

a fixed number of set texts submitted to set methods of interpretation — is clearly a thing of the past. But what is not a thing of the past — and this is where I differ from many of my colleagues — is literature itself, however differently “literature” may manifest itself in the information age. The first step toward “saving” our discipline at a time of public indifference and draconian budget cuts is to turn our attention to the radical literature and art works actually being produced at the present time — from the video works of Bill Viola to the theatre works of Mac Wellman and Susan-Lori Parks, to the “conceptual” poetries of Lyn Hejinian, Charles Bernstein, and Steve McCaffery. Exposure to these works will, in turn, send students back to the relevant sources: McCaffery’s work, for example, contains many echoes of Renaissance English literature, even as Hejinian’s *Oxotla* is a postmodern version of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*. I can conceive of an imaginative curriculum, adjusted, I would hope, to fit the needs of the individual student, that would allow for broad and exciting literary study across periods, national literatures, and genres. But it will not happen until we stop apologizing for our discipline, stop trying to turn it into pseudo-economics or politics and recognise that, however thoroughly we may want to revise traditional paradigms for literary study, *literature* itself — that elusive entity that, as Wittgenstein repeatedly remarked, cannot be defined even though we recognise it easily in its individual manifestations — shows no signs of going away.

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The Economics of Criticism

Criticism is a way of dealing with language, and it has been respectable for quite some time now. Respectability comes with acknowledged usage, and such usage determines what criticism is worth. There is then a whole economics of criticism. By “economics” I mean a set of domestic laws. Since criticism is a way of dealing with language, the economics of criticism has less to do with matters of money (although money matters, of course) than with a set of homely precepts concerning language. Unhappily, I can only briefly mention two crucial aspects of criticism. (The first one will, however, reemerge towards the end of this essay).

This first aspect is one which defines language in terms of kind and *specific* kinds at that. This means, among other things, that criticism has always been special-language criticism — or *art* criticism (I include here literary criticism proper). The problems of the limits of a given language, as well as of the limits of discourse have therefore been crucial to criticism from its very beginnings. When in the late 1760s Kant was looking for a name for the kind of philosophy he was interested in, he called it “criticism.” The reason was perhaps that Kant recognized that art criticism had been in a roundabout sort of way taking care of what for Kant was the ultimate philosophical business: an investigation into the limits of some thing (later on in his life, however, Kant compared literary critics to cooks, a comparison which is hardly complimentary).

The second crucial aspect is the relationship between the economics of criticism and the economics of installments. It is important to remember that literary criticism is a twentieth-century phenomenon. Although one does find collections of disparate articles, essays, prefaces and footnotes before 1900, it is hardly of the same ilk. This means that, contrary to philosophy, concerns with a unified doctrine were foreign to critics. Dr. Johnson’s critical doctrine is a side effect of the somewhat later genre of the historiography of criticism (Dr. Johnson, of course, had general ideas about language, about literature, and about art, but he, like Sainte-Beuve, or Friedrich Schlegel, had the more pressing obligation of telling the truth every other week).

If criticism is a way of dealing with language, and if criticism came to be a respectable way of doing so, then there is probably a way of making language respectable. Since the respectability of criticism is its very use, it follows that *useful* language be the object of language criticism. There is a paradox here, for when art is and has been compared to language, art is and has been typically described as useless language. Some followers of Kant, however, established the intriguing possibility of a useless something’s being useful by virtue of its very uselessness. Shortly thereafter, criticism and

and identity-talk.

