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No Future

> The trouble with our times is that the future is not what it used to be
> – Paul Valéry

The emergence of the current taxonomy of literary disciplines can be directly traced back to a century when the future seemed otherwise. "Otherwise" because it loomed ahead or above as a vast repository *into which* could be projected the anticipated outcomes of salvation and their counterparts, emancipation and progress; and *out of which*, via the spectacular logic characteristic of such metanarratives, present institutions could be legitimated or criticized as a function of those outcomes.

There was only one normative literary discipline during most of Western cultural history: Classics. Classics had little reason for anxiety regarding its place in literature's future inasmuch as it was universallyacknowledged as Western literature's source and origin. "Antiquity" had safely concluded tens of centuries before. Its corpus of texts appeared stable, reliable, and only marginally capable of revision or expansion. Its authors towered like the proverbial giants upon whose shoulders stood forward-looking modern dwarfs *(nani gigantum humeris insidentes):* dwarfs forever draping culture in the color of mourning, ventriloquizing ancient voices, bringing antiquity back to life in new forms. This irrevocable "pastness" of classical letters secured for it a present in which its privileged status seemed entirely natural inasmuch as, through the eighteenth century, classics virtually *equalled* literary studies.

The equation was so strong as to shape all early efforts at forging disciplines devoted to the analysis of vernacular literary artifacts and linguistic phenomena, from the High Middle Ages through the century of Valéry's birth. Indeed, even future-oriented concepts such as *Weltliteratur* (in the true Goethian sense of a world literature forged on the basis of internationalized literary markets) were unable, when they first arose, to uproot the conviction that classical letters were the locus of a university of spirit or expression whose secondary, particular manifestations were to be found in post-classical literatures. So the challenge faced by the founders of nation- or modern language-based literary disciplines was to develop schemes that would privilege the particular while embedding particularity within concepts of the universal that were either present- or future-centered (viz. nature or progress). Symptomatic in this regard are theorizations like that proposed by Johann Gottfried Herder in his *Briefwechsel über Ossian und die Lieder alter Völker:*

> Woe betide the philosopher reflecting on people and customs who takes his native scene to be the only one and who always mistakes the earliest efforts for the worst. As all scenes belong to the whole of a continuous drama, a new and remarkable aspect of humanity is revealed in each.

Whereas once there was but a single Greco-Roman scene of origins, now there exist multiple universes of peoples and customs. Universes that summon the philosopher to seek out ever new non-native scenes, each of whose "earliest efforts," no matter how recent or primitive, are found to contain the seeds of a universality that has been redefined as a continuously unfolding drama whose transcendental referent is Humanity. The new scheme instituted a split between locally grounded disciplines like the so-called "national" literary disciplines and meta-disciplinary complements like comparative literature, poetics, and textual science (paleography, philology, etc.). To the first corresponded the task of exploring and celebrating literary manifestations within the framework of a given native scene: manifestations whose authority resides in their "expressive" link to factors such as climate, race, ethnos, nation, tradition, language, genius. To the second corresponded the global (or, in Herder's terminology, "philosophical") extension of the former: the sifting out of themes, devices, genres, and works that transcend cultural localism and that, thereby, can be designed as part of humanity's common spiritual heritage; the study of genetic laws that govern literature's production, interpretation, and reception; and/or the study of human expressivity itself. Both presupposed an understanding of "literature" as a normative concept (opposed, for instance, to "non-expressive," which is to say ephemeral or instrumental, forms of speech or writing); both envisaged literature as an unfinished business.

