

d'extraits de lecture, de notes concernant les achats et dépenses etc., comme des indices permettant de comprendre sa production littéraire. À tel point qu'un auteur littéraire peut accaparer la vie d'un chercheur qui se consacre entièrement à accéder à des tels documents et à les publier. Ainsi Philip Kolb, l'éditeur de la correspondance de Marcel Proust, reconnaissait sans ambages que la vie de Proust lui était plus familière que la sienne propre. Comment se fait-il que nous ne nous satisfaisions pas du texte littéraire en soi, par exemple d'*À la recherche du temps perdu*, l'incarnation par excellence de la littérature? Pourquoi ce besoin de connaître en plus tous les brouillons de cette "Recherche" (les fameux cahiers de Proust), toutes ses lettres et mêmes celles de ses partenaires, sans oublier tout ce que Proust a lu?

Mon hypothèse est que nous tentons constamment de dépasser l'institutionnalisation des discours spécialisés en lorgnant vers l'interdiscursivité. Alors qu'en principe la littérature fait fonction d'interdiscours, il ne nous suffit pas de reconnaître le paradoxe voulant que la littérature, en tant qu'institution, érige en quelque sorte cet interdiscours en discours spécialisé littéraire. Autrement dit, il ne nous suffit pas de lire la "Recherche." Nous voudrions savoir de surcroît si Proust a eu connaissance de Freud ou de la théorie de la relativité d'Einstein – et de Dieu sait quoi encore. Mais comme dans un effet de miroir, il est également vrai que face à ceux qui écrivent dans le domaine des sciences exactes, nous ne nous contentons pas de chercher à comprendre leurs découvertes d'après leurs écrits scientifiques et selon nos capacités. Nous voudrions également savoir comment ils se sont comportés en tant qu'humains, avec leur affectivité, leurs passions; et nous nous délectons des biographies – ou auto-biographies – de tous ces grands individus. Dans le cas des arts plastiques, nous ne nous contentons pas non plus de contempler des statues, des fresques ou des tableaux, mais nous trouvons différentes façons d'accéder à un commentaire discursif – la vie du "génie" devient alors particulièrement fascinante. On pourrait multiplier et surtout approfondir les exemples, mais à ce stade on pourrait sûrement les ramener à un commun dénominateur, celui d'un désir interdiscursif et intermédiatique. Celui-ci, malgré le renforcement de la division du travail et du discours et donc également de l'inégalité entre l'appropriation du savoir et le savoir-faire technologique, permet malgré tout d'établir la cohésion culturelle d'une société qui, sinon, aurait dû depuis longtemps dégénérer pour n'abriter plus qu'une population incapable de communiquer, composée d'esprits sots et bornés à force de spécialisation.

Traduit de l'allemand par Manuel Meune

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Does Literary Studies Have A Future?

The topic proposed to us echoes with the stern undertones of a crisis: "the future of literary studies" might be phrased very directly and openly as "let us discuss if literary studies have any future at all." I guess we are invited to focus on a question: What makes a discourse socially meaningful? The answers are pivotal in the attempt to assess meaning to our practices in the literary field.

It must be said that the question did not always ring as it does today. Literary criticism has been socially significant and its importance in the construction of a modern public sphere is a widely recognized fact. In Latin America at the beginning of this century, the debates on national literature galvanized not only the intellectual community. They overflowed into public space, interested the politicians and the *idéologues*, and new proposals were advanced that regarded education, national identity, state policies toward immigrants and ethnic minorities. National literature was then a socially significant topic, not a concept that only called the interest of scholars or writers. For instance, the debate about national literature was crucial in the turn of the century Argentine reform of education, no matter how we judge today the direction and the values present in that reform. It offered the opportunity of a vivid interaction between scholars, writers, the state elite and the public at large. The case promoted by *literati* opened cultural issues in front of non literary publics and especially in front of policy-makers and politicians. Literature and literary scholarship were socially significant because they were regarded, along with history and language, as the core of a national republican education. Thus, at the beginning of the century, literary criticism had an impact on public discourse; its opinions were to be heard if the occasion was to define cultural guidelines for the future of the country. And nobody doubted that literature reigned over the artistic field that was seen as of crucial importance. More than half a century later, this time in the United States, again literature (and philosophy) were at the center of the storm: the debate began at Stanford on whether basic college education built on the grounds of an inventory of Great Works (that excluded almost everything that was not centrally male and European) could be acceptable.

