

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.

Stanford University

JUDITH BUTLER

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

to think a future where none has been thought.

Why would one, after all, want the literary work to offer "hope for a glorious future" if one did not want reasons to live in a world more glorious than the present one, if one were not committed to a better and enriched world, if one did not have a normative political view concerning what such a world would be? After all, what is it that would constitute the "glorious future" in Rorty's view if it were not a radically altered sense of social institutions? Is Rorty's demand to return literature to the business of making glorious futures not finally a political argument, a demand that literary works point the way toward the realization of that glory?

The question that emerges from this consideration alters the question that poses the task for this writing. "What is the future of literary studies?" becomes reposed as, "What is the future that literary studies opens for us, and how does it effect that opening?" If the literary referent exceeds the social conditions of its production, then the politicization of literature cannot succeed in reducing the literary work to a reflection or even a refraction of those conditions. But if the literary exceeds those conditions, condition of the not-yet – then the literary can *refigure* the conditions of its own genesis, repeating its origins in a future that has not yet arrived. Such a repetition into the future could hardly be the business of the social sciences; the figure of the unrealized is not a prescription – it is the inauguration of possibility. Through this route, we might well return the political to the literary without performing the reduction of the one to the other. If cultural studies has erred in returning the literary work to the social context of its production, it is not because the literary has been returned to the social; it is only because the literary has been returned to its social past, and missed the chance to figure in the making of social future – the preeminent task of politics.

University of California, Berkeley

Literary Studies: Back to the Future that Cannot Begin

I.

Perhaps, in the "future," our contemporary situation will be described as a radical case of what Reinhart Koselleck has called *Sattelzeit* – a transitional moment preceded by a period in which texts and concepts are only intelligible through a specific hermeneutic surgery, and succeeded by a period in which concepts and texts bear a familiarity that does not stimulate such surgery. A *Sattelzeit* provides a conceptual bridge that aims to render the once opaque past finally readable and, at the same time, cipher the context of our own everydayness into a defamiliarization that, for the first time, turns it into a text to be read.¹ In other words, a *Sattelzeit* stages a hermeneutic transubstantiation that engenders interpretative keys. This conceptual structure is grounded in an understanding of time that has become our own bygone future, since the operation performed by this surgeon of times requires a panopticon observer, to whom all is unclear save his own privileged position. Nonetheless, if, in our present circumstance, the "future cannot begin," the panopticon observer undergoes a radical metamorphosis (Luhmann 1982).² He will be replaced by an observer aware of the act of observing while performing it (Luhmann 1992, 296-400). This form of observation implies an overlapping of temporalities once conceived as clearly distinguished. The simultaneity of making himself the object of his own observation while observing (and differentiating himself from) his environment reveals that the geography of times supposed by the reconstruction of a *Sattelzeit* is as fictional as the impossible map drawn in the Borges story "Del rigor en la ciencia" (103). Therefore, the question of "the future of literary studies" has to be posed from a radically distinct angle. It would demand a *Sattelzeit* focused on the very moment of undifferentiation between a before and an after act of properly reading "futures past." However, such operation cannot be envisaged under the time-structure supposed by the concept of *Sattelzeit*. If the future

1 It is worth stressing that Koselleck has developed the concept of *Sattelzeit* basically to describe "the German world of language and experience" (233). However, I am discussing this concept from an epistemological standpoint.

2 Roughly, the future will not begin because social systems combine *sequential time* – in which operations are carried within the familiar order beginning-middle-end – and *structural time*, defined through a constant differentiation between the system and its environment, a process which experiences time as a succession of specific instants.