Now has criticism always been identity-talk and, more importantly, will it ever be anything else? I don't know much about the future. Some things can be said, however, about a past *and* about a future according to that past (that is, about a present). The first thing, again, I will have to mention only in passing. To assume that criticism has always been or even that it always will be identity-talk is to assure that critics have a special competence: in this case, the competence for reducing language to value. To be sure, they can mean to do it (or not). But the respectability of criticism has always been awkwardly mixed with critical controversies. If nothing else, these controversies show that critics (just like everyone else) are not particularly good at doing what they mean, let alone at saying so. Identity-talk has the curious property of not being very efficient at generating assent (but, then again, so has difference-talk). The second thing that can be said I shall follow from now on. It concerns the use of a word, namely one of the most popular words that are used to denote the *use* of language, that is, the *value* of language. I am referring to the word "culture." In what concerns me here, words like "culture" appear to be employed at crucial moments when in comes to the justification of the belief that language will behave in a certain way, that is, the belief that a given piece of language will yield out a certain meaning, the belief that certain persons will behave in a certain way (in Western Europe the use of this term is also a powerful way of securing grants from the state). All pluralistic talk about culture does not change much. Multiculturalism, among other things that need not concern us here, remains an idea, in the most rigorous Kantian sense of the word, about the market of meaning's future behaviour. It is in this sense that one can speak of the culturalization of criticism, and, indeed, of the culturalization of literary studies. Indeed, it may prove that in the end anti-cultural pronouncements on the part of critics have been very minority for the past two hundred years (and, moreover, liable to be construed as culturalist pronouncements). But, of course, this is what it means for criticism to be respectable and teachable, this is what it means for criticism to have a use, and for critics to find solace in some admirable version about the practical (i.e. moral and political) usefulness of their tasks.

There are perhaps two senses in which one can speak about the culturalization of literary studies. The first, simpler, sense is just that in the past twenty years it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish literary studies from cultural studies. Needless to say, I do not mean this in any disparaging way (but then again I am not very good at saying what I mean). The second sense is that, in the discourse market, most available criteria to speak of literature (and to configure literature as an object) are of a cultural nature. By this I mean that most available conceptions of literature as a

literature moved into the public universities. The paradox is therefore only an apparent one. That language is seen as useful, (even if it is its uselessness that is useful) means that language is ascribed a *value*, or, more precisely, that it is treated as if it had one. In sum, language is not treated as *mere* language. Again, linguistic literary criticism deals with the *non-mere*, that is, valuable language.

What does it mean for a language to be valuable? It means that we treat language in a particular way. If I were to simplify, I would say that it means to be treated as an investment. The problem is that "investment," in this sense, means at least two things: a commitment as to a future state of affairs and the notion that any current state of affairs is the happy result of an identical commitment, made by someone or by something in the past. The important point in my analogy is not the strict economic one, though. It is rather the trivially so, namely that to treat language as having a value means that you are sure that some thing will happen in the future to the piece of language you are currently dealing with (and also that the piece of language you are currently dealing with is the result of someone's similar past certainty). To treat language in the *non-mere* way implies a curious knowledge of the future (as well as the kind of knowledge of the past that will make *you* the heir of a given past). It implies that in a certain way one knows what will happen. "Value," in this respect, can be defined as the guarantee of an outcome. The marvellous thing is that what one expects will happen will indeed happen (this is why language speculation is not market speculation, all appearance notwithstanding). *Non-mere* language becomes therefore the confirmation of a previous knowledge, that is, of foregone values. If, for instance, one is sure that the use of a given piece of language lies in its making us more aware of the injustice in this world, that piece of language may indeed do so. But, more importantly, it will confirm our anticipated certainty. Language will be dealt with in a way so as to illustrate our very needs just like it serves our needs to imagine that language has been dealt with analogously in the past. In a nutshell, this is what it means for language to be useful. Now two important points can be derived from here. The first is really a precision. To say that values are prior guarantees of language's usefulness is indeed to say that values are guarantees of languages meaning possibilities (values are winning options in the meaning futures market). My second point is more substantial. I characterized a certain relation between language and meaning by using the verb "illustrate." If language's value is the anticipated knowledge of its meaning, illustration is what becomes of language when it becomes valuable. It is because a piece of language is treated as an illustration that one can say what that piece is, regardless of itself. So, the fact that language has a use for someone means that that person is capable of establishing the identity of pieces of language as anticipated meaning. Value-talk therefore is both meaning-talk

teachable object portray literature (and indeed language) as yet another kind of illustration of some alleged conditions for its possible meaning, and so cannot help knowing in advance what language is all about. Only in a derivative sense is identity-talk about literature primarily about treating language as if it were a tool for the constitution of who we are, and about treating art as a powerful organiser of *kinds* of persons (from Lesbian to Latvian). Identity-talk is in all these cases (and in many others) the fictional (and political) act *par excellence* of both describing the future, that is, an in-existent state of affairs, and of constituting the kind of heritage one is certain to be in the position to inherit.