Both debates proved to be socially significant despite the disagreement over the solutions that the participants fostered or the course of actions taken afterwards. Both debates proved to have deep social impact and modified the ways things were going on not only in academia but to some extent in society as a whole. Changes occurred and in many aspects they were positive.

I strongly feel that the heyday of public significance is gone, although we face conflicts as deep as those mentioned before. Things happened, and in fact were happening when the debate broke in the United States, that have limited the public visibility of literary studies. What is going on belongs to various dimensions of the symbolic but I will focus only on two of them.

First, the hegemony of audiovisual discourse on the construction of culture: it is well-known that we have been swiftly moving into the video sphere and what was public and political space is more aptly considered today as an electronic arena. The dispositions that literacy needed and developed are no longer as central as they used to be before the reorganization of the symbolic into a global video sphere. Technological changes took place that are irreversible: we live in cyberspace although vast minorities in Latin America and the rest of the world have to face gigantic obstacles in order to be considered acceptable citizens of this very pervasive and at the same time deeply stratified new cultural sphere. Cyberspace calls for a new kind of literacy (visual literacy). However traditional reading abilities are still required to decipher the written word that has been freed from the paper support and the page to page disposition in order to flow over a non geometrical and virtual space that we find today in the hypertext of our computers and the world-wide explosion of Internet. This means that although significant discourses are still written discourses, in the future they might not necessarily continue to be exclusively alphabetical texts: cable TV is present in forty per cent of the homes in Argentina, as written newspapers (that carried stories by Borges along with multiple new formats of information and gruesome narratives of crime and prodigies) were present in the homes where men and women lived in the twenties and thirties.

Secondly, the place of literature in culture has varied along the sequence sketched by these processes. Cultured citizens of the future cybernations should in short be able to connect themselves to a massive flow of writing and images. Literature, philosophy or history, as we used to consider them in terms of strict generic prescriptive regulations, will vary along lines whose directions are not mere hypothesis today. Our personal position vis à vis these developments (my personal rather skeptical view on them) are irrelevant in front of the strength they exhibit.

Reading, that simple act we usually take for granted, has to be reconsidered. Reading is under a process of mutation and we are perhaps the last traditional scholars in a world that will very soon demand new abilities. Reading is a time consuming activity: the deciphering of a written surface depends on concentration and intent attention along a rather long span of time. We look *at* the text and *into* the text, we practice intensive and extensive observations of the written matter, we stay *in* the text and *with* the text, we cut it (as Barthes taught us to do) only in order to recompose it once more.

Even if we know that there is neither depth to be reached nor totality to be reconstructed, we operate with the text piercing its surface and moving from a fragment to the other. We are experts in in-depth reading although we acknowledge the futility of a metaphysical in-depth pretension. This "cultured" activity with texts has been always different from the activities generally carried by the reading public, yet something of the order of intensity lay in the past a common ground between intellectual and non intellectual reading practices.

Let us face it: that common ground has been eroded. In the symbolic dimension of the social world hegemonized by the discourses of the video sphere, reading is still extremely necessary but is evolving into different styles of practice. Intensity is reserved to other discourses (live rock is extremely intense in the rituals of its consumption) and reading or looking are transmuting into practices that increasingly privilege speed and the ability to drift from one surface into the other. We used to *walk* on our texts; in the coming years, we will *glide* and *surf* over their fractal planes.

Does this mean that in those years to come *War and Peace* or *Doktor Faustus* are going to be read according to this gliding-extensive-surfing mood? Although the adventure of prophetizing has been an intellectual penchant for decades, it is difficult to foresee what will be the destiny of *War and Peace* in fifty years: Will a teenager take that book to the beach or to the woods on a holiday afternoon? Will he or she stay late at night swimming through Natasha's monologues? Will someone brood over Pierre's broodings feeling as clumsy and as restrained as he felt? Will someone recognize his or her longings in Adrian Leverkühn's? Will a pact with the Evil continue to be a rich metaphor for the artist's rebellion in the bourgeois world? These intellectual scenes actually happened many decades after *War and Peace* or *Doktor Faustus* were published, proving that the novels possessed a *sustained* meaning (although most surely a meaning different from that presented to its contemporary readers). The question is whether that sustained meaning has come to a close.

