

les formes de savoir – et Novalis ne voulait rien dire d'autre avec son programme de "poétisation de toutes les sciences" –, oubliée depuis l'ère des disciplines au XIX^e siècle, sous la longue domination du paradigme herménéutique de la "science de la littérature," on pourrait placer celles-ci dans une nouvelle perspective, en tant que "science de la traduction." Car certains signes indiquent que l'histoire – au moins l'histoire moderne – des littératures européennes et américaines (du Nord ou du Sud), en ayant largement brouillé les pistes, réuse toute esthétique de l'autonomisation, et qu'elle (d)écrit aussi une histoire, une rhétorique et une poétique de la transgression des frontières, dans un processus opposé à celui de la constitution (ou la création par subdivision) de littératures nationales, contraire à la spécialisation et l'institutionnalisation des études littéraires qui en découlent.

Je constate avec inquiétude – mais aussi avec espoir – les nombreux conditionnels présents dans mes remarques. Ne s'agit-il que de "Zukunftsmusik," de promesses en l'air? J'y souscris pourtant, alors que nous avons le devoir de penser des "subjunctive worlds and cultures" ou, selon le mot de Niklas Luhmann, d'esquisser un monde de meilleures potentialités.

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How to Have a Future?

The «post factum» discontinuous diary:

Heathrow Airport, London. May 25, 1992

I am waiting for the flight to Warsaw. The crowd is so multilingual and so similar to what I have seen already so many times in various places. Perhaps with the exception of Mexico. I remember the airport of Oaxaca where I observed a group of indigenous people, small men and women, speaking their language, noble and solitary, aloof from the outside world. I would have given a lot to be able to communicate with them. Suddenly, I realize that the best way of speaking about these people is probably film or television. With, of course, a competent commentary. Film can convey the images of their behaviour, their attitude and of their history. Would anyone need a novel about the Aztecs? (I recall having read many many years ago a Carlo Coccioli's novel about the Fall of an Aztec Eagle, but my memory fails to reproduce what I felt and understood while reading this novel.)

The recollection of Oaxaca airport is perhaps a lesson as to the tolerance towards television so frequently despised by intellectuals. How many communities survive today untouched by literature? They are probably plenty. How many students of literature can forget or ignore Ingarden? And how many can afford to ignore Bakhtin?

Recollection of Belgrade. Late October 1981. I arrived from Berlin. Through Munich. From the airport I called Stan. He was still working at Free Europe. Stan: "The collapse of communism is very close. And literature has played an important role in this decomposition of totalitarianism." He mentions Milosz, Gombrowicz, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, Mrożek, Baranczak, Andrzejewski, Herbert. I recognize the accuracy of Stan's opinion. Among others, these Polish writers were denouncing the lies. Literature became one of the most important means of resistance. In 1981 the number of underground publications was absolutely incredible. This literature of resistance does not necessitate any literary studies. The strength of its truth was so compelling that la raison d'être of literature was obvious.

I realized later that some of these Polish writers belong to the Western canon established by Harold Bloom. But they do not figure there because they contributed to the collapse of communism. They are there as some of the greatest writers of our time.

The question of the Western canon remains questionable. Both as a demonstration of a system of preferential texts and as monument. And one can ask oneself: what still remains to be written in literature? How many

important texts did not enter the Western Canon? What does "important" mean?

It seems to me obvious that Milosz's poetry is important.

I am reading his *Provinces*.. The poem "Return" :

In my old age I decided to visit places where I wandered long ago in my early youth.

I recognized smells, the outline of postglacial hills and oval-shaped lakes.

I forced my way through a thicket where a park was once, but I did not find the traces of the lanes.

Standing on the shore while the wave shimmered lightly as it did then, I was incomprehensively the same, incomprehensively different.

And yet I will not repudiate you, unlucky youngster, nor dismiss the reasons for your sufferings as foolish.

He to whom the pitiless truth of existence is suddenly unveiled, cannot but ask: How can it be?

How can it be, such an order of the world – unless it was created by a cruel demiurge?

His Nobel Prize (1980) to which a political and conjunctural explanation has been given, is fully deserved in terms of "objective values." How to define them?

I agree with Cesare Segre whom I read posteriorily to my meditations at Heatrow Airport. In his *Notizie dalla crisi* (1993), he says: "It is right to consider the value judgement the point of arrival of literary criticism provided that one keep in mind that a value is what it is only with respect to the epochal or personal paradigms." And Segre adds:

The value that endures beyond the contingencies of the taste ("vicende del gusto") is constituted: 1) out of capacity of a work to synthesize the vision of the world of a given time, and to be, to say it in terms of the School of Tartu, a "model of the world;" 2) out of its power to denude the masques and to propose something which is verifiable through the impact of the work on the contemporary society and awareness, and in the more excellent cases even on the successive ones." (13)

In Belgrade I was staying at the hotel *Slavia*. I remember its simplicity and mastered disorder although it was quite a good hotel. And I remember a series of meetings with various people in different rooms of the hotel *Slavia*. So much vodka and so much slivovica. I constantly felt that historically speaking something important was going to happen. A young Polish writer was quoting repeatedly three sentences in Spanish which reappear throughout Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* : "Le gusta este jardín? Que es suyo? Evite que sus hijos lo destruyan!" What was he hinting at?

