

Preface

It is an honour and pleasure to revive the Library of the Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Bibliothèque de la Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée with this collection, "The Future of Literary Studies/L'avenir des études littéraires." Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Walter Moser deserve our gratitude for bringing together an array of accomplished scholars who are debating this pressing question. In a time when the humanities seem to be on the retreat in the universities before the juggernaut of a market economy, where profitability is the mark of human value, it is important to ask what future literary studies have.

Before the Second World War, in France and Britain, a literary or classical education often provided an entrée into the government and the foreign service, but this is not so much the case any more in these and other western countries. China, too, has embraced the market as have many other countries that resisted such a policy in the past. Where literature will find itself institutionally in such a new context is a matter of great interest in many countries. Can literary studies survive the demand for profit as the primary measure of worth?

Shakespeare made a good deal of money in his day, for himself and others, and he is still an industry, so literature of quality was not immune to the profit motive then and is not now. Provençal poetry from the Middle Ages, as influential and marvellous as it is, does not make large profits. Will students who are exhorted to make sound investments in their future take time off to learn about love and war along the Mediterranean so many hundreds of years ago? Is there a cultural and intellectual dimension that profits a person beyond the narrow definition of profit? Must all reading and writing that is "profitable" be instrumental? Perhaps profit takes us down the wrong paths; perhaps not. In such a context, literary scholars have begun to doubt themselves and literature as something of intrinsic value. The push towards cultural studies, as literature is a function of a larger culture, or towards historical context has been a valuable development, but the abandonment of the aesthetic, or the fictional, or the lyric moment, while not a necessary move when discussing literature in cultural and historic contexts, might lead to a collapse of the role of the university in the study of literature. Paradoxically, the questioning of the value of the aesthetic or of the literary as an ideological or class construction has often come from the questioning minds of professors of literature and aesthetics or of related fields.

This self-doubt over the past four decades even at the same time as some literary theorists had tried to declare the independence of literary criticism (as it was then called) has led to an exciting and productive time in

the field. At times in those decades, literary theory and literature have ended up as two solitudes, the one declining the other and each seeking out some separate notice in the university and in the public spaces of the community. These changes have been enlivening in the short term but it would be interesting to see their consequences over the long term.

The definition and institution of literature have changed dramatically since the eighteenth century, when literature was linked to history through the rhetorical arts, and the what, and framework of literature will continue to change. There have always been markets and patrons in the production and reception of literature. Some have been in the government or noble houses and others have been located in a commercial realm. With the shift towards the popular in culture, especially in North America, is there an interest, will or logic to producing and archiving art and scholarship that will reach the few? Is this rarified production and store-housing something more needed than ever or something that seems more and more useless? The question of usefulness returns us to problems of market and audience and instrumentality. Is utility a proper measure or something doomed to curtail or smother the literary culture that has been traditionally important to many cultures in defining themselves over thousands of years? Can there be a society that produces and consumes for its own sake? Literary studies help to read the strangeness of the past and the changes in the present, so what role they will play in the interpretation of culture is an open question.

Professors Gumbrecht and Moser have assembled strong essays that address these and related questions directly and indirectly. This preface cannot do anything but express thanks for their efforts and send the reader to their Introduction and their collection. I am pleased that this volume will appear in the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* and its Library and am confident that it will enliven debate in our specific context for our readers as well as more generally for those interested in literature and culture inside and outside the university.

University of Alberta