To put the question from the point of view of literary studies: will *Doktor Faustus* or *War and Peace* be part of a philologically based program of literary studies or will they continue to be read as vast hermeneutic opportunities to assess new meanings and discuss old ones? There is no doubt that a philological perspective on these and other texts can happily go on for ever and ever discussing historical background, levels of language, acceptance and transgression of literary limits, and so on. But what is at stake, I believe, is not the continuity of a philological activity on literary texts, but the future of literary criticism which up to date implies the active connection of past texts to present ideological and cultural issues, in a very complicated process of emigration as the text moves from its time and cultural space into a new

consummation of the linguistic turn and the advent of postmodern social epistemologies.

Very little could be alleged against this trend which is battled by conservative critics and *idéologues* of the anti-multicultural right. I will not argue for cultural studies, whose legitimacy appears obvious to my eyes. Yet, I want to name very briefly the reasons because of which cultural studies do not solve the problems that criticism and literary studies encounter. The fading of progressive literary criticism in cultural studies (a trend that is quite evident in the topics that captivate academic research in Latin American culture) does not answer the questions we confront as literary critics. These do not vanish during our transmigration into cultural analysts. To mention some of them: the relation between literature and the symbolic dimension of society (which cultural studies are inclined to take for granted, although most of the work by Raymond Williams is an inquiry around this very point); the specific qualities of literary discourse (a concern raised by the Russian formalists that should be addressed by any critical *démarche*); the dialogue between literary texts and social texts (Bakhtin cannot be canonized for ever as the theoretical patron of this issue). These are topics that lawfully belong to literary criticism and it might be interesting not to leave them behind either because in the past they did not seem fashionable to the formalists or because they do not raise enthusiasm in the present times, given that there is a discipline (cultural studies) that is considered more apt to grasp their significance.

However, even these theoretical topics could be overlooked given the assumption that there is yet another issue which literary criticism cannot blandly hand out to other disciplines. And that issue is the one raised by values, in this case: aesthetic values. They are our problem, as values in general are the question that needs to be addressed in contemporary societies. We have learnt our lessons: relativism is the touchstone of multicultural conviction. But, to be straightforward, the consequences of extreme relativism are put before our eyes by the anti-relativists from the right when they accuse us of destroying literature together with the all-white, all-male, western canon. To enter the debate free from a moralizing *mauvaise foi*, we could openly recognize that literature is worthwhile not because all texts are equal and can be culturally explained, but on the contrary because they are different and they resist a limitless cultural interpretation. Something is always left when we face literary texts and that something (which is not an inexpressible essence but a resistance, the strength of a resilient meaning) is crucial. To phrase it differently: men and women are equal in a radical way texts are not. Equality of human persons is a necessary presupposition (it is the abstract basis of liberalism). Equality of texts is an ablation of the qualities that make them worthwhile. The perspective on values (not only moral or ideological, but aesthetic) is needed if literary criticism looks for an assessment of its capacity

epoch and a new symbolic landscape.

Literary criticism, different from philological reconstruction, poses to the text *demands* (not only questions, but *demands* in a strong sense: things that a text should do, things that readers want to produce with it) which philology does not. Philology may persist in a non Nietzschean archeology of literature. As a 'not so controversial' discipline it can stretch its procedures into the newly-decorated-future-cyber-writing-space. I am not equally sure that literary criticism will proceed into it with the same simple movement. In fact, literary criticism (a historical practice) emerged from and is rooted in the modern notion of public sphere, of citizenship and of publicity. Literary criticism is not well prepared to undergo a process of transformation into the study of the *remains of literature*, because that metamorphosis will simply erase the limits between philology, a scholarly discipline, and criticism, a public discourse produced in the intersection of academic and non academic values and practices.

What is at stake, then, is the future of criticism in a world where the place of literature has been deeply altered and will continue changing more swiftly and radically. International academia has been aware of this trends and has developed its own trend in response. The present popularity of cultural studies and cultural analysis, which employ hundreds of recycled literary critics is one of the strategies. Cultural studies exist as a discipline at least from the mid sixties in England where, around Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall in Birmingham and Raymond Williams in Cambridge, opened a bold set of questions that at that time did not receive even a patronizing attention from critics in other parts of the world. Suddenly, Raymond Williams, a name sparsely mentioned or quoted by literary critics, attained celebrity. This dramatic shift in reputation cannot be explained without considering the crisis that literary criticism underwent after the glorious days of the first and second structuralist waves. A rather similar process affected the resonance of Walter Benjamin (who was translated into English rather late if one considers that many of his writings were published in Spanish and Italian more than a decade earlier) and of sociologue of culture Pierre Bourdieu (whose work was well-known in the seventies but reached the aristocratic *quartier* of literary studies only in the eighties). In a few years many literary critics discovered that their discipline wanted something new and something different.