One morning we got up awakened by the news that General Jaruzelski was named Prime Minister of Poland. He accumulated offices and functions: First Secretary of the Communist Party of Poland, Minister of Defence and now Prime Minister.

I met the Polish writer, the fan of Malcolm Lowry who was looking at me with an ironical face and was shouting: "Le gusta este jardín? Que es suyo? Evite que sus hijos lo destruyan."

Now I hold in my hands *Under the Volcano*. Here is the summary of the novel on the back cover:

If there is morbidity here, it is akin to that of Elisabethan tragedy...he has created a character in whose individual struggle is reflected something of the larger agony of the human spirit.

Now I realize how the Spanish refrain of this novel recited so many times by the young Polish writer synthesizes an idea of literature which is now probably dead; or, at any rate, is not really operational any more... Literature as image and representation of the human condition. Literature as tragedy and as "grand metanarrative," literature as nostalgia of order. Literature as witness of reality. Literature is obsolete as an instance on the tragic or nostalgic vision of the world.

But it is also obsolete since it is a constant, if not institutionalized loss of meaning that points to the relativity of language, the impossibility of having another status than just the one imposed upon the text through the reading. I find a structured and coherent reflection on this problem in *La mort de la littérature*. There is no name of the author on the cover, but the second part of the book entitled precisely: "La mort de la littérature" (the first one is called "Textes") is signed with the initials J.E. I was told that they correspond to Jacques Ehrman. So J. E. says:

La lecture-critique n'est autre qu'une invention et un inventaire de la littérature. L'une et l'autre s'effacent pourtant aussitôt que constituées: leur existence ne se soutient que de leur conjonction, c'est-à-dire des signes qu'elles partagent, qu'elles mettent en commun; et en communication, pendant la durée de la dite communication. Rien d'autre n'en fixe, n'en détermine l'existence ou l'organisation.

La «littérature», alors, ne se distingue pas des autres signes comme un mode particulier du discours, mais comme une façon particulière de lire et déchiffrer les signes. Est littéraire non tel texte à l'exclusion de tel autre, mais les textes que le lecteur décide de qualifier ainsi.

Si l'on accepte cette thèse, il faut nécessairement en conclure qu'une certaine conception de la «littérature» – celle qui fait de certains signes une aristocratie du discours, séparée (par quelle décision magique?) de la trivialité et de la vulgarité du «langage ordinaire» – perd toute validité, tout fondement, en perdant ses

privilèges.

Cette «littérature», dépotoir des sentiments, musée des «belles lettres», a vécu. Alors, les signes, tous les signes, s'ouvrent à une nouvelle lecture – fragmentaire évidemment – mais libérée des entraves d'un «goût» arbitraire et stérilisant.» (*La mort de la littérature* [Paris: L'Horne, 1971], 132)

What does the future hold for a scholar of literary history?

The return of the questions

The return of these questions is quite obsessive. For many years various intellectual bodies, reviews, and institutions with differing social and less social objectives ask: What do you think of literature to day? Do you think that literature is still possible? How shall we teach literature? What is the function of literature? And consequently: do you think that literary studies still have a future? All these questions point to the ambiguous state of affairs in which both literature and the study of literature exist. As a matter of fact, neither literature nor literary studies have chosen it. It was imposed upon them by force, by the natural forces of social, economic and political agencies which decide upon what sort of media must dominate.

When social information and the communication of artistic and spiritual values run into trouble, as W. Benjamin notes in the area of the reproducibility of the art work, that takes the form of *ad infinitum* multiplication and manipulation of "artistic" objects with a supplementary potential of libidinal action. And this action reduces literature to a secondary, less evident and less intense process of transmitting such values as narrative, worldview, metaphors, verbal rhythms. All these values have been transformed into encapsulated T.V. and video objects that speak visually and libidinally and that enhance the potential and the game of the identification process.

Paradoxically enough, one has to note that literature is in perfect creative, commercial and social shape. The invention and the commercialisation of paperbacks and of various series and collections guarantee a collective and efficient circulation of literary and critical information. The state of ambiguity can be defined and understood as follows: there are still great writers, great literary works, Nobel Prize, Pulitzer, Goncourt and so forth, but at the same time there is television and film and video. The Gutenberg Galaxy is strangely surpassed by the media and reduced to the secondary role of transmitting a special type of information which those who watch do not really need to receive. The crisis of literature and of literary studies, if such a thing really exists, may be ontological in nature. Literature has its old and repetitious ontology which stems from the fact that it always dealt with three underlying forces, defined by Roland Barthes as "mathesis,"

"mimesis," and "semiosis." And nowadays these three forces are also actively committed in the areas of film, television, video and spectacle. Perhaps their role is not as "noble" as it is or as it was in literature. Their function is limited to the minimum of information mainly of narrative nature, to the minimum of mimetic tools and to the elementary operations of semiosis. In the realm of showbusiness, knowledge (mathesis), representation (mimesis) and meaning (semiosis) are not as multivalent and as complex as in some literary texts which gained universal applause and recognition. Novels still present and persisting in the great Western canon such as *Ulysses*, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaft*, *Der Tod des Vergil* or *À la recherche du temps perdu*, convey such diversity of visions of the world that their social efficiency is necessarily lost confronted with that of any reality show, movie such as *Apocalypse Now*, *The Godfather* or ready to wear fashion show.

