

Fragments, Not Wholes: Antinomian Thoughts in "Literary Studies"¹

"Without Contraries is no progression."

—William Blake

While it would be pretentious to attempt to predict "the future of literary studies" – a future, which, like all futures, can only be regarded as monstrous² – , a suggestion about possible tendencies of what is still called "literary studies" may, nevertheless, be in order. This suggestion grows directly out of the present critical situation of the discipline – and, perhaps, of society at large. Altered epistemological conditions, whose issues cannot be finalized, and a changing cultural situation, whose new understanding of culture and cultures is inclusive yet resists closure, have prompted a change in the scope and function of "literary studies," a shift whose general movement can be outlined by the transition from an emphasis on identity to a concern with difference. In addition, the increasing theorization of the field has transformed the humanities themselves from a comparatively homogeneous academic culture of letters, which was largely undisturbed by serious epistemological dissent, into a conflictual zone of antagonistic positions.

My response to the question of "the future of literary studies" differs from other assessments and risk and damage calculations in that it does not offer preventive care or reactive treatment to the situation at hand. Neither does it assume that it can anticipate the future of the issue by dwelling on its past. Rather, drawing its criteria from the perceived structure of the discipline's situation, this essay formulates an answer that responds to the alleged predicament by declaring it a healthy condition and, more importantly, by

1 I wish to thank William Rasch (German Studies, Indiana University at Bloomington) for a very stimulating discussion on antinomian thought and literary studies at the MLA Convention, Chicago, December 29, 1995.

2 Or it can be viewed in economic terms, as a recent change in the conception of the future documents. The future, in fact, has been split into two times. The future of a particular object is nested within a temporality to come, the future as such, which serves as a temporal foil against which the duration of the life of things becomes measurable. Accordingly, the temporal status of objects is assessed in terms of their ever shortened "product life" or "turn-over" time. cf. Nowotny, esp. Ch. II: "From the Future to the Extended Present." If, as I suggest below, economic thought is beginning to dominate university affairs and "literary studies" becomes commodified and placed against the horizon of "the future," what will be the life expectancy of "literary studies" under such circumstances?

suggesting to project this condition onto the level of critical reflection itself where it may serve as a stimulus for future thought within and about the discipline. Stated differently, I do not wish to end the conflictual situation by offering instructions on how to resolve the dissensus in the name of a higher unity (to be achieved, perhaps, in the new millennium). On the contrary, I argue that it is time to acknowledge and thematize the incommensurabilities we encounter and to see them as indicative of a changed discursive scene which is characterized by the very fact that its differences cannot be overcome. My suggestion is that we *accept* the present situation in its fundamental contrariety and ground our theories about "the future of literary studies" on the concept of dispute rather than on the idea of consensus—dispute, that is, not as an obstacle to be negotiated, but as an integral and unsublatable structural element which is antinomian in character.³

As a statement that puts itself in question while soliciting solutions to its critical condition, the question of "The Future of Literary Studies?" needs to be unpacked further. While it can be argued that what is at stake is the status of literature as the assumed object of "literary studies," the debates about the subject matter of the discipline (including those about canons and curricula) are also symptomatic of a larger issue: the presumed unity of this field of studies. As the discipline has extended its research from the strictly literary to other discursive and artistic practices, which address non-literary or even non-linguistic cultural artifacts, media, and sites of production, "literary" might no longer seem to be an appropriate attribute for these studies in their entirety (although it seems safe to assert that they will never abandon literature). Yet an expanded object of study alone does not seem to pose a threat to the discipline, for the new research objects could co-exist with the traditional ones in the field. Even a change of name for the discipline which reflects the new research concerns while avoiding a conflation with the recently

3 This statement is, of course, itself subject to the logic of contrariety whose validity it claims for the field of "literary studies" (and beyond). While the theory of antinomies must include consensus as one of the antinomies, consensus is rejected as the antinomian counterpart of dissensus. This account attempts to escape the double bind inherent in all totalizing statements – in this case the impossibility of requesting a consensus about the universal applicability of dissensus – by reading the impossibility as another antinomy, an antinomy, that is, which operates on the meta-level of the description given. While antinomian thought must allow for some consensus (which can never become absolute consensus), it is always dissensual because the antinomy of consensus and dissensus does not form a higher consensus (as the identity of identity and difference) but always remains antinomian. My account combines examples by Wlad Godzich (on the double bind as antinomy) and Bill Readings (on the impossibility of achieving dissensus by way of a consensus within a logical framework of dissensus). cf. Godzich, 142, and Readings. For a different account of "The Future of Literary Studies?" cf. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's essay of the same title in the same volume.

arisen movement of "Cultural Studies" could be imagined. The question, then, emerges how these studies can be defined if not through a common focus on literature, and whether such a definition will necessarily have to be given on the basis of a unifying principle. In other words, what is at issue is the conception of the field of "literary studies" as a contested arena.