"The future of literary studies?," like the question of literature's future, is thus a distinctly modern question: a foundational question unlikely to have been posed under the prior classics-centered disciplinary regime. It is also a question whose meaning has been partially (though I suspect non-permanently) voided in the course of the past decades inasmuch as rigidly normative concepts of literature and the teleological narratives that undergird them continue to lose their hold. The two-fold shift is real enough, but ought not be overestimated. Both normative concepts of literature and teleological types of historicism continue to shape the curricular foundations of many literature departments, be they progressive or conservative, mono cultural or multicultural. Both continue to circulate, albeit often in a fractured, subterranean or tactical form: as in various recent models of literary studies which, at least at some inaugural stage, have substituted Humanity as a transcendental referent with notions of environment, race, class, ethnicity or gender. This said, contemporary institutions of literary study often seem more analogous than not to the Church after the death of God. The true believers in Literature remain concentrated at the base, while the priesthood is filled with atheists and agnostics. The resulting gap between insider and

outsider discourses, once viewed as a problem to be overcome in some future of total literacy, now emerges as a constitutive feature against the backdrop of an accrued mass of intersecting and often contradictory practices of teaching, reading, studying, writing, that, whether moored or unmoored in any universal pedagogy or faith in the unique truth-status of literary knowledge, is largely self-perpetuating. All of which suggests that it matters little whether "the future is not what it used to be." The show is likely to go on.

But in what form? The multilayered form of the present. Any scenario that forecasts an abrupt reorganization, explosion or implosion of the literary disciplines prompted by the diffusion of electronic and audio-visual media ignores the lessons provided by the material history of literature. Lesson #1: every communicative system relies upon the system that immediately preceded it to establish the authority of utterance. Machine-produced documents thus require handwritten signatures; written codes of law require oral oath; laws themselves constitute systems of meaning founded upon archaism, using a linguistically "dead" medium and/or archaic modes of reference, indexation, etc. All of which ensures a high degree of simultaneity within communicative systems: prior systems never vanish, but rather simply assume a new set of specialized meanings and functions (much like rhetoric has within the fold of composition courses or much like scribal transcription was transformed from a mere necessity into a pious virtue after Gutenberg). For the literary disciplines this means that the electronic media revolution will not bury the prior book-based edifice of literature, but rather frame it within a new genealogical structure, *Ceci ne tuera pas cela.* Book-based teaching, learning, testing, rating, and promotion systems will continue to prevail, even though they may take on new organizational and sociological valences. Paperless literary studies are no less a phantom than the paperless office.

Lesson #2: within this field of simultaneously coexisting media systems there is no inherent reason why historical changes should prove irreversible or imply some sort of continuity-based model of historical change. A high degree of randomness characterizes the media history of literature, the sort of "randomness" one finds in technological/media jumps like that which has rendered video the chosen medium of Amazonian Indians in their battles to defend the rain forest and their cultural autonomy. This implies that new literatures (in the traditional book-bound sense) will continue to arise well into the electronic age: literature that may or may not be informed by electronic/video age norms. In either event, they will probably prove no less absorbable within current disciplinary structures than have, for instance, post-colonial literatures written in English within contemporary English departments.

Lesson #3: rather than driving literary history, technologies of transcription, recording, reproduction, and diffusion, tend to accompany or

follow. Only slowly (and sometimes only quantitatively) do they modify the material constraints and horizon of possibilities within which literature and literary studies operate. What this means with regard to the age of electronic writing is that, if the future "is not what it used to be," this is in large part because the utopic effusions of today's hypertext, virtual reality, and Internet visionaries cannot be easily disentangled from the effusions of prior proponents of telegraphy, telephony, electrification, and radiophonic learning. Media "revolutions" are firmly anchored in the recent and not-so-recent past. They arise — pace McLuhan, Havelock, and Ong — not as rupture events that abruptly unveil a strange new kingdom. Rather, their advent does little more than to cull from and recodify an existing repertory of communicational stances and options. Alphabetical modes of organization; word, sentence, and paragraph separation; punctuation codes that inscribe "voicings" into written texts; an expanding author function; graphical conventions for conjoining images and text and for distinguishing primary texts from secondary forms of writing (annotations, commentary, titles, running titles); techniques for the rapid reproduction of manuscripts and transfer of images: all these "revolutionary" elements, once viewed as the defining features of the regime of moveable-type printing, were the product of the codex-based manuscript culture of the Middle Ages. Likewise, film initially was able to add little that was new to the phantasmagoria, magic lantern shows, stage trickery, and split-frame conventions of printers and postcard artists from the prior century. Televised classrooms, once envisaged as a brave new frontier, have more often than not turned out to be wooden replicas of conventional classrooms. Is it any surprise, then, that electronic hypertextuality has contributed little in the way of modes of access, construction, reference that was not already fully codified in commercial advertising and by the avant-gardes, from futurist words-in-freedom to Cortazar's *Rayuela?* Or that its impact on disciplinary and departmental structures still belongs to a distant future?

