

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.

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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 posited from a radically distinct angle. It would demand a *Sattelzeit* focused on the very moment of undifferentiation between a before and an after 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.

cannot begin, questions have to be conceived of as philosophical.³ Regarding the "future of literary studies," I propose that instead of providing an answer, we must produce a new question, now concerning the "future of universities." The overlapping of these problems will perhaps offer more productive insights.

II.

Back to the futures past of books and universities, it seemed almost natural to celebrate the former by its intrinsic association to the latter:

Universities are a notable, respectable product of the modern ages. (...) Once you invented Printing, you metamorphosed all Universities, or superseded them! (...) The true University of these days is a Collection of Books. (Carlyle 161-62)

These were Carlyle's projections in 1840: a new model of university had to be voiced to address the novelty of the unprecedented diffusion of books that occurred throughout the nineteenth century. However, printed words not only challenged universities. The new medium eloquently echoed Kant's enlightened answer to a famous question (Kant 1784/1957). *Supereinde* should be easier when it could be done via the solitude and privacy provided by the printing press.⁴ The chaos of infinite interpretations would be disciplined under the common ground provided by the knowledge legitimated within universities. This common ground was rooted on the soil of "nationalisms which, between 1820 and 1920, changed the face of the Old World [and] in almost all of them, 'national print-languages' were of central ideological and political importance" (Anderson 67).

The importance of constituting such mechanism of controlling the multiplicity can be better appreciated if we turn our attention to a historical circumstance in which the notion of nation could not yet offer an epistemological shelter. In the inaugural speech at the University of Naples, delivered in 1798, Giambattista Vico touched upon an issue that had already become a common trope (see Müller). In a section entitled "Typographical

characters. The disadvantages of printing. How they may be overcome," Vico hesitated between benefits and potential harm brought out by the printing press:

Unquestionably the invention of typographical characters is of signal assistance to us in our studies. Today (...) books are in great abundance and variety. (...) I am afraid that the abundance and cheapness of books may cause us to be less industrious. (72)

The medicine prescribed by Vico was a *pharmakos*. The proper dose of printed words elevates the spirit, while any excess might even destroy it. The real threat implied in the abundance of printed books was the insurmountable variety. Therefore, "the Ancients should be read first, since they are of proved reliability and authority" (Vico 74). The resonance of this advice is fully heard in the next section, "Universities. Their drawbacks; how they may be remedied." The ancients did not need universities, since each philosopher synthesized in himself all the knowledge that was to be known. Longinus was the first to be called a "walking library," but the principle behind this title supposed the synthesis dreamed of in Vico's medicine. In modern times, new challenges had to be faced. First and foremost, there was no authority that could provide such reliability. Moreover, the body of knowledge had grown to an extent that rendered the mission of mastering it an endless task. Foreseeing this dilemma, the members of the Royal Society of London tried to promote a stylistic reform that, it is my contention, also represented a reaction against the overwhelming amount of data rendered available through printed words. This reform basically wished "to return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men delivered so many *things*, almost in an equal amount of *words*" (Spratt, in Vickers, 6). The Royal Society also decided to produce abridged versions of books published, since their number superseded the capacity of any member to keep updated. However, this method provoked an obvious resistance. Were the moderns dismissing the ideal of a universal grasp of all knowledge? Vico did not meet this answer. "Our need for universities is much greater" (Vico 75), as well as a principle upon which such university could be grounded. Vico's *pharmakos* became a central commandment in nineteenth-century social organization:

I would suggest that our professors should so co-ordinate all disciplines into a single system so as to harmonize them with our religion and with the spirit of the political form under which we live. (77)

3 Jean-François Lyotard (1991, 8) calls "philosophical" a question that, instead of demanding an answer, engenders new questions. By approaching the question of "the future of literary studies" through Lyotard's notion, I am trying to develop a perspective first proposed by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, in his 1995 article.

4 Indeed, Miguel de Cervantes had already intuited this possibility. The "Prólogo" of the first volume of *Don Quijote* (1605) reads: "estás en su casa, donde eres señor della (...) todo lo cual te esenta y hace libre de todo respecto y obligación, y así, puedes decir de la historia todo aquello que te pareciese."

III.

Vico's words tell us of a serious crisis in the status of modern knowledge provoked by the emergence and diffusion of the printing press associated with structural changes in the organization of society. I want to stress this point because it is usual to overlook the critical nature of that moment. Nineteenth-century universities and a bookish culture were so intrinsically attached to each other that the classical image of an intellectual "walking library" seems to have found its modern personification in the geography of any campus. Although not a single professor will synthesize all fields of knowledge, s/he may literally stop by them in a daily walk through the campus – this shelter to a threatened universality. Since the modern conception of literature emerged within the culture of literacy, literary studies have to be radically thought over given the collapse of that culture:

(...) the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age. This transition has been under way since at least the end of the 1950s. (Lyotard 1984, 3)

Indeed, since the mid-forties some of the most renowned representatives of literary studies suspected that any future *was* already a bygone one. Ernst Curtius, in his master-piece, concluded the chapter on "the book as a symbol" with a melancholic tone: "Here, in the age of Goethe, we bring our journey to an end" (347). Erich Auerbach, intuiting that the Vichian ideal of universities-synthesis was no longer possible, could write the obituary of the Goethean world:

How can anyone go on to speak of a scholarly synthesizing philology of Weltliteratur?
A few individuals today do have a commanding overview of the European material (...) however, they all belong to the generation that matured before the two World Wars. (9)⁵

Auerbach's "Philology of *Weltliteratur*" may also be read as a "Philology of Literary Studies" and, perhaps, a "Philology of Universities" as well. However, I do not want to sound apocalyptic. A better strategy is to learn from our present crisis "that language and literacy are two distinct phenomena, and specifically, that the second term is a shorthand description of a

determinate set of relations that we have with language,"⁶ and, since these relations are inexorably historical, there is nothing exceptional in the fact that the contemporary status of knowledge supposes a set of relations that has moved away from the preconditions that defined the culture of literacy. Books cannot store data as efficiently as computers, and they are incredibly slower regarding the (re)production and transmission of knowledge. Images flow in a rhythm and rapidity that prevent books from competing in a worldwide market in which "knowledge has become the principle force of production over the last few decades" (Lyotard 1984, 5). Thus, a new question seems the best answer to the one proposed on "the future of literary studies." Are we experiencing, albeit not necessarily in a full awareness, a silent although steady displacement of functions of producing knowledge from universities to institutes? In 1840, Carlyle realized that "the University which would completely take-in that great new fact, of the existence of Printed Books (...) has not yet come into existence" (Carlyle 162). Similarly, the emergence of media other than the printing press demands rearrangements in the structure of universities. In that sense, the performativity criterion not only replaces the grand narrative, above all, it performs the most radical change, the one concerning a "very postmodern moment that finds the University nearing to what may be its end, while the Institute may just be beginning" (Lyotard 1984, xxv).⁷

It was within universities that literary studies first found their home, cultivating the soil of nationalism.⁸ From an institutional standpoint, this common ground provided the proper environment. In the age of the grand narrative as the primary form of legitimization of knowledge, literary studies mastered privileged epistemological tools – language and its narrative devices. Therefore, the early professional competence was defined as functions of these two elements. The present postmodern status of knowledge turns the "philosophical question" of the future of literary studies into a problematic "economic question." Some scholars have voiced their concerns regarding the career of their graduate students, to whom perhaps the future will never begin in an actual sense: "many Ph.D.'s in comparative literature have gone unemployed, underemployed, or out of the profession entirely" (Greene 297).⁹

6 Cf. Godzich 355. The author has developed the same argument, this time regarding specifically the American academic context.

7 Lyotard 1984, xxv. Regarding "performativity" – institutes – and "grand narrative" – universities – as forms of legitimization, see 31-47.

8 For a genealogy of literary studies according to their specific historical contexts, see: Gumbrecht 1991, 1995a, and 1995b.

9 Herbert Lindenberger has expressed a similar concern.

5 Let me briefly remark that the translation of "Philologie der Weltliteratur" should read "Philology of Weltliteratur."

The same holds true to more cautious graduate students that have specialized in one national language. It is certainly not possible to advance straightforward answers or offer predictions, and not only because "it is unwise to put too much faith in futurology." (Lyotard 1984, 3). The main reason lies in the complexity of our contemporary circumstance, which creates variables far more numerous than we could ever master. However, let me bring forth ideas that hopefully would meet some discussion.

We know that, during the age of the Gutenberg Galaxy, the otherwise historical link between language and literacy was taken as "natural." Therefore, not to incur in the same pattern, we must be aware of the historicity of the postmodern predicament itself. Moreover, the time of the culture of literacy was not as literary as we believed. Simply, we only searched for elements constitutive of a bookish civilization. Beneath and apart from the world and words of literacy there were streams of other expressions – oral and visual as well. Perhaps forms of written expression will try to cope with the challenge of flowing images, as the most creative artistic experiences from modernism onwards have already attempted. From a methodological standpoint, a new light may be shed upon the age of literacy, given the relative distance we acquired from it in the last decades. Let me provide one example. Curtius remarked, as though it was only a remote possibility: "Goethe's relation to writing, to script, to calligraphy, to the book in general – this is a theme which deserves separate treatment" (347), a treatment so separate that it constitutes what David Wellbery has called "post-hermeneutic criticism." It has little to do with a formula that is becoming familiar and reads: "from literary studies into ..." ¹⁰ We have to face the radicality of our circumstance and imagine new approaches to an environment that no longer needs metanarratives. Universities tend to increase their "scientific" basis steadily, since this is the "natural" field to the performativity criterion. Therefore, universities would increasingly incorporate the structure of institutes. An attractive strategy would conflate not only literary studies but the whole of Humanities towards the task of critically reflecting on the systematicity of a center of production of knowledge so closely related to and dependent upon a worldwide market. This strategy supposes a considerable shift in the traditional sense of scholarship. Young scholars would have to "risk" crossing borders of disciplinary fields. However, I am not suggesting any form of "interdisciplinarity." An attempt to provide a metadisciplinary instance would fail in the absence of the grand narrative model of legitimation. Rather, we have to conceive of a scholarship no longer based on a dualism between Sciences and Humanities. What it could look like will depend on a series of

risk calculations we must carry forward in our own everyday environments. Finally, as I have tried to recall, this is not the first crisis the status of knowledge has had to face after the introduction of a new medium of communication and structural changes in the social organization. Most likely, this will not be the last. Therefore, there are many more than only two roads to be taken, and that is precisely what makes all the difference.