The shift into cultural studies had begun. The redemption of literary criticism by cultural analysis (a curious *Aufhebung* in these not very dialectic days) opened a path followed in many countries almost at the same time. In fact, this responds not to a serendipitous shift but to a good-willed contract made possible, among other reasons, by the increasing attention that literary studies have obtained from disciplines as history and anthropology after the

to speak publicly on topics that do not pertain to the realm of other disciplines. The great literary critics of the twentieth century (from Benjamin to Barthes, from Adorno to Lukács) have mastered the debate on values: meaning is socially significant because something which is hard to grasp stays with the text once the text has accomplished other social functions.

I wonder whether we are communicating to our students and readers this very simple fact: we are literary critics because we consider literature a high impact discourse, a discourse marked by the intensity forged in the deployment of aesthetic values. I wonder whether we repeat as often as necessary that we study literature because literature affects us in a special way, due to its formal and semantic density.

It is difficult to say if we are living through the last decades of literature as it has been known up to now. I have the feeling that films are bound to disappear in the *continuum* of the videosphere (not that narrative "things" are not going to be shown in theaters or cable TV, but that films, as the twentieth century invented them, are over). And it could happen that hypertext be in the future not only a convenient way to manage footnotes, remarks or various levels of information, but a new pattern of the syntax that, for centuries, literature has been modeling and changing.

We do not know which developments will take place in the next decades. On one hand, it has been of the utmost importance that literary studies opened themselves up to the perspectives of cultural analysis. The drive had positive consequences in the extension of the universe of discourses we consider, and cultural analysis has benefited from the techniques of literary criticism. But the moment has come to draw a balance. Literary criticism in its specificity should not disappear engulfed in the mainstream flow of the "cultural." Nobody wants to be one of the last selfrighteous priests of high art. Yet we may not dismiss without heavy losses the opportunity to continue speaking about that special type of discourse still existent (in our case literature) that knits and unravels the intricacy of values, ideologies and forms.

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How Nice to Be an Outsider

Every one of my scholarly/literary activities is outside literary studies as such. Yet to a varying degree all that I do is the subject of the amoeboid activities of the field. I also have, in principle, no vested interest in the flow of students into your departments, nor do I have to worry about jobs for them, nor the level of remuneration of your sluggers and sometime pinchhitters. It seems to me that given this practical disinterest (reading Burke and Kant) I am ideally situated to make aesthetic judgments if not prognoses of the future of literary studies. Which is the reason, I suppose, that I was asked to do so.

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But first let me count the ways in which I am marginal. First of all, I am a chemist, of the theoretical subspecies. I have done some good science, even shaped the way that chemists think of the motion of electrons in molecules, and how the electrons determine the shape and reactions of those persistent groupings of atoms we've learned to see without seeing. My and my collaborators' work is divulged, some of my colleagues would say preached, in over 450 scientific articles (our stock in trade, rather than books). Such "texts" have become the subject of a burgeoning field of literary studies of science. But no one would bother with my texts; they are individually unimportant (though what they collectively teach is of value; I think of my articles as chapters in a serialized text, but please don't tell the editors of the journals in which I publish). And perhaps when I write science I am too self-conscious of the central problem of representation for me (or those messages that abandon me) to play the role of an innocent native (or his artifacts) awaiting the sage pseudo-anthropo/sociological investigation of the way I construct knowledge. Also the cognitive, intrascientific background needed to assess my papers is moderately formidable; there is a reason why chemists spend five years in graduate school... So, so far, I've escaped attention as an object of literary studies. I keep my fingers crossed.

Second, I have a modest career as a poet. It's much easier to make a living as a chemist (would I dearly like you to convince me that it is otherwise, by buying my books!), so the poetry is perforce a part-time vocation. Not much need be said about poetry as the subject of literary studies – past, present, and future. Fortunately for me, poetry of middling quality is not usually the object of literary studies. Unless it is written by figures of whom others have written...