The study of literature has developed into an area of thought whose organization is marked by sets of opposite forces. In particular, it is informed by the tensions between cultural studies, textual criticism, and literary or critical theory, which have often translated into differences along departmental boundaries, i.e., between English departments, foreign language departments, and comparative literature studies. This polarization has been further intensified by claims made in favor of either a fundamentally historical orientation or one grounded in philosophical questions, and also by debates about the importance of – mostly European – national literatures which has been challenged by an increasing attention towards emergent or newly discovered literatures which are predominantly studied in terms of race, class, gender, religion, ideology, and/or (post)colonial status. This already heterogeneous picture becomes even more diffracted through its reception by the media and society at large.

What would appear to be imperative, then, to "rescue" "literary studies" is to implement a transformation and reorganization of the field along the lines of an integrative concept which would bring together the different strands of investigation in humanistic studies into one larger realm. This field, constituted by theorists, historians, critics, and practitioners, each with an expertise in a different sub-field, would be regulated by the idea of cultural production, or culturally relevant production of meaning. "Culture," however, which so fashionably functions as the umbrella term for various phenomena and practices studied in the humanities, is far from being unambiguous as a concept. If the new research and teaching is securely anchored, as it seems, in the idea of culture, this is done on the basis of postulating "culture" as a comprehensive whole – itself a cultural construction whose theoretical presuppositions are generally not interrogated (but cf. Herbert). The notion of "culture" is thus problematic for being a totalizing concept under which any expression of social life can easily be subsumed. Culture, in its homogenizing all-inclusiveness, therefore, appears to perform the same function for subject matter as the principle of consensus does for approach.

An historical perspective on the attempt at unifying the heterogeneous shows us that the present age seems to be bent on repeating the past. Yet what legitimizes the study of literature – or even the more inclusive one of "culture," however (un)defined – today can no longer be the ideals derived from a past to which the present situation does not correspond. The knowledge of literature and culture are no longer perceived as the exclusive venues to

the attainment of (a higher sense of) beauty, moral elevation or pleasure, or the medium for the grounding of a national character and for social activism. Neither, then, should "literary studies" attempt to harmonize differences within the discipline into (a semblance of) identity, or, rather, to resolve differences by subsuming what is different under a dominant paradigm (or by altogether excluding it from consideration). For such a unifying practice, whether labelled "literary studies" or "cultural studies," appears to be driven by an Idealist and Romantic desire, a desire which, in its longing for a Golden Age which perhaps never was, seeks to mend the split between complementary entities by projecting a state of unity within a utopian future rather than allowing them to persist in their difference. Regarding the present situation as a crisis which has to be remedied, such endeavors strive to unite and homogenize what, however, cannot be reconciled.

If, on the other hand, we stop borrowing epistemological patterns from the past which are external to the present developments, but derive insights from the situation at hand, we ought to realize the stakes: a fundamental conflict within the discipline of "literary studies." Much depends on how we evaluate this condition. While many wish to restore unity and harmony, this conflict, I argue, is antinomian in nature. It is generally staged as a contradiction between two main principles, most often identified as "cultural studies" and "theory," which both claim equal validity for the field in which they operate, the humanities. It is not so much a difference in subject matter which generally separates the two, but the approach to the same object made from mutually incompatible presuppositions which divides the object of study. The debate is further complicated by claims made in favor of studying the literature of emergent or heretofore neglected communities as *literature*, situated within its unique context, rather than exploiting it for its cultural use value.⁴

Antinomian thought is exempt from the critique of reducing concepts to familiar binary oppositions because its nature is not oppositional or antagonistic. Rather, it opens up a foundational heteronomy, an unbridgeable chasm. Yet this un-ground is not an abyss which would allow us to hover over it, a passage between poles accessible from both sides. The desire for such an oscillation – a gesture reminiscent of the figure of Romantic irony or of Kierkegaardian faith – is still marked by its wish to capture the totality it

4

Cf. Lionnet. Unlike the antinomian relationship between "cultural studies" and "theory," the traditional lack of connection between the humanities and the natural sciences, i.e., the state of the "two cultures," does not seem to be irremediable. If scientists start to recognize the competence of researchers in the humanities, a collaboration between them might become possible. A "cultural studies" approach of the history of science is already under way. The search for theoretical models of describing thought and reality, on the other hand, might bring together philosophically oriented thinkers from the humanities and the natural sciences in the future.

has projected into the infinite. The antinomian situation, on the contrary, marks the loss of a common ground.