This is not to deny that substantial shifts can and do occur. The most interesting ones, in my view can be best described as "indirect." They involve the rise of new representational norms: norms that shuttle back and forth between new and old mediums much as in the loop formed by cinematographic and novelistic realisms between 1890 and 1940. But there are "direct" shifts as well. Among the most visible is the expanded data range and accelerated retrieval time made possible by large electronic databases. Every participant in the contemporary institution of literary studies with first-hand experience of electronic library catalogues and their interlibrary extensions (RLIN et al.) is aware of the degree to which they have already succeeded in forging a single virtual research library spread out across the American continent. Though their concept of "records" and "documents"

remains firmly bound to prior paper-based cataloguing practices, such reference tools have now expanded out into text-based applications (analogous to legal tools such as Lexus and Nexus) with a seemingly greater transformative potential. A case in point is the Dartmouth Dante Project database, a one-time National Endowment for the Humanities (US) - sponsored pilot project in which I once played a leading role. The database makes available via the Internet six centuries of verse-by-verse commentaries on Dante's *Comedy*, commentaries that can now be searched either by verse number or by keywords (with or without Boolean compounds). The advantages are beyond dispute. A research task that once would have absorbed weeks in even the best equipped library can now be reduced to a matter of minutes. However powerful, it is important to remember that such tools leave unanswered every fundamental question regarding the present and/or future of literary studies. What sort of research task is a worthy one? For whom and to what end? How ought these tools best be employed? Surely not to rehash the least imaginative work of the past, to render bibliographies ever more elephantine, to forever multiply studies of sources or of prior interpretations of poems. One might well be tempted to argue the contrary: namely, that the availability of vast text-based databases will emancipate literary studies from certain burdens of reference and footnoting. But this is unlikely to be the case for reasons that by way of a conclusion, will now be adumbrated.

A second direct effect on literary studies is the rise of electronic writing, storage, publication, and retrieval technologies. The potential to further accelerate the expansion and segmentation of publishing markets via such technologies as scanning and photocopying spawns a hitherto unimaginable proliferation of texts and documents. "Unimaginable" but feared inasmuch as printing's industrialization during the course of the nineteenth century already engendered forms of panic akin to those that sometimes motivate current fears regarding the future of literary studies. For prophets like Nietzsche, the fin-de-siècle cult of information, translated into an ever mushrooming corpus of books and institutions devoted to the commemoration of the past, required the countermeasure of a cult of forgetting and a return to the body as the locus of values. But Nietzsche's equation between information surplus and a threat to life seems little more than a vitalist illusion when viewed from the perspective of a new end of century in which bodies themselves are imagined as programmable sets of codes passed along transgenerationally and information is as much "about" stimulus as it is about historical memory. Today's panics are of a different nature. Most hinge on anxieties regarding the decline of literacy. Statistical evidence, however, suggests, to the contrary, that ours is not an era in which literacy per se is in crisis anywhere in the world. Rather, the demographic band covered by readers has grown, as have the quantity and complexity of

contemporary literary cultures. As a result it is only *certain encyclopedic models of literary education* that have entered into crisis. The book trade is exponentially larger than it was at mid-century. The amount of capital invested in and circulating in the form of (past and present) literature has vastly expanded. The number of presses, titles published, general and professional journals, bookstores, self-supporting writers and critics, professional practitioners and teachers of literary studies (both inside and outside the academy) are near all-time highs whether on a gross or per capita basis. Electronic writing enters this picture as an accelerator of already present phenomena. From an "external" standpoint, it reduces print production costs, speeds up production time, and opens up new more volatile distribution and interaction circuits in public spaces such as the Internet. From an "internal" standpoint, it tends to increase authorial productivity and ubiquity inasmuch as it streamlines the compositional process, while at the same time encouraging authorial self-recycling, updating, and what one might call a "modular" attitude towards all written documents (everything is readily available for a fresh cut and paste). It also intensifies certain pressures towards standardization to the degree that text editing and accessing software is usually written in the global languages and that it has embedded within it orthographic, bibliographic, and grammatical tools whose purpose is to automate the work that schooling and reference manuals had for centuries accomplished.