Some critics, who deplore this situation, appear to believe that there is a solution in a return to the undoubtedly highly unpopular virtues of the aesthetic realm, namely the idea that there is a use for uselessness itself. I painfully have to disagree, and for two reasons. The first is that no sheer force of intention will effectuate any return (one does not simply *go back* to basics, to things themselves, to business, or even to the future). The second is that in an important sense there does not seem to be an opposition between notions such as "culture" and notions such as that of "the aesthetic," since in both cases the question is primarily one of values, of the notion that, say, linguistic sequences have intrinsic properties. This last point is puzzling, since culturalism (but no aestheticism) has often been described as an attack on the idea that there are intrinsic properties in language. All so-called intrinsic properties, the line goes, are contingent and so open to endless historical specification. However, what is intrinsic about language, for culturalism, is not a given set of meanings, or even a given set of values, but rather language's (and art's) illustrative nature, in a word, the value of language. Both culturalism and aestheticism share a characteristic procedure in their dealings with language: that of presenting the illustrative relation there is between *a priori* values and pieces of language as a derivation of values from language. The highest epistemic joy they know is the verification that what they already knew was in language or literature was there all along indeed.

Up to this point I have been talking as if there were an alternative to this state of affairs. "Alternative" here would mean an alternative way of dealing with language. Disappointing as it may sound, I hasten to say that I do not think there is one. One does not do business with language just as one does not choose what in the unfortunate phrase of Wittgenstein is called a language game. From this point, however, one cannot conclude that criticism has always been and always will be a more or less somber variety of illustrationism. Moreover, the fact that some forms of criticism appear to be marked by the belief that there is an alternative to culturalism does not prove anything, since the belief in an alternative to culturalism is more often than not an important value, just as the desire for transcendence implied in that

move is a frequent ingredient in well known descriptions of the human nature. Indeed, literary studies have always typically been connected to the idea that their object has a value (a proper value) even when the naturalness of such a value remains an open question. A different matter altogether is the otherwise puzzling fact that the descriptions of what I have been calling here culturalism have been as a rule produced by critics. Take, for example, one of the most prominent features of those descriptions: the insistence that culturalism is the belief in a form of inference, namely the kind of inference that, by assuming that language illustrates values, allows for values to be derived from language. As it happens, a minority (and hardly homogeneous) part of criticism has allowed itself to cultivate (or to be cultivated by) a form of scepticism as to that kind of inference (which, wrongly or not, they have come to identify with criticism itself) as well as attributed to literature, or art, an identical attitude – which is often called, to make matters more confused, a *critical* attitude proper. And perhaps it can even be said that all critics, at one point or another, have to do so. Our topic would then be "Criticism in Criticism," rather than "The Future of Criticism."

If you will allow me a metaphysical final pronouncement, my personal feeling is that times are not running out for scepticism, that is, that times are running out for identity-talk; by this I mean that Bosnia has become the perfect embodiment of a problem, whereas Switzerland has been relegated to the merely mere. The domestic fable of contemporary literary studies appears indeed to repeat in a parodic mode too perfect for mere human intention the ordinary fable of Aristotle's successors' opinions on poetry, namely the identity fable about the overarching position of kind-vocabularies. I mean that "gender" is yet another word for genre, and that the political consequences of critics' talking about either one are roughly comparable. One could argue that criticism has always proceeded through distinctions (that is, after all, what the word is supposed to have meant all along), and so that kind-vocabularies are of the essence of distinction-talk. Allow me therefore to propose one final consolation. Even if in the vast majority of cases distinction remains a sorry way of separating what has been thrown together from what is left out, the fact that in a few cases distinction has been merely a way of separating what has been thrown together announces still, however dimly, the infrequent possibility of criticism in criticism.

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