowd, Trump, he argues, has a "performative aura" that feeds the fantasies of listeners with a simplified version of the world, like the confidence man he resembles. Aligned

with an "aggressive capitalist ethos" his (ab)use of language is, moreover, "indicative" 'of the transformation of Corporate strategies into U.S. national policies" and "of the personalising and privatising of politics." It remains to be seen – and here there is hope – how long "the bad smell of his lies" and the damage done will last.

Change in language use is an object of study which is shared by literary and cultural scholars with linguists. Loren, for instance, opens his essay with a list made by the historian Eric Hobsbawm of words that emerged during the period of radical changes to which they bear witness, while Swift dwells on the nuances of grammatical tense as well as of lexical repetition in his analysis of the phenomenology of time in a poem from the same historical moment. Each with a different focus both are concerned with the particular – local effects of meaning in their relation to ideas and structures of thoughts, feelings, or ideologies at a moment of radical change. Ideology is approached from a different angle by linguists who seek to understand the motivations of speakers and writers in their choices of lexical or grammatical expressions. The question what a given linguistic expression stands for, what social groups, ideologies, and world views it is associated with, influences these choices and may, in the long run, lead to the adoption and conventionalisation of a new form, or the obsolescence of an old one. In this context, Tino Oudesluijs points out that it is often far from clear whose language we see when we examine historical manuscripts. His discussion of administrative texts from Coventry, written by scribes in the 15th and 16th centuries, focuses on phenomena of linguistic variation at the lexical, orthographical and morphological levels of the text, where most changes are registered. The aim of the analysis is to determine whether diachronic changes reflect personal preferences of an individual scribe, changing scribal conventions, or more general processes of language change. Oudesluijs notes the importance of scribes' personal training, which reflects the choice of expressions in their texts more faithfully than superimposed standards or their immediate working environment. The essay thus brings to our attention not only that language itself changes, but also that the reasons that bring speakers and writers to adopt linguistic innovations are subject to evolution and change.

In an essay that complements Oudesluijs' linguistic observations, Anita Auer explores Jane Austen's use of an expression that has been in the focus of prescriptive, normative attitudes towards language, namely the English subjunctive. Existing work on Austen's language use has put forward the claim that Austen was aware of these normative attitudes and even aspired to make them her own. Auer's analysis takes a close

look at Austen's personal letters, her novels, and, more importantly, corrections that were made to the texts of the novels during the editorial process. The examination of the data contextualises Austen's use of the subjunctive in the standardisation of the English language more generally, and in the history of education, which of course also includes her own personal education.

Diverse as they are then the essays prove how well the topic served the members of SAUTE, "an exceptionally adventurous band of scholars," our guest speaker Felipe Fernandez-Armesto observes in his afterword, suggesting that this may be "because it is liberating to study a foreign language and literature in a land as inwardly diverse linguistically as Switzerland." His observation might give us pause – and a reason to cultivate rather than suppress the specificity of SAUTE as a community. However this may be, the conference could hardly have been more pertinent to its moment. This is signalled by the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year for 2017: *youthquake*, "a significant cultural, political, or social change arising from the actions or influence of young people." Like those who lived and wrote during the period of revolutionary change two hundred years ago, we live in times of sudden, unforeseen changes, inhabited by imaginings of still more momentous changes to come – whether the sense of definitive ending in (ecological or geo-political) catastrophe or the sense of the apparently infinite possibilities of human technology to transform the conditions of our individual and collective lives. And yet, with change as the only constant, we remain unaware of the full scope of possible scenarios that may unfold. As Austen observed to her sister: "whatever I may write or you may imagine, we know it will be something different."

Margaret Tudeau-Clayton and Martin Hilpert