In any event, trends towards *globalization* — the drift of native scenes out into the world cultural system — *proliferation* — the sheer quantitative growth in all forms of literary documentation, printed and electronic - *diversification* - of global and regional literary markets — and *segmentation* — the formation of specialized and layered literary submarkets — are likely to continue under the regime of electric writing. Together they shape a world picture where the abundance of transcultural literatures — local and global, elite and popular, didactic and recreative, traditional and experimental - tends to hollow out the old core of national literature departments (reducing them to the fact of language) and to favour their "metadisciplinary" and interdisciplinary counterparts. A context so multilayered and complex that one of the principal functions of university-based literary studies becomes that of *selection.*

Nineteenth-century institutions of literary study developed their canons by supplementing the West's traditional cult of Greco-Roman origins with a cult of the "earliest efforts" of multiple peoples, Western and non-Western. They sought legitimacy by approaching the contemporary literary scene only via reconstructions of a remote past where, because the normative assumption was one of scarcity of textual remains and not of abundance, value was guaranteed by a text's mere existence. Their twentieth-century successors adopted these canons, and multiplied and extended them, first, into the modern

era, then, into the literary present. One result was that, under the massive weight of industrial/postindustrial era literary production, the relative importance attributed to studies of "earliest efforts" diminished in tandem with the rise of concerns regarding criteria for the inclusion and exclusion of texts on a global scale. Twenty-first-century institutions of literary study will still pay lip service to studies of premodern cultural production, cling to fragments of the traditional canon (reframed as scenes of a discontinuous drama), and forge new information-era myths of origin. An ever stronger grounding in the present and near past, however, is likely to be their hallmark as they confront the challenge of devising ways to delimit fields within a seemingly infinite printed/ electronic global scene.

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Literary Futures

Richard Rorty recently offered a short essay to the "Point of View" page of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 9, 1996, A48). He argued there against a trend in literary studies to incorporate social science perspectives into the reading of literary texts and, in particular, he objected to "cultural studies" as an approach no longer capable of being inspired by literary works. Indeed, Professor Rorty contrasts those kinds of readings that show evidence of having been inspired by literature to those that exhibit a kind of "knowingness," quick to "debunk" and "deromanticize" literary works in the service of political agendas.

Rorty's stark contrast between literature and politics makes questionable assumptions about how both institutions work. For instance, he appears to think of literature as inspiring, but does not think of politics as a source of inspiration. He seems to think that to offer a critique is to debunk and deromanticize. And yet, as the Frankfurt School surely evidenced, critique can be in the service of a romanticizing project. Indeed, Rorty appears to assume that to import a political perspective into the reading of literary works will lead to the de-aestheticization of literature, and to the establishment of literary studies as "another dried-up academic backwater." But if the direction in which political readings of literary works were, in fact, as dried-up as Rorty presumes, then surely he would not be as strongly opposed to that direction as his essay suggests he is. According to Rorty, those who "take refuge in self-protective knowingness" are those who practice cultural studies in some vein, and those "who still hope for a glorious future" are those who keep literary studies purified of the political.

This last point is quite provocative, for how is it that one might come to hope for a glorious future? What opens the future as a site of possible glory? One might think of utopian tracts as precisely the kind of narrative cross between politics and literature that figures a future nowhere realized outside the text, one that exploits the auto-referentiality of the text to produce a world that is u-topic, nowhere, has no place, not yet. Indeed, something of this character of the unrealizable marks literary works to the extent that their referentiality cannot be exhausted by the conditions of their production. Any effort to supply a complete social description of the referent of the literary work will never substitute for the literary referent. Precisely to the extent to which the literary referent is causally untethered from the conditions of its production, it functions as literary. It occupies and enacts a temporality that is not reducible to the temporal conditions of its own genesis. In this way, the literary work produces a time that is "not yet" and offers some way