Since these contradictory claims cannot be resolved or neutralized by being brought under a higher order, we are faced with a dispute or difference in Lyotard's sense (see *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute and Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*). The conflicting positions do not allow for a synthesis, therefore no finalization of the issue is possible. It is therefore a confrontation which lets its differences be. Although it certainly is difficult to accept a situation as antinomian and to live in the knowledge that, despite one's best intentions, no mediation between the different positions is possible, there are advantages to such a situation. The antinomies will further critical thought and self-reflection of the discipline, for the tensions that result from the rift between the different discourses are the enabling condition for continued thinking and discussion. In Kierkegaard's words: "a contradiction is always the expression of a task, and a task is movement" (28).

However, such an antinomian pluralism is only possible if it is based not on a concept of "culture wars" (Gerald Graff), on the notion of replacing older discourses with newer ones, but on a sense of peaceful co-existence and mutual tolerance. We ought to be able to reject other opinions and viewpoints without rejecting the people who hold them and stand for them. Antinomian thought is complementary. As in the case of light, which can only be described as particle *and* as wave, such heterogeneous explanations, while mutually exclusive, are *both* necessary to account for the issue under discussion (see Plotnitsky). Antinomian thought is thus marked by a loss of totality. Or rather, its totality can never be closed, and it exceeds any attempt at representation.

Antinomian thought resists subsuming everything within one monolithic system, a system, be it Hegelian, cybernetic, or cultural in its orientation, which, in its all-comprehensiveness, knows no "other," but absorbs, sublates, and annuls all difference. Instead, it opens up new antinomies. Antinomian thought is itself antinomian, a counterdevelopment to the predominant tradition which favors a unifying discourse of consensus and reconciliation, supported by the bridging power of the aesthetic. To describe the relationships between different entities (people or their positions) as essentially harmonious and consensual, however, is to claim general validity or interest for a particular viewpoint. Traditionally, it was in the name of a higher principle, be it progress, a final goal, or a set of values, that partial notions could be promoted to the status of generally accepted norms. In particular, group interests could be legitimized by the appeal to the authority of truth. The belief in possessing "the truth," the one right version of things, enabled the owner to make totalizing claims and to denounce other views as unenlightened. In the absence of last instances, especially with truth as a

contested idea, the logic of progress and improvement towards the greater good of humankind have become suspect. As universities are increasingly managed like businesses, humanistic idea(l)s are replaced by the laws of the market. Evaluations – often nothing more than statistics of lists and rankings based on vague parameters which are not subject to evaluation themselves – borrow their criteria from economics (c.f. Bill Readings' discussion of "excellence" in his essay "The University without Culture"). Value becomes a ratio of short-term success. Accordingly, "better" and "best" are what sells better and best, especially if a desirous market has been created for the product.

A discourse grounded in dissensus would avoid such totalization, for each claim would be limited by the resistance posed by contrary forces, which are not subject to market competition. It will be difficult to institute antinomian thought in an academic environment where it is often the most powerful and influential voices that gain the support of the administration. Antinomian thought, however, would be extremely useful to the self-understanding of the university for it is able to lay bare conflicts of interest by giving a double reading of academic endeavors. Thus it could, for instance, outline the economic perspective of the institution against its function as a transmitter of knowledge. To propose an academic culture which is defined by an endless seesaw movement of discourse and counterdiscourse is therefore not opposed to the idea of joining forces in that common interest of the highest value, the pursuit of knowledge.

Antinomies, one could argue, threaten the idea of community which is almost synonymous with the notion of consensus and social harmony, with shared interests and projects. We are already observing the disintegration of communities in their traditional forms, however. What is needed, therefore, are attempts to define commonality differently, not based on a notion of all-inclusiveness.⁵ We also still need to find ways to orient ourselves, despite the lack of absolute truths. If we cannot allow ourselves to be guided by ideas external to the situation at hand – because these ideas are either arbitrary or totalizing or both –, we need to derive our criteria for action from the circumstances we are facing. If the current condition of "literary studies" can indeed be characterized as antinomian, then the logic of this as yet local truth requires that we project this condition onto other areas of life, that – to evoke a lesson from Kierkegaard – we also live what we teach.

Northwestern University