While theorizing la "société du spectacle" Guy Debord is right: an overflowing and all-encompassing dictatorship of showbusiness excludes a not-spectacular art and by the same token reduces literature to a secondary activity. But even literature is enthralled into the showbusiness' dictatorship. It has become above all a manipulated market object. Recollection: it is like the landscape along the rail road between Tokyo and Kyoto. In 1984, while travelling in Japan I wrote down the following sentence: "Le paysage complètement mordu par l'industriel et par le commercial."

While meditating about the purposefulness of literary study one has to account for many parallel and concurrent phenomena. For instance the death of literature. Hegelian self-imposed and self-administrated. In the debate between Roland Barthes and Maurice Nadeau about "Where is literature going?" (France-Culture, March 13, 1973) Maurice Nadeau quotes at the outset Blanchot who says: "Où va la littérature? Elle va vers elle-même. Vers son essence, qui est sa disparition." Nadeau claims that the disappearance of literature has a metaphysical connotation for Blanchot. It means that it is a natural and inescapable death. And that literature cannot be saved. Its death is a mystery of death, but it is also the consequence of pushing to the limits the autotelic meditation of literature about itself. There is no predicament of literature. There is only literature as a transitory phenomenon played out by humanity.

The why and the how of literary studies? Their future. In the multivalent society, i.e. in the society (post-industrial? post-modern?) where there is place for any, and so many artistic or community activities, literature can still safeguard its function as one of the discourses which is able to give a relatively objective vision of the world, and of the epoch. Just recently, see the Rushdie problem and problems; his latest novel *The Moor's Last Sigh*.

So the future is still there. But there is also an another future. Some postulates. To study literature both archeologically (as an obsolete document,

as the "testament of tradition" - Harry Levin), ironically, in confrontation with all the medias business (to show how literature is still vital and unique as a means of denouncing the catastrophic state of the world: Rushdie, Fuentes, Galeano, Balestrini; to recall the mysterious and "human" dimension of the *Lebenswelt*: Saramago, J. Benet, Calvino, Perec). Finally to study it concurrently anthropologically, culturally, ethnologically: as one of the social activities not of the "Geist," but of the individuals who from time to time decide to think in letters and in narratives.

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The Return of the Repressed

In a provocative essay called "Cultural Criticism and the Politics of Selling Out," appearing in issue #2 of the new *Electronic Book Review* (www.altx.com.ebr), Michael Bérubé, himself an important cultural critic, worries about an "academic left whose chief function is to analyse and interpret the formation of the hegemonies that are actually being formed by our counterparts on the right." "I fear," Bérubé remarks with reference to Fredric Jameson's critique in *Social Text* of Tony Bennett's essay "Putting Policy in Cultural Studies," "an intellectual regime in which cultural studies is becoming nothing more than a parasitic kind of colour commentator on the new authoritarian populism of the Age of Gingrich, too busy dissecting the postmodern eugenicist-libertarian-cybernetic-fundamentalist Right to be of any use in actually opposing it" (10).

What makes Bérubé and other "Cultural Studies" advocates so uneasy is the growing recognition that *our* (i.e., the academy's) critique of the public sphere is in fact being read and discussed nowhere but in the academy itself. There is an important lesson here for Literary Studies, a field increasingly threatened, we all know, by financial cutbacks, lack of government and public support, and a dismal job market. But here it is less a question of Left versus Right ideology than of the recognition that even as English and Comparative Literature departments and Humanities Centres have turned their backs on "mere" literary or art studies, those studies are resurfacing *outside the walls* of the university. A concern for poesis, I want to suggest here, can never be eradicated; if the university will not accommodate it, as is now too often the case, it inevitably moves elsewhere.

Let me begin with a personal anecdote. When my daughter Carey Perloff took over the directorship of the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco four years ago, she instituted a series of symposia to accompany each production, a series for which she even received a sizable grant from the NEH. The symposia are usually on Monday evenings when the theatre is dark and are free to the public; additional discussion groups occur after particular performances. For *The Tempest*, for example, Carey invited Stephen Greenblatt (Berkeley) and Harry Berger (Santa Cruz) to speak; for Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, Katherine Hayles (UCLA) addressed the issue of chaos theory and narrative structure; for Euripides' *Hecuba*, the symposium included law professor Jeremy Waldron (Boalt), classicist Helena Foley (Barnard), and the anthropologist Martin Bernal (Cornell). And so on, I myself am shortly going to be on a panel discussing the new "language" theatre with poet-dramatist-novelist Mac Wellman and poet-dramatist-publisher Douglas Messerli, in conjunction with the production of Eric Overmyer's *Dark Rapture*.